

Staying the course

Status quo in monetary policy was to be expected

The Monetary Policy Committee surprised no one by holding its repo rate and retaining a neutral stance. There are enough reasons for it to have done so. Growth has responded well to the 125 bps cut in 2025, while inflation in the upcoming fiscal could be up from recent lows. Growth prospects look good in view of the improvement in investment sentiment in the wake of the India-EU FTA (even as the deal could take some time to come into effect). The same could be said if the US trade deal comes on track.

With growth not an overriding concern, there should be room for the MPC to act on inflation, if required. Meanwhile, numerous fiscal growth drivers are at work, anyway. The slight upward revision in the real GDP growth for the first two quarters of FY27 (6.9 per cent in Q1 and 7 per cent in Q2) reflects the optimism being relayed by high frequency indicators such as credit growth, industrial production and corporate earnings. The income tax and GST rate cuts of 2025 are likely to boost consumption, along with the Eighth Pay Commission award. However, there are imponderables at work, as far as price stability is concerned. While farm sector output and outlook looks robust, global uncertainties cannot be discounted, especially with respect to financial markets and capital flows. Real GDP projections for FY27 will also be dependent on how the change in base year to 2024 in the new GDP series impacts the growth number. In view of this cocktail of factors, the MPC is justified in holding rates for now.

Meanwhile, bond markets were displeased that the Governor did not spell out the quantum of durable liquidity injections for the months ahead, leading to G-sec yields hardening after the policy. G-Sec yields have defied rate cuts over the last year (at 6.5-6.6 per cent), leaving the RBI to deploy deft liquidity management measures. Having announced open market operations, USD/INR buy-sell swaps as well as measures to manage short term rates and liquidity in the December policy, the RBI appears to be implying that it will continue in the same vein. This is implicit in the Governor's statement that the RBI will be 'pre-emptive' in its liquidity management to take care of 'fluctuations in government balances, changes in currency in circulation and forex intervention.' The system liquidity, in surplus of ₹1.5 lakh crore over the last two months, has helped in easing short term rates. The central bank would try to keep market rates cool, and better aligned with the repo rate.

Of the slew of developmental policies announced along with the monetary policy, the doubling of the limit for collateral free loans for MSMEs to ₹20 lakh will be beneficial for smaller MSMEs. Allowing banks to lend to REITs, in line with the existing rules for InVITs, will expand the market for banks. Given the increase in digital frauds, the proposal to compensate customers up to ₹25,000 for losses in fraudulent transactions will come as a relief to account holders.

POCKET



Budget for strategic autonomy

BUILDING BLOCKS. The Budget's stress on a deep-tech industrial base, SME fund and care economy marks a decisive shift



The global economy is in transition, and countries will need to focus on scale, skill, resilience, and technology to win the global economic race currently underway. This government must be credited for consistently pursuing policies that align with these goals through its trade, industrial, and development policies, especially since the Covid shock. True economic transformation requires policy integration, not fragmentation. Rather than a scattergun approach to appease various interest groups, the Budget must deliver a unified strategy where new initiatives reinforce and scale existing programmes to maximise collective impact. The Budget meets this challenge head-on. It provides the architecture to transform India from a 'service provider' into a 'strategic industrial power'. This pivot toward high-entry-barrier sectors ensures that India is not just participating in, but actively defining, the next decade's global supply chains.

BEYOND ASSEMBLY For years, the critique of Indian manufacturing was its reliance on low-value assembly. This government's industrial policy focus has made a decisive break from that past, moving toward a deep-tech industrial base. The strategy has been clear; dominate the "building blocks" of modern industry. The older set of Production Linked Incentive (PLI) schemes have been complemented by ambitious programmes for semiconductors, biologics, and rare earths. The ISM 2.0 & Electronics initiative, backed by a ₹40,000-crore outlay, seeks to transition India from an "assembler" to a "designer and maker" of global electronics. Biopharma SHAKTI prioritises high-value biologics over generics to capture the most lucrative global market segments. To ensure these products reach the world, the Budget strengthens the CDSO and NIPERs, aligning Indian regulatory standards with the stringent requirements of global markets. PSU-led precision tool-rooms will lower component costs via automation and digital testing. By supporting mid-sized firms and start-ups in high-tech R&D, this initiative directly complements ISM 2.0 and the CIE scheme.



GEOECONOMICS. Economic power is derived from owning the platforms, the data, and the specialised niches

Sovereignty is also being built into the ground. By supporting mineral-rich States like Odisha and Kerala to establish Rare Earth Corridors, India is securing the supply chains essential for electric vehicles (EVs) and renewable energy. **The Sustainability 'Shield':** The Tex-Eco Initiative promotes ESG-compliant apparel. By providing a sustainability premium delivered at scale, Indian exports will be less vulnerable to tariffs in such segments where consumers are willing to pay premium in exchange for quality and 'ethical' consumer behaviour. **Gram Swaraj and One District one Product (ODOP):** This initiative brands products like 'Khadi' as luxury, artisanal goods, making them less price-sensitive and occupying a niche that mass-produced goods cannot fill. To support this transition, Samarth 2.0 programme acts as a human capital multiplier, training the workforce on high-end machinery to narrow the efficiency gap with China and Vietnam. **'CHAMPION' MSMEs** Global trade competitiveness hinges on the agility of MSMEs. The Budget introduces a 'game-changer' shift from debt-based support to equity support through a ₹10,000-crore SME Growth Fund. This 'patient capital' allows firms to scale and invest in R&D without the immediate pressure of interest repayments. To integrate MSMEs into GVCs, the Budget breaks the 'liquidity trap' by mandating Central Public Sector Enterprises (CPSE) use TREDS for invoice discounting and expanding credit guarantees using Credit Guarantee Fund Trust for Micro and Small Enterprises, unlocking MSME capital from unpaid invoices. The next step is leveraging the digital footprint of MSMEs, across GST, PAN, and Customs, to create comprehensive credit ratings that empower lenders and slash borrowing costs. **By focusing on specialised products rather than low-cost commodities,** Indian firms gain a strategic cushion against tariff-induced price shocks

India's growth moment is turning regional

The Budget's thrust on rail corridors, logistics, and using tier 2,3 cities as hubs of investments and jobs is welcome

Poornima Dore

Union Budgets are often judged by headline numbers or marquee schemes. Yet some of the most consequential shifts reveal themselves quietly — in how problems are framed, in the language policymakers choose, and in the logic that underpins public investment. Seen through this lens, this year's Budget marks an inflection point. Its significance lies not in a single announcement, but in a clear reorientation of India's growth strategy: away from an over-dependence on a few metropolitan centres, and towards a more regionally grounded economic architecture. Metros have usually attracted investment, creating jobs and growth around their surrounding areas. But this strategy has also led to regional disparities. This Budget rather than treating spatial inequality as a residual outcome, engages with geography as a core design principle. Public investment, infrastructure planning and industrial incentives are increasingly being deployed through a differentiated regional lens. A central pillar of this shift is connectivity — as a mechanism for economic integration across regions. The proposed expansion of high-speed

rail corridors linking major urban and emerging centres reflects this thinking. These corridors are being positioned as growth connectors, reducing travel time, widening labour catchments, and enabling firms to operate across multi-city regions rather than within isolated urban pockets. Equally important is the renewed focus on freight, logistics and multimodal transport. Dedicated freight corridors, inland waterways and logistics networks are intended to reduce the cost and friction of moving goods across regions — a long-standing constraint for manufacturing clusters and MSMEs located outside major metros. Apart from connectivity, regions require economic anchors that draw on local capabilities and comparative advantages. The Budget's sectoral thrust reflects an attempt to do precisely this. Initiatives spanning electronics, semiconductors, critical minerals and advanced manufacturing point to a strategy where regions are defined by specialised assets rather than generic policy incentives. The proposed City Economic Regions (CERs), supported through challenge-mode funding, further reinforce this approach. The Budget's most consequential aspect is its positioning tier-2 and tier-3 cities as active nodes in production networks, where firms can locate,



TRANSPORT. For regional growth

workers find jobs and supply chains deepen. This has far-reaching implications for employment, migration and urban sustainability. **FROM ASSETS TO ECOSYSTEMS** Roads, rail and industrial parks matter, but without productive firms, skilled workers, finance and institutional capacity, such assets remain underutilised. The emphasis on MSMEs, productivity enhancement and enterprise financing reflects an understanding that growth depends on ecosystems, not isolated investments. Measures such as the SME Growth Fund and expanded support for micro enterprises signal an effort to link physical infrastructure with firm-level capabilities and job creation. Yet ecosystem building also requires tougher, often overlooked elements.

Crucially, this is not just about dispersing growth geographically. It is about building regional capability — the institutional capacity, data depth, and coordination mechanisms required to translate local potential into scalable economic outcomes. Budgets can signal intent, but execution will require strategies that reflect their unique industrial mix, workforce profile, and market access. India appears to be moving from an aggregate view of growth — measured largely through national averages — towards a more differentiated economic strategy that takes regions seriously as units of development. This transition will not be automatic. It calls for sharper regional diagnostics, stronger collaboration between government, industry, finance, and institutions, and a willingness to move beyond one-size-fits-all policy design and active investments by the private sector. It also demands patience: regional economic transformation is cumulative, not instant. India's next growth phase will be shaped by how effectively regional economies are identified, connected, and scaled — across multiple geographies, sectors, and city sizes — each rooted in its own strengths, yet linked into a shared national trajectory.

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Two more factors This refers to the article "Don't neglect higher education" (February 6). The percentage of education expenditure in schools and for higher education also depends on the number of students enrolled. In 2024-25, India's school education system had approximately 24 crore students while higher education enrollment (18-23 age group) was 3.8 crore students. As such expenditure per student

would be a more realistic yardstick to judge whether spending on higher education for the youthful, intermediate and ageing States is appropriate. Besides, the National Education Policy 2020 recommends higher education expenditure should be around 30 per cent of total education expenditure. (The well-researched article may also analyse this aspect also.) **YG Chouksey** Pune

MPC's status quo logic This refers to 'RBI MPC Meeting 2026: RBI holds repo rate at 5.25%' (February 6). The unanimous decision of the MPC to maintain 'status quo' in respect of the prevailing repo-rate, was a foregone conclusion in the absence of a room for any tinkering therewith amid the given economic scenario. However, it also goes without saying that one could always expect some changes therein as the CPI may be upward looking and the extant global

geo-political situations may remain as fluid as before, when the MPC meets next in April. **Kumar Gupta** Panchkula (Haryana) **Crop insurance for plantation** Apropos "Jan rains hits Robusta Harvest; dents 2026-27 crop prospects" (January 31). This is the reason why exclusive crop insurance is demanded for plantation crops. Long stretch of rainy days in 2025 has affected several plantation crops including coffee, arecanut and rubber, and January 26 rains have caused premature flowering in coffee, even while harvesting is in progress. PMFBY like insurance for plantation crops is impractical. An exclusive crop insurance for the plantation sector is overdue and must not be delayed in view of their forex earning capacity. **Rajiv Magal** Halekere Village (Karnataka)

On agriculture, look for low-hanging fruit

UNION AGRICULTURE Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan has said that the India-US trade agreement will not force the country to open up its market to any “major crops”, be it foodgrain, fruits or dairy products. This comes even as the US Agriculture Secretary, Brooke Rollins, has claimed that the deal announced by President Donald Trump on Monday would result in “export of [more] American farm products into India’s massive market”. The details of what has been agreed upon will be known only with its actual signing or issuance of a joint statement. Agriculture posed few problems when it came to finalising a free trade agreement with the European Union, which isn’t very cost competitive in most commodities. Also, imports of premium Gouda cheese, wines and spirits or olive oil from the Netherlands, France, Germany, Spain and Italy might not really hurt Indian farmers.

This may not be so with the US, which is a huge producer of large-acreage crops such as soyabean, corn and cotton. India, too, grows all three — soyabean on 13 million hectares (mh), and corn and cotton on 12 mh each. With average American per-hectare corn and soyabean yields at over 11 tonnes and 3.4 tonnes, as against India’s 3.5 tonnes and 1 tonne, the effects of large-scale imports of these two commodities would be no different from those of Indonesian and Malaysian palm oil. The US is, moreover, the world’s biggest producer and exporter of ethanol derived from corn. If India were to accommodate its demand for allowing imports of ethanol for blending in petrol and diesel, it is bound to face opposition from domestic distilleries producing the same from homegrown sugarcane and cereal grains. It is not for nothing that agriculture has been a key stumbling block in the trade negotiations.

But difficulties in opening up bulk commodity imports shouldn’t deter from identifying low-hanging fruit, where substantial scope for liberalisation exists. India is the US’s largest market for tree nuts, with an estimated \$1.5 billion worth of imports in 2025. Why should it impose an import duty of 100 per cent on walnuts and Rs 100/kg on shelled almonds when there is hardly any domestic cultivation of these dry fruits? The same goes for blueberries and cranberries. At the end of the day, India exports more agri produce to the US than it imports. Defending its export interests — be it in shrimps, spices or basmati rice — is as important as shielding domestic producers from imports. It calls for a flexible approach where maximalist and overly defensive positions should give way to more proactive give-and-take.

Anthropic sends a message to Bengaluru

FOR LONG, it was believed that AI would be a handmaiden for the software industry — an assistant to automate repetitive tasks and improve efficiency. AI could offer suggestions, but the software remained the core decision-maker, with the levers of control in the hands of a human operator. In recent years, AI’s role has expanded from serving as a conversational interface to becoming a more active and productive agent. Now, an innovation by an American start-up, Anthropic, could render the software-centred approach obsolete. Last week’s release of 11 plugins to the company’s chatbot Claude that can perform tasks handled by traditional software platforms has rattled IT, data analytics and legal services sectors. For Indian firms, which have traditionally relied on large teams of analysts and developers to customise software solutions according to clients’ requirements, Claude is a particularly serious challenge. On Tuesday, the Nifty IT index registered its biggest fall since the early days of Covid.

Skilled human capital and cost efficiency have historically been the calling cards of the Indian software industry. But now, tasks that once required teams of engineers can potentially be performed by an AI agent. It could affect the prospects of entry-level technicians who handle routine coding and maintenance work. The ability of the plugins to learn domain knowledge, interpret regulations and generate business logic can upend the models of the consultancy sector. The AI’s legal plugin, for instance, is being described as being capable of reviewing documents, flagging risks, and tracking compliance. Claude’s other assistants are equipped to plan workflows, analyse datasets, streamline processes and create content.

Indian IT firms have spent heavily on equipping their workforce in AI’s traditional capabilities. The jury is still out on the extent to which the new development will undermine their investment. It is, however, clear that the conversation around AI has fundamentally changed. The Economic Survey recognised this paradigm shift. Equipping all segments of the value chain with new technology while ensuring that jobs are not lost will be a major skilling challenge. The ball is now in the court of the country’s policymakers, universities and industry leaders.

Note to cricket board: WPL is ready

THERE WAS plenty of evidence for women’s cricket’s potential — both commercially and on the field — in India’s historic World Cup triumph last year. But the fourth edition of the Women’s Premier League (WPL) provided more proof to the Indian board that the sport is ready for a bigger, more concerted push.

An exemplary knock from Smriti Mandhana in the final powered Royal Challengers Bengaluru to a second title. The campaign proved to be a good sign for India’s impending transition when Harmanpreet Kaur — who also had a prolific season personally — calls it a day. The real success of the tournament, however, is beyond the stalwarts. In Jemimah Rodrigues’s first tryst with captaincy at the highest level, she showed immense maturity in leading Delhi Capitals to yet another final. Delhi also unearthed a new gem in the form of medium pacer Nandani Sharma, who was the joint-leading wicket-taker of the tournament and also picked up a hat-trick. Gujarat Giants’s Anushka Sharma was another young talent who caught attention with her impressive strokeplay and sensational athleticism on the field.

Looking forward, the BCCI should realise that the WPL is ready to evolve beyond just a five-team tournament. The World Cup victory, followed by arguably the best edition of the League, should encourage the board to give it the pride of place it deserves on the sporting calendar. The increasing quality of cricket across the five teams, the rate of scoring and the investment of franchises in talent scouting are all reasons the BCCI can and must put more of its resources into making the League a better product than it already is.

Lower tariff is good news, but with the US, beware of backsliding

THE UNMATCHED cricket umpire Harold “Dickie” Bird once said of Bomber Wells, a spin bowler who batted at No. 11 because it was not possible to bat any lower, that he was so poor at running between the wickets that, “when he shouts ‘YES’ for a run, it is merely the basis for further negotiations”. (*The Pavilion End*). The line is funny, but it captures the essence of what I am about to say.

Quickly, and somewhat curiously, on the heels of India and the European Union (EU) signing what has been described as “the mother of all trade deals”, US President Donald Trump took to social media to announce a trade “deal” with India. Details, as is the norm, will follow. For the moment, here is what is publicly known.

The United States has reduced its total tariff on Indian goods from 50 per cent to 18 per cent. This includes removing the punitive 25 per cent tariff imposed in August 2025 in response to India’s purchases of Russian oil, and lowering the baseline reciprocal tariff from 25 per cent to 18 per cent. In return, India has reportedly committed to stop purchasing Russian oil, and instead source oil from the United States and potentially Venezuela. India has also pledged to reduce tariffs and non-tariff barriers on American goods “to zero”, and committed to purchasing over \$500 billion worth of US energy, technology, agricultural products and coal, although no timeline has been specified.

The headline question is simple: How seriously should we take this announce-

ment? Especially when it comes from a President who has been single-handedly responsible for inflicting irreparable damage on the rules-based trading system, painstakingly constructed after World War II. This is not to dismiss the deal outright. Any easing of tariffs and restoration of predictability is good news. Thousands of hours of negotiations and patient diplomacy have clearly taken place, and these efforts will bear fruit as goods and services continue to flow. As long as commerce proceeds on the new agreed terms, exporters will rejoice. The US remains India’s most important single-country trading partner, particularly once services are included.

Engagement with the US today, however, comes with a statutory warning. Backsliding is a strong possibility. Several countries and individuals have discovered this the hard way. The EU has oscillated between being a strategic partner and being a target. Elon Musk learnt that proximity offers no immunity. No deal, however grandly announced, is safe from the impulses of a President with a demonstrated disdain for rules-based trade.

This is not how institutions are meant to function. And that points to a deeper contemporary problem. Much of what is taught in Economics, and much of what underpins modern growth theory, rests on a simple proposition that institutions matter. Stable rules, credible commitments and constraints on executive discretion reduce uncertainty and en-



RAJAT KATHURIA

As long as commerce proceeds on the new agreed terms, exporters will rejoice. The US remains India’s most important single-country trading partner, particularly once services are included

RBI maintains status quo, conserves policy ammunition



RAJANI SINHA

THE CENTRAL Bank chose to leave the policy interest rates unchanged in the February Monetary Policy Committee meeting, after having already cut the rates by a cumulative 125 bps in 2025. The Reserve Bank of India’s decision is supported by India’s improving growth outlook and continuation of benign inflation.

While there were no further liquidity supportive measures announced, the central bank is likely to continue intervening as required to ensure ample liquidity.

India’s macroeconomic indicators are reflecting healthy growth momentum. As per the advance estimate, India is likely to have recorded GDP growth of 7.4 per cent in FY26. The growth outlook for the country has improved with the India-US trade deal.

In the last few months, Indian exporters felt the heat of US tariffs. India’s non-petroleum goods export to the US contracted by 2.2 per cent during September-November 2025 (higher tariff was effective from September 2025), with items like gems and jewellery, ready-made garments, textiles, and chemicals specifically impacted.

While there was some diversification, India’s total non-petroleum goods export growth moderated to 3.5 per cent in September-November as against growth of 7.3 per cent during April to August 2025. Given that exports to the US account for around 20 per cent of India’s exports, there will be a big reprieve to the exporters with the lowering of tariffs.

The details of the trade deal are still not out, but our first-cut analysis shows that the lower tariff would provide a growth boost of around 0.2 percentage point, taking our GDP growth projection to 7.2 per cent for FY27.

However, we will wait for the new GDP series to finalise our projection for the year. The RBI has also shown optimism, revising the first-half growth projection upwards by 20 bps from its earlier projection. It is important to note that India’s recent bilateral trade deals with major economies like the US and the European Union are also likely to improve capital

flows to the economy.

Inflation remains comfortable with an estimate of around 3.2 per cent for the fourth quarter of FY26. Core inflation is also low at around 2.6 per cent (December 2025), after excluding the impact of gold prices.

Assuming normal weather conditions, we expect inflation at a comfortable 4 per cent in FY27. However, we will have to assess the impact of the new CPI series in our inflation projection for FY27.

Despite the RBI’s liquidity-supporting measures, average banking system liquidity in the last two months lowered to Rs 0.7 trillion as against average of Rs 2 trillion in April-November 2025. One of the reasons for tightness in liquidity was the RBI’s forex interventions.

Going forward, we feel that the need for it to intervene in the forex market could reduce as we expect support for the Indian rupee with the signing of a trade deal with the US.

Despite the policy rate cuts, Gsec yields have risen by 45 bps in the last eight months. This has taken the spread between the 10-year bond yield and the repo rate to a high of 150 bps.

The Centre’s large gross borrowing requirement for FY27 has been putting pressure on the gsec yields. High state-government borrowings are aggravating the situation.

The spread on 10-year state government bonds over gsec has risen to a high of 70 bps from 35 bps in the beginning of the fiscal year. The central bank could announce OMO purchases to take care of the demand-supply scenario in the government bond market.

Going forward, we expect the RBI to maintain the status quo on policy rates. The global environment, however, remains uncertain and volatile.

The RBI has preserved the policy ammunition that could be used later if required. With credit demand improving, the focus will be to maintain a comfortable liquidity situation and support the government bond yields.

The writer is chief economist, CareEdge Ratings

courage investment. The Anglo-Saxon economic model has long been held up as the exemplar of this logic. Its antithesis is now on display. Trade policy can be rewritten by executive fiat, deals announced on social media and market access made conditional on geopolitical alignment. In such a world, hedging and diversification are prudent choices.

In an earlier piece on the India-EU trade agreement (‘FTA not an endpoint, marks reform push for next strategic move’, *IE*, 28 January), I had invoked the Mundell-Fleming framework to describe India’s emerging trilemma. India cannot simultaneously maintain unshackled access to Russian oil, preserve complete strategic autonomy, and deepen trade integration with the United States. Something had to give. The EU deal appears to have eased one constraint by opening European markets more substantially, thereby reducing overdependence on the high-income American consumer. Europe is admittedly fractious and often frustrating, as exporters readily testify. But it also respects institutions, remains far more rule-based, and is significantly less prone to unilateral economic measures. For India, the deal represents a conscious trade-off: Accepting regulatory friction and long negotiations in return for predictability. In trilemma terms, India voted in favour of institutional reliability.

This is precisely the logic that Daron Acemoglu, who received the Nobel Prize in Economics in 2024, has long advanced. His work emphasises that good institutions are fundamental to long-term economic development. The resultant policy prescription is clear: Build robust institutions and prosperity will follow. More than three decades ago, in 1992, Jagdish Bhagwati warned the US against aggressive unilateralism and the damage it could inflict on the global trading system. That warning now appears strikingly prophetic.

India’s course is therefore clear. Engage with the US, accept respite when it is offered. But maintain and deepen relationships with other major economies. As the Union Budget presented last Sunday underscored, India must promote and expand labour-intensive manufacturing, especially after the damage inflicted by the 50 per cent US tariff. Textiles and apparel, gems and jewellery face intense competition from Bangladesh and Vietnam, whose lower-duty access to American markets has placed Indian exporters at a disadvantage. The recently announced removal of punitive tariffs and reduction of reciprocal tariffs will help level the playing field somewhat.

At the same time, continued investment in the EU relationship is essential because it provides critical diversification. In the words of P G Wodehouse, relationships need “tending, nurturing, and assiduous fostering.” For India and the EU alike, that is sound advice.

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START is over. Will a nuclear arms race restart?



SAPTARSHI BASAK

THE DOOMSDAY Clock has inched four seconds closer to midnight (from 89 to 85). *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* warned that the world is now closer to catastrophe than at any other point in history. As if that were not troubling enough, the last remaining nuclear arms control treaty between the US and Russia expired on February 4. The New START frequently ran into difficulties, most recently in 2023, when Russia suspended participation amid its war in Ukraine. Vladimir Putin proposed a one-year extension, but negotiations appear to be far away. With other long-standing arms control treaties having already collapsed, there are now effectively no legally binding limits on the US and Russia expanding their nuclear arsenals. The consequences of such a hollowed-out arms control architecture are dangerous for three reasons.

First, in the absence of limits, both sides have incentives to expand their nuclear stockpiles. One country building more weapons is likely to provoke a similar response from its rival, which perceives it as an emerging offensive threat, and the situation becomes what scholars call a security dilemma. In October last year, Trump announced that he had directed the resumption of nuclear weapons testing in the US for the first time in over three decades. This could trigger an arms race that would only raise the probability of conflict, particularly between nuclear and non-nuclear powers. The dangers were most recently illustrated by the 12-day war between Israel and Iran last year. The second consequence is what Glenn Snyder termed the stability-instability paradox: While the risk of direct war between nuclear-armed states may be reduced due to fear of nuclear retaliation, the likelihood of low-intensity conflicts and proxy wars may increase. States assume that as long as they remain below the nuclear threshold, escalation to catastrophic levels can be avoided. Arms control agreements provide transparency; without them, the nuclear threshold becomes harder to read, intensifying the paradox.

Third, if the two countries that together account for most of the world’s nuclear weapons abandon arms control, nuclear proliferation elsewhere is bound to thrive. Even while China undergoes its largest nuclear expansion, nowhere is this more immediately relevant than Iran, which is holding talks with the US over its nuclear programme this week. Should Iran acquire the bomb, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Egypt will inevitably follow suit. An already dangerous West Asia would then find itself armed with nuclear swords pointed in multiple directions.

Ronald Reagan wrote in his memoirs that watching the film *The Day After*, which displayed the potential damage a nuclear exchange can cause, directly influenced his efforts at arms control and eventually, the signing of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty with Mikhail Gorbachev. Perhaps Trump and Putin can do the same to be reminded of what is at stake. If nothing else, both states will be talking about nuclear weapons again, giving diplomacy more time. But should the arms race prevail, the Doomsday Clock will only move closer and closer to midnight.

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40 YEARS AGO

February 07, 1986



Butter oil imports banned

RESISTING PRESSURE from the European Economic Community, the Centre has finally decided to ban the import of butter oil to save the indigenous dairy industry. The belated decision is expected to rescue the industry. Nearly 1 lakh tonnes of butter oil was to be imported by a multinational corporation from the European Economic Community.

War on fog

FOG WILL cease to be a problem at the country’s airports. Before the onset of next winter, 11 airports — Delhi, Agartala, Jaipur, Patna, Jammu, Imphal, Amritsar, Bhopal, Kanpur, Mohanbari (Dibrugarh) and Varanasi — will be equipped with the

latest Instrument Landing System (ILS), making flight landings possible, even in the poorest visibility conditions. The work on the multi-crore project, which involves the provision of new electronic gadgets, both in the control towers and on the runways, is progressing on a war-footing.

Walk-out in UP

THE UTTAR Pradesh Vidhan Sabha was repeatedly adjourned as the presence of police personnel in guard uniforms irked the Opposition. The Governor’s address to the joint session of the legislative assembly was also cut short amidst slogan shouting and protests by the Opposition, which walked out. Opposition leaders in a signed statement explained that their walk-out was in protest against the anti-people pol-

icies of the state government, which was resorting to repressive measures to crush the people venting their grievances.

Two shot dead in Punjab

TWO PEOPLE were shot dead and two others seriously injured in different incidents in Punjab in the past 24 hours. Jatinder Singh Ghuman, the president of the Gurdaspur district unit of the All-India Sikh Students’ Federation (Khalsa faction), owing allegiance to the Shiromani Akali Dal, was shot dead by suspected terrorists in his village, Ghuman Kalan, in Gurdaspur district. Bhagwan Dass, a 65-year-old religious leader, was also shot dead by people suspected to be terrorists at his “dera” in Buttar Kalan village near Mogra.

● HEALTH

IIT-B researchers overcome a key cancer therapy bottleneck

Purnima Sah
Mumbai, February 6

IMMUNOTHERAPY IS reshaping cancer care by harnessing the body's immune system to fight tumours. Among its most promising forms is CAR T-cell therapy, in which T-cells collected from a patient are engineered in labs to recognise and destroy cancer cells. But for this therapy to succeed, scientists must grow large numbers of healthy T-cells outside the body — and retrieve them undamaged.

A new study from Indian Institute of Technology-Bombay, published in *Biomaterials Science* and featured in the European Society for Biomaterials conference collection, addresses this crucial bottleneck. Led by Professor Prakriti Tayalia, the team has demonstrated a gentler recovery method that preserves the cell's viability and immune behaviour, potentially improving the reliability of advanced cancer care.

T-cells and CAR T-cell therapy

T-cells are a type of white blood cells that act as the body's frontline soldiers. They patrol the bloodstream and tissues, looking for infections or abnormal cells such as cancer. When they detect a threat, T-cells either kill the harmful cells directly or signal other immune cells to join the fight.

How CAR T-Cell therapy works

- T-cells are collected from the patient's blood and engineered in labs to target cancer.
- The labs multiply these cells, retrieve them from the medium in which they were being grown.
- The retrieved T-cells are then infused back into the patient.

Globally, CAR T-cell therapy has been approved in the US and Europe for certain blood cancers such as leukemia and lymphoma. It has shown dramatic success in patients who had exhausted conventional treatments. However, it remains expensive, often costing upwards of Rs 3-4 crore abroad, and is still being tested for solid tumours.

The challenge in retrieving immune cells

Growing T-cells is only half the battle. They must be collected intact and functional for therapy to work. Traditionally, labs grow cells on flat plastic dishes, but this environment does not mimic the body. To better replicate natural conditions, researchers use three-dimensional fibrous scaffolds. This biomaterial resembles a dense fishing net, allowing T-cells to grow more actively and multiply faster. But the cells burrow into the fibres, making them hard to remove. "Cell recovery sounds simple on paper, but in practice it turns out to be one of the biggest challenges," said Prof Tayalia. "Without enough healthy cells, you can't test them properly or use them for therapy."

What the study found

The IIT Bombay team tested three approaches to retrieve T-cells: manually flushing the scaffolds with a growth medium, using a relatively harsh enzyme, and using Accutase, a gentler enzyme solution. While cell yield was comparable across all methods, Accutase-treated cells survived better and continued to function normally. Prof Tayalia said: "If we want advanced therapies to reach patients, every step matters. How we grow cells, and how we retrieve them, can make a real difference."

India has begun its own CAR T-cell journey. IIT Bombay and Tata Memorial Centre have collaborated on early trials, with spin-offs like ImmunoACT working to make therapies more affordable. While CAR T-cell therapy abroad can cost crores, Indian efforts aim to bring costs down to a fraction, making them accessible to more patients. IIT Bombay's work shows how small technical refinements can have potential clinical impacts.

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● GEOPOLITICS

Russian oil imports may fall, but unlikely to stop



SUKALP SHARMA

ANNOUNCING THE reduction of tariffs on India from 50% to 18% Monday, US President Donald Trump claimed New Delhi had agreed to stop buying crude from Russia — its largest supplier — and would buy much more from the US and Venezuela.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the government, while welcoming the long-awaited trade deal with the US, have not commented on whether Trump's claim is something that New Delhi will implement. Indian refiners have so far not received any directive on the matter from the government, it is learnt.

But they appear to be preparing to cut down on their Russian supplies significantly. On Thursday, Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal reiterated the government's position that ensuring the energy security of 1.4 billion Indians is the main priority of the government. He said diversifying energy sourcing, in keeping with objective market conditions and evolving international dynamics, is at the core of the strategy.

But completely halting Russian oil imports doesn't appear to be a feasible option for India in the prevailing circumstances. Moreover, substantially reducing import volumes from Russia and correspondingly increasing American and Venezuelan crude supplies is easier said than done, according to industry executives and experts.

Technical and commercial challenges exist, and so do considerations around India's strategic autonomy on its energy trade. Industry analysts expect a gradual reduction rather than a sudden stop.

A major share in oil imports

Indian refiners have already booked Russian oil cargoes through March and even part of April, and turning them down is not an option. If there is a heavy cut in Russian oil purchases, Indian refiners will need an extended window to wind down their purchases. Even if they do that on the government's advice, one refiner — Nayara Energy — will not be in a position to do so, experts pointed out.

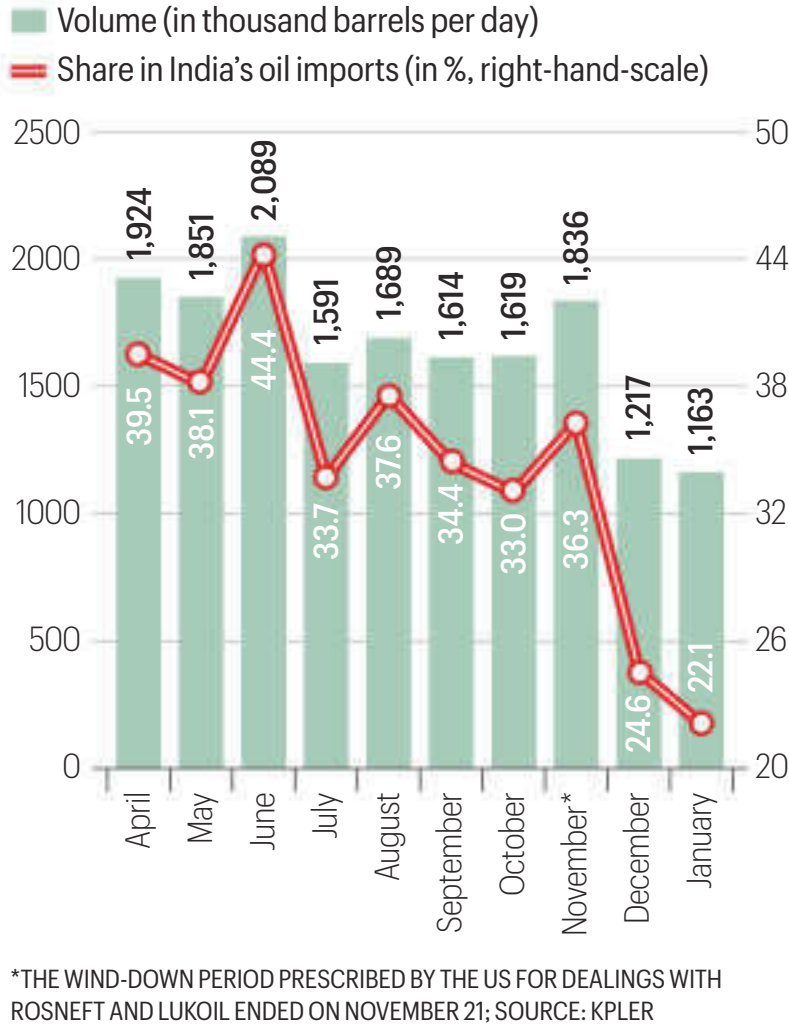
Nayara Energy, which counts Russia's national oil company Rosneft as a significant shareholder, is almost entirely dependent on Russian crude. This is because it has been sanctioned by the European Union, while Rosneft has been sanctioned by the US as well, in addition to the EU.

With these sanctions in place, the refiner,

● INDIA'S CRUDE IMPORTS FROM RUSSIA IN 2025-26



An oil tanker anchored at the docks of the Cardon Refinery in Punto Fijo, Venezuela. NYT FILE



which processes 400,000 barrels per day (bpd) of crude, has not been able to secure oil from most countries other than Russia. Asking Nayara to shun Russian oil would effectively mean shutting the refinery.

"It's unlikely that India will slash (Russian oil) imports to zero. Nayara is completely reliant on Russian crude after coming under EU sanctions last July... Imports may be reduced from an average of around 1.6 million bpd in 2025 to around 0.5 million bpd," said Vandana Hari, energy expert and founder of Singapore-based energy markets intelligence firm Vanda Insights.

Some other industry experts agreed that once the already-contracted volumes of Russian crude are delivered to Indian refiners, and if the government indeed wants to seriously cut down on Russian oil imports, the volumes in the medium term could fall to around 500,000 bpd, which would be roughly half the oil Indian refiners imported from Russia in January.

Now, over the past couple of months, India's Russian oil imports have declined steadily to a three-year low, as per tanker data. This followed US sanctions against Russia's top oil producers and exporters Rosneft and Lukoil. From the 2025 peak of 2.09 million bpd in June, India's Russian oil imports dropped to 1.16 million bpd in January 2026, according to data from commodity market analytics firm Kpler.

Despite this decline, Russian oil still accounted for a dominant 22% share in India's

Output challenge

Venezuelan oil could present a major opportunity for Indian refiners.

But the country's oil output is just 1 million barrels per day. Raising this will take time and money.

total oil imports in January, although it is much lower than the 35-40%-plus share Moscow's oil used to enjoy in India's oil import basket. And this dominance is likely to continue for a few months, at least. Even at 500,000 bpd, Russian crude would account for roughly 10% of India's oil imports.

"India's Russian crude imports are unlikely to see a near-term decline. Volumes remain largely locked in for the next 8-10 weeks and continue to be economically critical for India's complex refining system..." said Sumit Ritolia, Lead Research Analyst, Refining & Modeling at Kpler.

Replacing Russian oil

Theoretically, replacing Russian crude with oil from other countries is not particularly difficult, considering Russian oil's share in India's oil imports prior to the Ukraine war was less than 2%. But to what extent American and Venezuelan oil could replace Russian crude is the key question.

According to industry insiders, India has been increasing its oil imports from the US and can continue to do so, provided it is priced competitively. The cost of shipping oil from the US to India is currently more than double of getting it from West Asia.

The other key consideration would be the US crude grades on offer and their compatibility with Indian refineries. This is because different crude grades are suitable for different petroleum products from an operational and efficiency perspective. In-

dian refineries are currently more accustomed to "medium-sour" crudes from Russia and West Asia, although they have the capability to process nearly all types of crude. US crude is lighter and "sweeter".

Venezuelan oil, which India has not been importing due to US sanctions, presents a major opportunity for Indian refiners. It is more similar to Russian oil than US crude. But Venezuela's oil production is currently limited to just about 1 million bpd, and that crude is also in high demand in the US, which means that it can only partially replace Russian volumes consumed by India. Meaningfully raising Venezuela's oil output would take years and billions of dollars.

"US crude could account for up to around 10% of India's crude intake, largely displacing lighter West African grades rather than Russian supply," said Ritolia.

Strategic autonomy

India took a strong stance on its strategic autonomy for most of last year, even as the Trump administration exerted pressure over New Delhi for its hefty Russian oil purchases, including by imposing an additional 25% tariff. India showed no meaningful signs of buckling under US pressure on the issue, even as there was a domestic trade-off at play — the prohibitive cost of sky-high US tariffs on India's small and medium exporters versus the relatively lower savings accrued by large refiners by buying discounted Russian crude.

Trump's public posturing also made it difficult for India to cut back on Russian oil immediately. It was clear that India did not want to compromise on its strategic autonomy and was unwilling to be dictated to by the US on whom it should be doing business with, particularly when it comes to Russia — an old and key strategic partner. Even the reduction in Russian oil imports in recent months came only after Rosneft and Lukoil were sanctioned by the US.

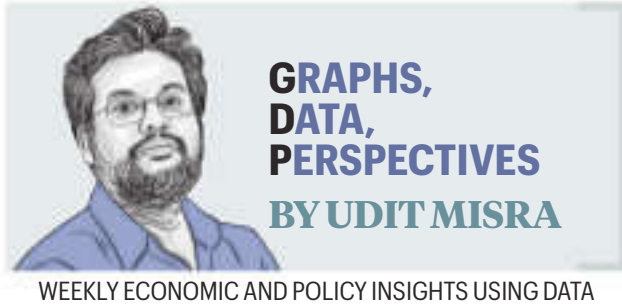
Thursday's statement from the MEA indicates that the government is unlikely to change its stance on India's trade autonomy. In that context, maintaining some volumes of Russian oil supply would work well for New Delhi. According to industry experts, 500,000 bpd of Russian oil imports would still serve the American objective of tightening Russia's revenue from oil exports.

"That would still be a major blow to Russia, as it would not be easy for the country to place another 1 million bpd into China (the other major buyer of Russian oil) and the discounts are likely to widen further," said Hari.

"A more pronounced reduction (in Russian oil imports) would likely require a clear policy shift by the government of India, which appears highly unlikely given that energy security and economics remain a primary policy objective..." said Ritolia.

● GLOBAL

Despite tariffs strategy, US manufacturing jobs fell under Trump



GRAPHS, DATA, PERSPECTIVES
BY UDIT MISRA

DONALD TRUMP'S fascination with the use of tariffs during his second term as the US President has redefined the global order. By slapping punitive tariffs — which he called "reciprocal" in nature — on both US allies and adversaries, Trump has forced every country to move in two opposite directions at the same time.

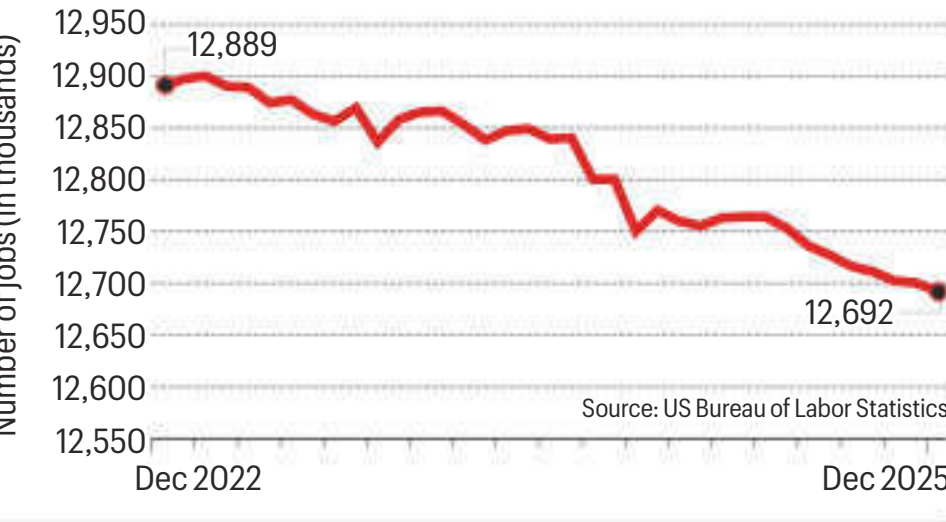
As such, while countries have been forced to look to one another for closer trade alignment, they have also felt compelled to turn insular to reduce their dependence on global trade flows. India is a

good example, in that it has tried to push for self-reliance in its domestic Budget while concluding as many (and often long-pending) trade agreements as possible.

On the face of it, Trump imposed tariffs because he wanted to wipe out the US trade deficit — the gap between what the US pays for its imports and what it earns from its exports of goods. This deficit was close to a trillion dollars. But the deficit was only the accounting aspect of the problem. Tariffs were ultimately aimed at turning the US into a manufacturing powerhouse. Trump repeatedly underscored how the US's share of global manufacturing slid over the past five decades.

This January, Trump completed his first full year in office. Based on the evidence so far, did Trump's tariffs boost manufacturing in the US? He has repeatedly claimed that tariffs have forced global multinational companies to start the

● US manufacturing jobs continue to slide



process of investing in new manufacturing capacities in the US. However, data on manufacturing sector jobs, released by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), paints a starkly different picture.

As the chart shows, the total number of

people employed in manufacturing in the US as of December 2025 was 12.69 million. This is 68,000 fewer jobs compared to December 2024. In fact, jobs in US manufacturing have been coming down in a secular fashion since February 2023, when there were 12.9 million employed in manufacturing. Two decades ago, there were 14.2 million employed in US manufacturing.

This continued fall is likely to be a crucial argument against the efficacy and desirability of Trump's tariffs, as the US political system gets into campaign mode for the midterm elections of the US Congress this November. There is a slight silver lining in the data for Trump, however. The same set of data from the BLS also shows that weekly wages in manufacturing rose from \$1,385 in December 2024 to \$1,439 in December 2025. That's an increase of around 4% at a time when the consumer price inflation has gone by a little less than 3%.

● POLICY

'Eradication of stray dogs an impossible promise... ABC rules not a silver bullet'



EXPERT EXPLAINS
KRITHIKA SRINIVASAN

PROFESSOR OF POLITICAL ECOLOGY

THE SUPREME Court took suo motu cognisance of concerns about stray dogs last year, subsequently ordering their transfer to shelters after sterilisation and vaccination. Several groups challenged the order, and after hearing their arguments, the court reserved its verdict last week.

Dr Krithika Srinivasan, a professor of political ecology in the School of Geosciences at the University of Edinburgh, speaks to **Vineet Bhalla** about India's stray dog population and the dangers of reactive policy-making.

ing. Srinivasan is the Principal Investigator of the Remaking One Health (ROH)-Indies project, which combines human geography, behavioural ecology and social psychology to study human-dog interactions.

In court proceedings, advocates frequently claim there is no data on street dogs. Is that true?

That is simply not true. We must distinguish between two kinds of data. First, there is the government's "reported data", based on hospital records. This is often inaccurate due to under-reporting — many people may not go to hospitals, or inconsistencies can arise during aggregation.

Epidemiological surveys, which study disease and its determinants, are more robust. Two comprehensive surveys were conducted in 2003 and 2022. These showed a steep decline in both rabies and dog bites. There was a 75% decrease in rabies cases, from 20,565 in 2003 to 5,276 in 2022-23. Annual dog bite incidence fell from 15.9 per 1,000 persons to 5.6.

So why does the conflict feel so acute?

A good part of the decline in rabies is due to vast improvements in Post-Exposure Prophylaxis (PEP). The decline in bites is likely linked to the cessation of mass dog removal after 2001. This brings us to a crucial ecological concept: the perturbation effect. When you disturb a population by removing or killing animals, you disrupt their social dynamics. It causes movement — some dogs escape and move to other sites, while new dogs enter vacated territories. These changes increase disease transmission and bites.

But in recent years, we have seen a slight spike in reported issues. Part of this is better reporting, but our research suggests a behavioural shift in urban pockets. Changes in caregiving practices, specifically the shift from casual foraging to regular, mass feeding of full meals, are altering dog behaviour.

How does dog feeding change the dynamics?

It sounds counterintuitive, but a street dog cannot afford to behave like a pet dog.

Ecologically, street dogs are foragers. They usually maintain territories to secure limited resources, which keeps populations stable. They learn to coexist with a wide range of people. Dogs that are aggressive towards humans generally don't survive; their gene pool is eliminated.

This changes with regular mass feeding. Without the need to forage, dogs form strong attachments to feeders and locations. This "de-skills" them. They lose the capacity to stay out of trouble. They start engaging in behaviours like chasing, often out of boredom or territoriality over the feeding spot. A pet dog plays with a ball; a street dog typically conserves energy, but without foraging, they have energy to burn. Such dogs can become aggressive toward strangers, creating localised surges in density and conflict.

Is the Animal Birth Control (ABC) programme the solution?

The ABC rules are based on the assumption that all problems — rabies, bites, nuisance — can be solved by birth control.

While ABC was effective in stopping the perturbation effect, it is not a silver bullet for issues like chasing, barking and congregating.

Our surveys show that for the lay public, rabies is low on the list of concerns. The daily irritants are noise and the fear of chasing. To address these, we need to manage resource availability. The 2023 ABC rules, which entrenched "feeding spots" in law, are perhaps the worst thing you can do ecologically. Concentrating food concentrates dogs, leading to fights and conflict. We need to stop mass feeding while encouraging dispersed tossing of scraps and leftovers, which supports foraging without creating territorial hotspots.

Proposals to remove dogs from public spaces are also problematic at multiple levels. Look at the example of IIT Madras. They removed dogs to a shelter, where many died, but to maintain that "dog-free" status, they had to build high walls and employ 24-hour security. Most public spaces lack those resources. New dogs can also

move in to fill the vacuum, triggering the perturbation effect.

The debate is often framed as dogs vs humans. Is that visible on the ground?

Our research across India shows that 96% of human-street dog interactions are uneventful or positive. The predominant relationship is one of casual coexistence.

Many people who want street dogs removed actually like dogs, but are simply frustrated by specific annoyances, like congregations. Conversely, many "dog lovers" often prioritise only the specific dogs they care for. We are dealing with problems at the interface of human-dog interaction. A multidimensional approach is needed here: accessible post-bite treatment for rabies prevention, environmental and resource management to stop congregations, and education.

People must also learn how to interact safely with animals that share our spaces, rather than relying on the impossible promise of eradication.



OPINION

The
Hindustan Times
ESTABLISHED IN 1924

{ OUR TAKE }

ReSTART for arms control

A post-New START nuclear arms control treaty must include China, factor in concerns of Global South

Nuclear armageddon may be the stuff of fiction, but the fact is that the world has been a safer place because of global treaties that have tried to restrict — with differing degrees of success — the proliferation of nuclear weapons. Take the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty or New START that the US and Russia signed in 2010, under which both agreed to cap their strategic nuclear warheads at 1,550 and limit strategic delivery vehicles to 800, including both deployed and non-deployed systems. It came into force in 2011, with compliance mechanisms, including annual on-site verifications, and promised a 30% reduction in warheads, from what had been promised in the earlier SORT agreement.

New START focussed on the legatees of the two Cold War bloc leaders, the US and Russia, who were involved in an arms race for decades. With New START expiring on Thursday and the US and Russia refusing to negotiate another extension (the treaty was extended for five years in 2021), the world needs new guardrails to avoid nuclear arms proliferation. US President Donald Trump has promised “a new, improved, and modernized treaty that can last long into the future”, and Moscow seems to agree on the need for a new treaty, subject to conditions, though there is no clarity on how and when it will be worked out.

The elephant in the room is China. Washington has rightly said that any new treaty must involve Beijing, whereas the latter has ruled out participating in nuclear disarmament negotiations at this stage. Washington has a point because China possesses the third-largest nuclear arsenal in the world — 600 warheads — though far behind the US and Russia, which together have 90% of the world’s nuclear warhead stockpile (as of January 2025). (In comparison, India has 180). However, the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) estimates that the Chinese arsenal is growing by about 100 new warheads a year since 2023, faster than that of any other country. Beijing has promised a “no first-use” policy, but its refusal to cap its stockpile is of concern to New Delhi. India has adopted a credible minimum deterrence doctrine, a necessity of sharing borders with two nuclear-armed nations. But, it will be hard for New Delhi to ignore Beijing’s expanding nuclear capabilities.

On its part, Russia wants the UK and France also to be signatories of a new treaty, considering that both have a significant arsenal of warheads. Moscow’s demand is also in step with the emerging security situation in Europe, where Russia and Western Europe have been in a standoff since the former’s invasion of Ukraine. Russia revised its nuclear doctrine in 2024: According to the new doctrine, it is now prepared to use nuclear weapons in retaliation, even to conventional strikes that threaten the sovereignty or territorial integrity of Russia or Belarus.

Surely, much of the global treaties on arms control, including New START, privileged the interests of big powers and stood out for their hypocrisy in ignoring the Global South’s concerns, just as in climate talks. These mechanisms also failed to penalise proliferation, as countries such as Pakistan and North Korea built their arsenal surreptitiously with aid from countries such as China. As global power relations change, the big power world view is being challenged by emerging powers. New multilateral treaties will have to be more inclusive and factor in the concerns of the Global South if they are to survive the present moment, where national self-interest has emerged as the key factor in diplomacy. And, in a world of multiple conflicts, concerns of nuclear armageddon can’t be dismissed as overblown.

{ MINOR HINTS }

Rahul Sagar



Xi’s ‘rejuvenating China’ vision hits demographic wall

Xi Jinping’s vision of China rests on a distinctive conception of the good life, one that de-emphasises individual desires and ennobles social virtues. In stark contrast, stands the American harnessing of individualism

In times of chaos, quiet developments that should provoke reflection are easily missed. So it is with the news that China’s birth rate has fallen to its lowest level since 1949. Over the past decade, the Communist Party of China (CPC) has sought to infuse the Chinese people with a grand sense of collective purpose. But the continual decline in China’s birth rate indicates that even its powerful leadership is struggling to address the great anxiety of the modern age — individualism.

Commentary on China is usually either dismissive or alarmist. These extremes can be seen in reaction to Xi’s vision for China (formally known as Xi Jinping Thought), which is often described in the West as either vainglorious or totalitarian. It is instead better understood as an effort to elaborate a social contract — to explain to the Chinese people what makes their political system legitimate. To wit, it lays out a common objective and the means to achieve it: The shared purpose of the Chinese people is the “grand rejuvenation” of their nation under the decisive leadership of the CPC. Critics focus on these aspects of Xi’s vision, which they decry as fostering nationalism and dictatorship, and they console themselves with the futile hope that the Chinese people will decline to pursue greatness or that the CPC will collapse. This approach misses what is distinctive in Xi’s vision — and the true challenge it confronts.

Notably, Xi’s vision rests on a distinctive conception of the good life — the “Chinese” dream — that de-emphasises individual desires and ennobles social virtues.

A number of policies that have befuddled observers follow from this. The CPC, whose reputation had been tarnished by pervasive corruption and nepotism, has been subject to purges, and economic and cultural elites whose lifestyles aroused envy have had their wings clipped too.

The family unit has been a particular concern, with concerted efforts being made to encourage childbearing and filial piety. An array of policies has been enacted to this end, ranging from changes in schooling systems and housing markets to financial incentives and even increased taxation on birth control.

What explains this censoriousness — this bonfire of the vanities with Chinese characteristics?

The theory behind it can be discerned in a profound work, *America Against America*, written in 1991 by Wang Huning, the CPC politburo member often described as China’s “chief ideologue”. Like famous figures before him — from Alexis de Tocqueville and James Bryce through to Fukuzawa Yukichi and Liang Qichao — Huning sought to decipher “the American phenomenon”. “What is the force that has created such a dazzling material civilisation?”, he asks. His answer is that America developed remarkable “political and social management processes” that allowed it to do what Europe and Asia had not — namely, to revere “tradition”, which preserved the “core values” of a society, and yet welcome “innovation”, which was necessary for material progress. Americans secured this extraordinary combination, Huning observes, by being conservative in the public sphere but liberal in the private sphere. They expected, he memorably writes, every president to swear on the Bible, but also gave “reputation and respect” to successful individuals that embodied “the new and different”.

This bifurcation, which had taken shape over generations, explained why America had social stability as well as technological prowess: It had learnt to discourage and encourage “individualism” appropriately.

This analysis, however, did not lead Huning to recommend the American model to his Chinese



The question before contemporary China is whether “self-forgetfulness” can truly be fostered in our age. The blunt answer offered by plummeting birth rates is no.

BLOOMBERG

audience. This is because, as the title of his work indicates, he discerned an “inherent contradiction” in the American experiment. Though America proclaimed both freedom and equality as its “core values”, these principles pushed in opposite directions, producing paradox upon paradox. There was freedom, but it was undone by drugs, crime, and hedonism; there was equality, but “powerful groups” and “private consortia” controlled decision-making. Yet, to advocate for the better realisation of either freedom or equality elicited a howl from the other side, which meant that there was an “unstoppable undercurrent of crisis” in American life.

The ultimate consequence was that every individual was left to decide what values mattered, leading to quiet relativism or civil strife depending on the seriousness of the issue. For this reason, while “there are pros and cons to collectivism for the development of a society”, Huning concluded, “it is clear that collectivism unites more than individualism”. Nor should the Chinese fear that they would not be able to develop economically unless they adopted American values, Huning added, because East Asia’s rapid rise showed that State-led development, which favours coordination, could generate technological advances as impressive as those generated by American-style individualism.

If we take *America Against America* to be the kernel of Xi’s vision, we can see more clearly the challenge it confronts: China’s “great rejuvenation” demands patriotic “self-forgetfulness” from all sections of society. The parent must toil for the child; the scientist for the nation; the entrepreneur for society; the living for those to come. It is a grave mistake to denigrate this thoughtful effort

to address the question of how a large and complex society — a fifth of humanity — can flourish under conditions of modernity. But it is not beyond question.

The fundamental weakness of collectivism, as Aristotle told us long ago in *The Politics*, is that the individual must be content to say that the common is “mine” (in the sense that they share in it) but also “not mine” (in the sense that it is not theirs alone). This is very difficult to accomplish, Aristotle warns, because experience teaches that “everyone thinks chiefly of his own, hardly at all of the common interest”.

So, the question before contemporary China is whether “self-forgetfulness” can truly be fostered in our age. The blunt answer offered by plummeting birth rates across East Asia is — no. These societies have achieved prosperity, but in doing so they have created individuals whom they cannot quite control, least of all in their most intimate moments. This leaves China facing a dire choice. It cannot rely on immigration, as this would, Huning notes, introduce “groups” whose “different cultures” would make it difficult to sustain the “core values” of the society they enter. Nor does the CPC have that great spur to self-sacrifice — religion — at its disposal. Perhaps then, in the end, China will have to rely on compulsion, penalizing those who do not have children as unpatriotic. But, in that case, will the social contract on offer still be described by its citizens as “the Chinese Dream”?

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

Budget 2026-27: Ledger of missed opportunities

A Union budget represents a moral guide, a political direction, and an economic plan combined into a single entity. It informs citizens not just of the government’s planned expenditures, but also of who it aims to support. Budget 2026, unfortunately, achieves none of these effectively.

It was a budget of polish without proof, numbers without nuance, announcements without answers. It speaks in majestic visions but murmurs on delivery. It promises confidence, yet avoids commitment. It declares intent, but evades impact.

In a period when the Indian economy faces declining private investment, pressured exports despite trade deals, weak employment, and increasing household hardship, this budget opts for distance rather than decisiveness. This budget is filled with slogans, lacking in fairness, and noticeably quiet about pain.

Let us start with the strict rigour of figures. The most notable, and sadly, absurd aspect of the budget is a calculation that fails to tally correctly. In 2025-26, revenue receipts were short by ₹78,086 crore, while total expenditure was short by ₹1,00,503 crore. Even more troubling, capital expenditure, crucial for growth, was cut by ₹1,44,376 crore, comprising ₹25,335 crore at the Centre and an alarming ₹1,19,041 crore at the state level.

This does not reflect financial caution; it signifies financial withdrawal. The Centre’s capital

spending dropped from 3.2% of GDP in 2024-25 to 3.1% in 2025-26, with no clarification provided in the finance minister’s address. When growth decelerates, governments should aim to spend more wisely rather than retreat quietly. Budgets might communicate in percentages, yet citizens experience in absolutes.

The budget compels me to believe that the present government focuses on cutting more in areas where it hurts the most. The sharpest axe has fallen not on administrative excess, but on sectors that touch ordinary lives. Rural development allocations were cut by ₹53,067 crore, urban development by ₹39,573 crore, social welfare by ₹9,999 crore, agriculture by ₹6,985 crore, education by ₹6,701 crore, and health by ₹3,686 crore.

As far as fiscal targets are concerned, there is prudence in name, but drift in practice. The budget shows timidity, verging on complacency, when it comes to budgetary consolidation. The budget deficit is expected to decrease by a meagre 0.1 percentage point in 2026-2027, although it will still be 4.4% of GDP in 2025-2026. The revenue deficit stagnates at 1.5%.

After years of citing the Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management (FRBM) Act like a hallowed document, the administration now considers it as optional reading.

The middle class is taxed by silence. Perhaps the most glaring miss of this budget is what it

refuses to say to India’s middle class. There is no income-tax relief, no slab rationalisation, and no inflation indexing. In effect, the government has allowed the fiscal drag to quietly raise the tax burden without legislative change.

When prices rise and slabs don’t, taxation becomes stealthy, not stable. The salaried class — paying EMIs, school fees, and hospital bills — heard only silence in a speech that ran into hours. For them, this budget was like an ATM where the screen lights up but cash does not come out.

The situation is compounded by policy signals that unsettle financial savers, a sharp Securities Transaction Tax (STT) hike on futures and options, removal of interest deduction on dividend and mutual fund income, tighter capital gains exemptions on sovereign gold bonds, and unfavourable taxation of share buybacks. Together, these moves erode trust in the very instruments meant to deepen household participation in capital markets.

Markets speak in points. And when indices fall sharply, it is not opposition rhetoric, it is market cross-examination. The Economic Survey 2025-26 had flagged around a dozen major economic challenges, from stressed exports due to US tariffs, from low gross fixed capital formation (hovering around 30% of GDP) to persistent FDI uncertainty and FPI outflows, to the closure of lakhs of MSMEs and rising youth unemployment. None of these received serious policy attention in the budget speech.

MSMEs are offered slogans but no credible rescue plan. Urban India, strained by rapid migration and crumbling municipal infrastructure, is acknowledged rhetorically and abandoned fiscally. Workers are thanked, but not supported; farmers are praised, but not pro-



Abhishek Singhvi

A potential flashpoint between Centre & states

The Supreme Court of India recently ruled (*NK Meena vs State of Rajasthan*) that a State agency can investigate a complaint of corruption against a central government official without getting the Union government’s approval. In the apex court’s opinion, there is nothing in the law that prohibits a state government functionary from investigating charges levelled against a central official. This is a ruling that relied heavily on the judgment in *AC Sharma vs Delhi Administration* (1973), which dismissed the plea of the accused, a CPWD official, that only the CBI, and not the Delhi administration, could register a case against him. The recent ruling upsets the apple cart and could promote discord between the Centre and the states, particularly at a time when there is an acute

lack of trust in the fairness of investigating agencies, both at the Centre and in states.

The Delhi Special Police Establishment (DSPE) Act, 1946, gives a legal status to the CBI. The latter can have a grandiose physical structure in a State, but it can exercise legal authority only with the consent of the state government. This can be unconditional or approval given on a case-by-case basis. The CBI cannot look into a complaint against a state government functionary unless the state specifically authorises it. This means while state investigators can exercise unfettered authority to proceed even against a central government official, the Centre does not have the same power against a state government servant.



RK Raghavan

On the face of it, there is an invidious discrimination here.

The founding fathers of the Republic probably wanted to strike a balance between the Centre and states. The apex court ruling, unfortunately, gives enormous power to the states. It nearly subordinates the Centre to the states. This is dangerous considering the polemics that now dictate public debate. States that are unabashedly inimical to the Centre, may use the ruling as a weapon to intimidate New Delhi. We have witnessed the Centre and some state governments squabble over powers. This is somewhat analogous to the abrasive exchanges between governors and state governments in non-BJP-ruled states. Hence, a public debate on the apex court ruling is called for, in order to restore parity between the two entities.

Our public scene is so polluted that I can foresee some erratic states waiting for an opportunity to snipe at Delhi by fabricating charges against central government officials. The current scene has

thrown up a substantial number of flimsy investigations arising from an unconcealed desire to settle political scores.

The apex court ruling could open the floodgates for false charges. Those most vulnerable to such malicious triggering of legal processes are income tax and customs officers, who initiate investigations on suspected suppression of taxable income or attempts to smuggle contraband into the country. The Union government’s civil servants (including those in the CBI or enforcement directorate) routinely create enemies for themselves; those being probed by them could go to any extent to frustrate investigations or merely throw mud at honest officials. The imposition of a penalty on those who are party to untenable complaints is a time-consuming process, and we seldom see such action. The Union government should seek a review of the apex court’s ruling.

RK Raghavan is a former CBI director and a former head of the vigilance and anti-corruption bureau in Tamil Nadu. The views expressed are personal

{ EDITOR’S PICK }

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

CLEAR PATH FOR NUCLEAR ARMS CONTROL

The post Cold War years saw the US and Russia work out a deal for nuclear arms control through the START treaties. With the New START treaty having reached its end date, the fears of a new arms race between the old geopolitical rivals have once again begun to rear their head.

Against this backdrop, David A Cooper’s *Arms Control for the Third Nuclear Age: Between Disarmament and Armageddon* provides the reader with a comprehensive outlook on the concept of nuclear arms control. From the rationale of the many Cold War era theories of arms control to how these theories inspired expansive multilateral nuclear treaties, this book shows how old ideas of nuclear arms control can also be applied today. The book presents a case for the world, especially in today’s era of uncertainty, to adopt similar models centered around negotiation, to ensure the world does not move one more second closer to nuclear midnight.



Arms Control for the Third Nuclear Age
David A Cooper
2021

THE ASIAN AGE

7 FEBRUARY 2026

All leaders need to shun hate, put the nation first

This hatred must end.” These words were those of Mahatma Gandhi during the difficult days of the Partition which resonated with the top leadership of the time in Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and Deputy PM Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel. The words ring true 80 years later though the hate per-

tains to what exists now between the top leadership of the country and the opposition. And this is what is also affecting the functioning of the Lok Sabha, which is the common ground at which both get to speak on subjects of national interest.

The frequent, perhaps even continuous, disruption of the Lower House since the discussion began on the Budget and then the trade deal with the United States and the motion of thanks to the President’s address in which the issue of a yet-to-be published in India memoir of an Army chief cropped up, is owed more to the hatred existing among those who run the government and those who are politically opposed to them.

It may have been extraordinary that a “gherao” of the Prime Minister’s seat by women MPs took place but the subsequent shutting down of Lok Sabha proceedings at the merest sign of dissent and discord is symptomatic of the erosion in sustaining even ordinary working relationships that are required for the national legislature to function.

It didn’t help either that a top constitutional functionary like the Speaker has been unable to control proceedings by using his considerable powers as, say, in having the disruptors removed from the House if it becomes necessary for its smooth functioning. The scare scenario that he whipped up leading to the Prime Minister abandoning altogether his duty of explaining “the position of the Government at the end of the discussion on the Motion of Thanks,” was not in keeping with the holder of a high, non-partisan office of democracy.

The crux of the problem leading to more than 80 per cent of time allotted being wasted post- Budget presentation lay in the ruling on the inadmissibility of reading from a media report on a book by a former Army chief. Irrespective of the correctness of the ruling, the Leader of the Opposition’s stubbornness in not accepting it contributed to the impasse in equal measure.

When so much information is available in the public domain these days in the age of instant communications, it cannot be right that the merest threat of disclosure of sensitive information in the House is a signal for the suppression of MPs’ speech. The fluent running of Parliament is primarily the government’s responsibility as much as it is the privilege of the Opposition to use the opportunity meaningfully to question government decisions.

What has been lost is the culture of civil discourse, debate and discussion in the Lok Sabha where the directly elected representatives of the people gather. This is not compensated by the Elders finding a kind of median of polite exchanges in the Rajya Sabha though the general coarseness of the language of vituperation against political opponents has not come down one whit, be it in someone calling another a traitor for being a political turncoat or a leader accusing a family of hijacking a surname to perpetuate its connect with the people. But that, again, is a sign of the hatred that runs through the top echelon of people’s leaders.

RBI neutral amid uncertainty

The Reserve Bank of India-led Monetary Policy Committee’s decision to leave policy rate unchanged at 5.25 per cent came along the expected lines as it is prudent to retain firepower for the crisis day.

The Central bank expects GDP growth for 2025-26 to be at 7.4 per cent, driven by private consumption, fixed investment and the service sector. The revival of the manufacturing sector’s growth is visible even as construction and services remain resilient.

The RBI forecasts retail inflation based on the Consumer Price Index at 2.1 per cent for financial year 2025-26, which is below its inflation mandate of four per cent (with plus or minus two percentage points). Though the Central bank predicts a slight uptick in the inflation figure at around four per cent in the next fiscal, it will remain comfortable for the country.

Though the economy is expected to benefit from the India-EU Free Trade Agreement and proposed India-US trade deal, the Central bank remains cautious about the growth outlook as it has kept its monetary stance neutral, primarily because of global uncertainty.

While macroeconomic actions remain muted in the monetary statement, the central bank has taken steps to increase production and employment in the country by doubling collateral-free MSME loans from ₹10 lakh to ₹20 lakh. This move will help micro enterprises.

The RBI’s proposal to allow banks to lend to real estate infrastructure trusts (REITs) is expected to give a fillip to commercial real estate and, as a result, lead to employment generation. Relaxation in norms for branch expansion for select NBFCS too will create jobs.

The biggest highlight of the monetary policy is the RBI’s proposal to compensate customers, who lost their money in digital frauds, up to ₹25,000. While it may give some relief to the victims of cyber frauds, it should not absolve RBI of its responsibility to make payment systems as far as possible fraud-proof.

The RBI’s proposal to allow banks to lend to real estate infrastructure trusts is expected to give a fillip to commercial real estate and, as a result, lead to employment generation

KAUSHIK MITTER

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Subhani



The general in his literary labyrinth... So, what now?



Shobhaa’s Take

Books are not bombs. Poems are not bullets. What are you afraid of, censors? Something foul is afoot. This is about former Army chief Gen. M.M. Naravane’s unpublished book (*Four Stars of Destiny*), which is causing mayhem across the country. All hell broke loose after an extract was boldly and bravely published by *Caravan* in the magazine’s Security/Essay section. The much-decorated Gen. Manoj Mukund Naravane (Retd), the author of two other books, was Chief of the Army Staff between December 2019 and April 2022. The rules restrict retired officers from publishing classified information, under the sweeping Official Secrets Act. Regulations for publishing secret content require prior government clearance. Never one to lose a golden opportunity to embarrass his bete noire, the BJP, Lok Sabha LoP Rahul Gandhi defiantly flashed a printed copy of the book the government insists doesn’t exist, before quoting from an excerpt carried by *Caravan*.

“Rahul has made it a habit to demoralise the armed forces,” thundered BJP’s Ravi Shankar Prasad, while parliamentary affairs minister Kiren Rijiju warned Rahul to stop “speaking the language of anti-India elements”. Rahul was also accused of “defying the Chair”. It didn’t stop there. Subsequently, eight Opposition MPs, including seven from the Congress, were suspended from the Lok Sabha for the remainder of the Budget Session: it was the first such suspension of MPs in the 18th Lok Sabha. Rahul Gandhi continued his tirade against Prime Minister Narendra Modi even after BJP MP Nishikant Dubey pointed out that Rahul’s own party had not allowed Army generals like K.M. Cariappa or V.K. Singh to write potentially explosive memoirs. Unruly, disruptive conduct followed — the usual scripted protest that saw Opposition MPs rushing to the Well of the House, tearing up papers and raising slogans. By 3 pm, the humiliating suspension was enforced by a determined Rijiju.

“This is a blot on our democracy”, responded a miffed Rahul as he recorded his “strongest protest” via a letter to the Speaker. So much for that unparliamentary, over-dramatic *hungama* and *hulla gulla*. The man with the unpublished memoir has been on the lit fest circuit recently, attracting crowds and talking soberly to supporters and fans in the audience — regular book lovers and readers — not hired, flag-waving cheerleaders of any political party. Unsurprisingly, the retired general has been attracting a full house at some of the country’s most prestigious lit fests. Since we were both invited to the same fests, it was inevitable that our paths crossed at different venues, from Dehradun to Vadodara. We met briefly in various authors’ lounges, and it is my loss that we couldn’t grab more time together. There were so many questions I had for him! But that is the nature of the beast these days. Authors are assigned well-briefed minders (at the Vadodara lit fest, they were called “shadows”), who take their jobs very seriously, functioning more like bouncers and security guards, frequently obstructing writers from interacting with readers. I am not sure if this is by design, but there is no free movement these days, minus vigilant watchdogs.

A close friend overheard a belligerent police officer talking to a worried organiser about a Bangladeshi writer whose session was expected to attract sizeable crowds. “*Session ko bandh karwa doon?*”, asked the cop

It’s disheartening that nobody is willing to discuss ‘sensitive’ issues, even informally. Self-censorship has never been this obvious! News TV channels doing author interviews routinely edit out anything that is potentially ‘dangerous’.

eagerly. The organiser replied hesitantly: “*Nahin, nahin. Par extra bandobast organisae karo.*”

I noticed that at a few lit fests, big-ticket non-resident *desi* writers carefully screened the crowd and actively avoided interacting with known right-wingers. “I don’t want to be in a photograph with that person”, a highly reputed author told me (Errr... I’m more than happy to flaunt my pic with Gen. Naravane). It’s disheartening that nobody is willing to discuss “sensitive” issues, even informally. Self-censorship has never been this obvious! News TV channels doing author interviews routinely edit out anything that is potentially “dangerous” to the carefully curated official narrative. At the Kolkata Book Fair (*Boi Mela*), I talked to a local anchor about the glaring absence of hugely popular writers from Bangladesh. I also mentioned the substantial loss of revenue this year, with 25-30 publishers/ book-sellers from Bangladesh pulling out of the fair. Over the years, it was their stalls that attracted the biggest crowds. My quotes on this glaring vacuum and unfortunate omission at the fair were missing in the clips that aired.

The troubling question is not about the general’s unpublished book, patiently awaiting official clearance while languishing with his publishers (Penguin Random House). It’s much bigger than any one individual or book. It’s not even about Bangladeshi authors either opting out or not getting visas to attend lit fests and book fairs in India. It is about the environment.

At Mumbai’s Kala Ghoda Festival, a discussion titled “Incarcerated: Tales from behind Bars” was abruptly

cancelled by the police. Activist Anand Teltumbde, Neeta Kolhatkar and others were taken aback to see the posters being pulled down. Participants were asked to delete posts... or else. The Mumbai police threatened to shut down the entire festival, leaving the organisers with little choice but to hastily withdraw the session. Ironically, the Maharashtra police are listed as “supporters” of the festival. I so wish Brinda Miller, the dynamic festival director, had issued a statement and taken a stand expressing solidarity with Teltumbde.

A literary Urdu Jalsa co-organised by the Urdu department of the University of Mumbai featuring Naseer-uddin Shah was similarly cancelled. “Preet Nagar”, tracing the progressive tradition of Urdu literature, was abruptly shut down without prior notice. It was claimed the actor had opted out — a claim the actor insists is an outright lie. No reasons were given to him for withdrawing the invitation at the last minute.

Writers are soft targets, almost heart-breakingly vulnerable. So are poets, painters and filmmakers. Living in such a vitiated environment is bad for the soul. Paranoia hurts creativity. Our moral outrage should be aimed at the pamphleteers and propagandists — lawbreakers who parade as lawmakers. Why pick on those who are armed with nothing more lethal than words and images?

I mentioned this to a New York-based *desi* person who works with sensitive agencies worldwide. “The environment is the same across the US! Events get cancelled. Nobody opens their mouths. Lips are sealed. So are ears.” There is widespread distrust, to the extent that communication on even seemingly innocuous subjects is restricted to non-committal, truncated exchanges. Text messages rarely go beyond polite greetings. Opinion is now a bad word.

In Trumpland, everyone is a suspect. Let’s hope it never comes to that in *Mera Bharat Mahaan!*

Instagram handle @ShobhaaDe; Twitter handle @DeShobhaa

LETTERS

THE ‘BETTER’ SEX

The recently concluded edition of WPL was a treat for all lovers of cricket. Two things converged to give rise to it. One, Indian women’s cricket has finally come of age giving rise to a plethora of young and mature talent. Two, the women’s relative lack of physical strength has come as a blessing in disguise. With the arrival of heavier bats and the shorter format of the game, men’s cricket today is all power and looks almost like a video game. Forget grammar, even skill is not needed. It’s about hitting the longest sixer. Even ODIs lead to Test match scores. It is in the women’s game that we get to see struggle and technique, and touch and timing, the hallmark of any sport, and yes, boundaries, the bread and butter shot of cricket.

Priyanka Mathur
Noida, UP

CRICKET THE WINNER

RCB’S EMPHATIC TRIUMPH over DC in the WPL final embodied courage, discipline and conviction. Captain Smriti Mandhana’s composed and assured innings anchored the side, steering the chase with poise under mounting pressure. The bowling unit reinforced her effort with disciplined spells and sharp fielding, a testament to preparation and collective resolve. This championship stands as a fitting reward and a moment of deep fulfillment for devoted fans. More than a trophy, the victory carries a resonant message to young girls — that leadership, unity and resilience can reshape narratives and propel women’s cricket to new heights across the nation.

K. Chidanand Kumar
Bengaluru

FAIR MOBILITY

BHARATCABS, commonly referred to as the BharatTaxi App, is a Government of India-supported initiative that got launched on Thursday. Union home and cooperation minister Amit Shah launched the service for the netizens. This is a user oriented mechanism to initiate the cooperative decision making platforms. The platform offers services to customers to hail cars, three-wheelers and two-wheelers through it — makes two promises in a cut-throat ride hailing market dominated by private players. It will charge commissions from drivers, with drivers earning more since it is also a driver-owned initiative, and it will have reasonable pricing for customers. This app represents a movement toward fair mobility in India.

Dimple Wadhawan
Kanpur

Farrukh Dhondy

Cabbages & Kings



“Abandonment on the cross gave rise To the great religion of hope So can all abandoned ones surmise That within it there’s still some scope... For a small revival — though it may be best That the transgressor go her ways... Is this not a spiritual test To bring light to these darkest days?” — From *Aaj Hi Bhaaji*, by Bachchoo

When ‘free speech’ is no longer ‘free’... and the rising peril of ‘deplatforming’

As those of us who possess a dictionary know, the word “free” has two meanings — “without a price” and “unconfined”. The phrase “free speech” originally meant the latter — unconfined expression — but today it seems to have picked up connotations of the former — having a price.

How? The French police have raided the Paris headquarters of Elon Musk’s X, the social media platform with its AI branch Grok, which charges users to create pornographic pictures of children and women without their consent.

France, and now the UK, allege that X is guilty of the violation of security and the promotion of Holocaust-denying pro-Nazi propaganda.

The prosecution could mean the closure of X and Grok in these countries, or perhaps a climbdown by Musk, who could filter usage on the platform and its mechanisms to exclude potentially criminal content.

What X’s spokespersons plead is that their con-

tent and AI nude-making devices are there in the interests of “free speech” and the prosecution by France and Britain is “politically motivated”. This is abject hypocrisy as the people who access these nasty Grok mechanisms pay for them.

Free, at a price?

And as for “politically motivated”, it certainly may be, as both countries have legal strictures against Holocaust-denial propaganda and there certainly could be some political motivation in investigating fascist-apologist stuff from X’s owner who raised his arm, for all the world to see, in a Nazi salute at a Donald Trump political rally.

This shibboleth of “free speech” has now become a rallying cry of right-wing and ultra-right-wing publications, politicians and parties. A right-wing British weekly called *The Spectator*’s present editor is the ex-Tory Cabinet minister Michael Gove. His magazine, no doubt in the interests of “free speech”, recently published a feature interview with the criminal misogynist brothers Andrew and Tristan Tate, who have sought refuge from the 26 cases of rape and abuse they face if they return to the UK. They are proven traffickers of vulnerable young women and see themselves as the influencers of a new masculinity that champions extreme misogyny on social platforms which have built up a vast following of young men.

The interview in Gove’s magazine was nothing short of an advertisement for these unpleasant criminals... And then Gove also ran a piece by

some woman who calls herself Bonnie Blue and claims to hold the world record for having sex with 1,057 men in a single day. Her piece wasn’t an explanation of why she had sought notoriety with this demented stunt. It wasn’t in any sense enlightening and as far as I remember could have been about affection for her pet dog — or for Michael Gove, for that matter.

Each week in this publication a fellow called Toby Young — who has now been elevated to the House of Lords by the Tory establishment — who runs an outfit which he calls “The Free Speech Union” writes a column. Apart from boring readers with accounts of visits to games his favourite football team plays, or some confessions about drink or abstinence, he writes in support of people who have been stopped from speaking on some platform or the other.

His diatribes are always in favour of someone who has been “deplatformed” because of their denial of transgenderism or their support for the present Israeli government and its actions in Gaza. Fair enough. These platforms, usually in universities, should be open to all views as long as they don’t violate the British law against hate speech which prohibits the instigating of violence towards individuals or groups.

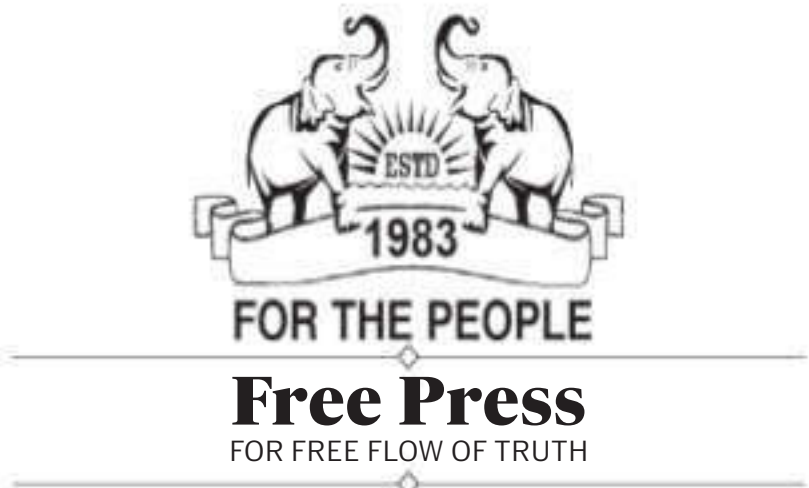
The name of the Free Speech Union suggests that it is a voice of liberalism and a necessary watchdog within any democracy. It isn’t. Its mission is the defence of right-wing views and the

unrelenting denigration of anything Lord Toby deems to be leftist or “woke” objections to nasty and provocative right-wing stances.

I would put his “free speech” conviction to the test. There was recently in Adelaide, Australia, a storm in a literary teacup. The Palestinian writer Randa Abdel-Fattah, scheduled to appear at the city’s literary week, was, at the last minute, cancelled. Jewish groups and politicians brought about the cancellation, claiming that she should not be invited as the memory of the massacre at Bondi Beach by anti-Zionists was still raw. Dozens of writers, including Zadie Smith, thought the association of Randa with events at Bondi Beach was ridiculous and walked out, causing the mid-January event to be cancelled. Would Lord Toby’s Union have opposed the ban on Randa Abdel-Fattah? Unlikely, as it emerged that she had in posts and pronouncements expressed enthusiastic approval of the massacre and hostage-taking of civilian Israelis in October 2023. She’d also called in 2024 and later for the “deplatforming” of writers Ayan Hirsir Ali, American columnist Thomas L. Friedman and the pro-Israeli musician Deborah Conway. A cancelled pro-canceller?

Lord Toby would, without a doubt, have opposed the cancellations that Abdel-Fattah called for. But would he campaign against the cancellation of herself?

Was Rome built... Free Speech for Nasty Right-Wing Views Union?



Piercing the dark web

In a move to deter the illegal online sale of controlled pharmaceuticals in the United States, the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) in that country has seized 200 website domains that were part of an India-based transnational crime organisation operating in America. In a separate action, it arrested four individuals. This Operation Meltdown joint operation with Indian law enforcement agencies reflects an escalated response by the DEA to the illegal sale of drugs, some of them opioids that threaten people's health. Controlled drugs can be sold in the US only by licensed pharmacies based on valid prescriptions, while many websites operate without such requirements and are, according to authorities, selling fake or harmful drugs laced with opioids like fentanyl. It is well-known that fentanyl has been linked to an epidemic of opioid addiction, overdosing, and drug-related deaths in the US and has been the target of the Trump administration even in its first term. For instance, in a report issued six years ago, the DEA identified India as a major source of precursors of fentanyl and the finished opioid exported to Mexico after China had started imposing export restrictions.

Cleaning up the dark web is a major task that requires coordinated international action

US intelligence prompted India to shut down an illicit fentanyl factory in Indore, and the Mumbai anti-narcotics cell seized 100 kg of its precursor chemical and made four arrests a few years ago. The flow of controlled substances under the radar, with a footprint in India, is a matter for worry, given the perception of growing addiction among the youth.

The pattern that emerges in the use of the dark web on the Internet, social media, and cryptocurrency to facilitate the flow of opioids and other controlled substances should serve as a wake-up call to law enforcement agencies. While China was treated as ground zero for fentanyl flow eight years ago, it has since pivoted to stronger enforcement on exports. Other theatres for clandestine online commerce, such as Canada and Western Europe, have also been the focus of DEA enforcement action, including shutting down websites selling fake or controlled drugs four years ago. At home, a spate of drug seizures in the ports of Gujarat and the National Investigation Agency's report that international terror groups could be using India to raise major funds through narcotics to carry out attacks such as the Pahalgam tourist massacre underscore the need for extreme vigilance. The role of cryptocurrency in paying for illegal purchases must also be subjected to close scrutiny. Recommendations have been made by the Financial Action Task Force to regulate crypto, mandating virtual asset service providers to retain originator and beneficiary information for some transactions. Keeping some classes of payments out of crypto could, perhaps, be a viable filter. Cleaning up the dark web is a major task that requires coordinated international action.

HP mobile ban the right step

The horrors of online addiction came to the fore recently with the chilling death by suicide of three minor girls in Ghaziabad, allegedly obsessed with Korean serials and video games. Himachal Pradesh Chief Minister Sukhvinder Sukhu's announcement of a ban on mobile phones in all government and private schools in the state from March 1, therefore, has come as a timely step. The Chief Minister cited the need for academic excellence and interpersonal growth as the reason for the ban. Students found with mobile devices will have to pay a fine of Rs 500, while their parents or guardians will have to undergo mandatory counselling. Adolescent obsession with mobile phones is a dangerous trend that needs to be curbed. There have been innumerable cases of reckless online behaviour by teenagers, leading to fatal consequences. It has been found that many students are spending more time on their mobile devices than on studies or sports, hampering their all-round growth. The relentless use of social media sites has also made youngsters vulnerable to online predators and stalkers, leading to potentially dangerous situations.

Recently, Australia became the first country to ban those under 16 from using most social media sites. It made it mandatory for platforms to verify users' ages and dismantle underage users' accounts. France's lower house has also approved a bill banning social media use for those under 15, and the UK government is considering such a ban. Two southern states in India are also mulling such a move, with the Andhra HRD minister Nara Lokesh stating that children were slipping into relentless social media usage, while Karnataka IT minister Priyank Kharge referred to a 'digital detox' programme involving 300,000 children and 100,000 teachers.

Teenage obsession with social media sites has reached dangerous levels, affecting attention spans, academic performance, and sleep patterns. Social skills have also been hit by this online addiction, and mental health experts point to its dangerous consequences. The Ghaziabad children's case is a bizarre expose on how online addiction makes adolescents or pre-adolescents live in an alternate reality far removed from everyday routine. Parental curbs on online usage led them to take the extreme step, and their suicide note is an example of how different their world was from that of their parents. In a world where nuclear families are the norm, and most households consist of working couples, there is very little parental oversight of children's behaviour. It, therefore, becomes imperative for the state to step in and ensure that children are protected from the dangers of online addiction. The Himachal government's move is one in the right direction, as it envisages a more holistic approach to education and upbringing. We owe it to the future generation to ensure their mental and physical well-being.



Budget 26 has been overtaken by news that the Indo-US trade deal has finally been clinched. Farmers' organisations have already expressed apprehension that allowing zero per cent import tariffs on US goods may end up destroying the livelihoods of Indian farmers. While we await the finer details of this deal, it would be a good time to analyse to what extent Budget 26 will help Indian women, who comprise half the population, a large percentage of whom are working in the field of agriculture.

A sizeable number of these women are landless and are entirely dependent on daily labour, which is seasonal and poorly paid, especially since mechanisation, monocropping, and the acquisition of large tracts of land for public development purposes have led to their displacement. This has led to a drop in their wages and increased rural indebtedness.

Sadly, the shift from MGNREGA to VB-G RAM G will be the last straw on the camel's back as far as women's agricultural labour is concerned because on the ground it will mean a change from a rights-based and demand-led to a budget-capped, supply-driven scheme.

The three pillars of women's empowerment are health, education, and livelihood. None of these have been adequately addressed in



The storm in the tea cup in Ladakh raised allegedly by the unpublished book by Gen Narawane, whose excerpts appeared in a magazine some time ago, refuses to die down. This time it was Rahul Gandhi who raised the issue in the parliament, seeking clarification from the govt. As per parliamentary procedure and traditions, the President's address is not the appropriate occasion to raise this issue, as the responses have to be restricted to the matters included in the address per se. But notwithstanding that, the issue having been raised in public on earlier occasion as well, the treasury benches should have responded in a befitting manner rather than brusquely obfuscate it blatantly. Obviously the opposition parties will draw political mileage out of any such developments. Government on its part should have assured the LOP that the issue will

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Mamata in SC

This refers to the news report "Commission targeting Bengal" (Feb 5). Kudos to Mamata Banerjee for bringing the cases of harassment during the SIR exercise to the notice of the apex court, expecting the latter to take cognisance of the matter. The apex court is also apprised of the fact as to how Bengal is targeted and how the names of voters are being deleted on flimsy grounds. It is now the apex court's legal responsibility to find out whether any machinations are going on to delete names of voters arbitrarily.

Arun Gupta, Kolkata

Help fight cancer

February 4 is observed as World Cancer Day to raise awareness about the devastating impact of cancer and to encourage collective action against this deadly disease. According to WHO, it accounts for over 10 million deaths annually. In many regions, including in India, lack of modern medical facilities, limited access to early detection, and low public awareness worsen the situation. This year's

theme, "United by Unique", reminded us that while every patient's cancer journey is different, our collective action—supporting patients, funding research, and advocating for affordable treatment—is essential.

Jubel D'Cruz, Mumbai

False promise

This refers to the election eve second-phase promises of AIADMK general secretary Edappadi K. Palaniswami. While we welcome the increase in the old age pension, we feel the waiver of education loans will adversely affect the bank balance sheet,

year after year. He is also not clear about the amount of subsidy for the 3 LPG cylinders per year. Similar was the promise of the DMK chief on the eve of the 2021 elections. It would be nice if political leaders were clear on their promises and honest in implementing them in toto.

N. Mahadevan, Chennai

Student suicides

The news of the suicidal death of a second-year student in IIT Mumbai is shocking. The tragic incident is an indicator of the deterioration of the mental health of students. The IIT

seen in the National Health Mission.

But Poonam Muttreja, executive director of the Population Foundation of India, has pointed out that the NHM funding for family welfare has decreased from Rs 1,536.97 crore to Rs 1,524.74 crore, and family welfare capital outlays have dropped by 1.65 per cent. These allotments support a wide gamut of areas, including frontline worker training, maternity care, and contraception. "Family planning funding is decreasing while demographic trends show stark regional variations in fertility. We need to have doubled the health budget at a time when we are facing catastrophic health issues which have been accelerated because of pollution. But the pollution budget has been cut from Rs 1300 to Rs 1100 crore," said Muttreja.

She also emphasised that childcare and nutrition remain underfunded. Allocations for Saksham Anganwadi and POSHAN 2.0 have increased by only 5 per cent, which is inadequate to tackle the problem of child malnutrition. Aanganwadis are expected to be nutrition centres, preschools, health hubs, and childcare facilities, but nearly one million ASHAs and thousands of ANMs continue to work under conditions of low pay, insecurity, and limited professional recognition, even as they shoulder expanding responsibilities.

"When most gender spending is

folded into general schemes, women become invisible beneficiaries. In the absence of clear targeting, intent rarely translates into impact," Muttreja maintains.

Expanding on the Lakhpati Didi scheme, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman announced in her budget speech a new platform for women entrepreneurs called SHE-Mart—"Self-Help Entrepreneur" Mart has been created which will help "women take the next step from credit-led livelihoods to being owners of enterprises".

Amarjeet Kaur, national secretary of the All India Trade Union Congress, regrets that despite several women's delegations having had lengthy interactions with the finance minister prior to the announcement of Budget 26, there has been little attempt to come up with clear women-targeted schemes. Kaur believes, "This whole emphasis on Lakhpati Didis and claims that the SHG numbers will increase from 20 to 40 million must be taken with a pinch of salt because banks are not forthcoming with loans and microfinance companies have proved to be extremely exploitative of women. Women often end up in debt traps by taking multiple loans to repay existing ones."

Economist Dr Aasha Kapur Mehta, who has done extensive research on gender budgeting, regrets that an evaluation of all the nine budgets announced by the

woman finance minister shows little gender sensitivity, with a reliance on general schemes rather than an attempt at targeted, high-impact empowerment.

The government claims to have lifted 25 crore people from poverty in the last ten years, but this has been done by manipulating the poverty index. For example, launching the National Mission for Financial Inclusion allowed 53 crore people to be brought into the formal banking system by opening Jan Dhan accounts, but it was subsequently found that a large number of these accounts are dormant and have never been used.

Since the 2019 election, much of the welfare thrust has come through cash transfers on the eve of elections. These are often found to be short-lived interventions, which do not, in any way, ensure a structural improvement in the economic well-being of women. Nirmala Sitharaman's Budget 2026 failure has been its inability to prioritise social spending, which alone can empower the marginalised. Modi seems to have forgotten that his repeated successes in both parliamentary and state elections are because of the unflinching support he has received from women voters, and yet it is this loyal flank of voters that has been let down once again.

Rashme Sehgal is an author and an independent journalist.

Essence of military leadership

Ladakh controversy underscores the need for clarity, courage and accountability in command decisions. True military leadership demands timely judgement, not hesitation or buck-passing

viously not be declassified so early. If the COAS was aware, then how could he permit the publisher to release the excerpts for publication? If he did not permit it, then why hasn't he come forward to castigate the publisher and sued him for breach of trust and contract? So was there a tacit understanding, that such a revelation would ignite a controversy which will help the sale of the book and will work as a teaser for the potential buyers? The only person who can clarify these issues is the author himself and he should come forward to clear the air once and for all.

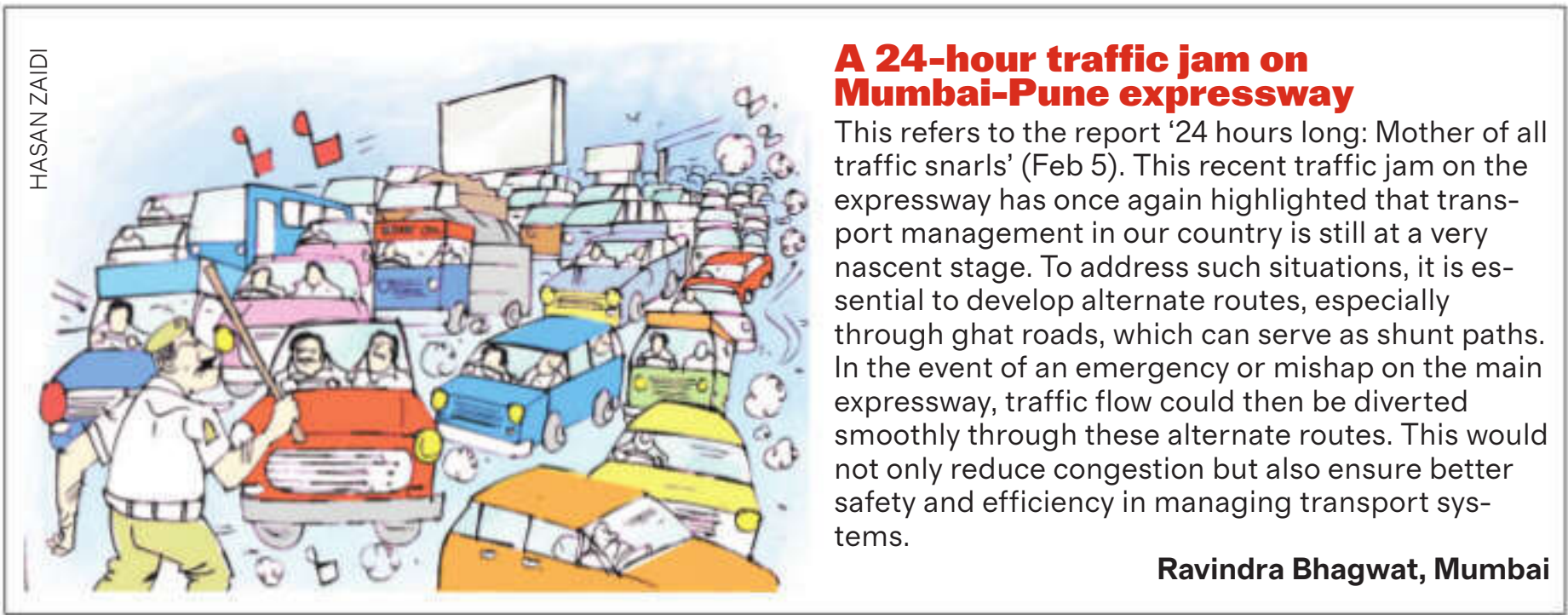
The issue of lack of any directive from the govt for a considerable period of time, on the reported movement of the Chinese tanks in the disputed area, puzzles me. There are explicit instructions on any such violations with the formations and the commanders at the appropriate level address them as per the protocol, keeping the higher HQ

in picture. When a senior commander feels that a different set of actions are to be taken, he issues orders accordingly, again keeping his hierarchy informed. The commanders looking over their shoulders for instructions at such critical junctures is a sure recipe for disaster. The Corps Commander in this case would have had near four decades of experience and was thus entrusted with such a crucial assignment of safeguarding the LAC. The predicament faced by the commander is essentially whether he should play safe, seek directions or take command decisions. In my opinion, these are the moments when the Tiger in him must awaken to give clear directions to the subordinates rather than await orders. Similarly, up the chain, commanders were passing the buck rather than tackling the bull by the horns. One understands that matters with China are not the same as they are with Pakistan,

but this pusillanimity puts a question mark on their professionalism itself. We have had instances when Generals have disobeyed orders, Lt Gen Harbaksh in 1965 Indo-Pak war and Maj Gen (later Lt Gen) Sagat Singh in 1967 NathuLa. In both the cases their stand was vindicated. As the adage goes, 'no risk no gain', commanders ought to trust their own judgement as they are in situ and have a much better understanding of the tactical picture.

Government on its part has also not covered itself with glory, as in the first instance itself, the response should have been the same which appeared after what reportedly took almost three hours plus, "Jo Uchit Samjiho Wo Karo!" giving the commander a free hand in dealing with the situation. Commanders thus must rise to the occasion and be prepared to face the consequences, that is the essence of military leadership.

Dear reader, we are eager to know your opinions, comments and suggestions. Write to editor.indore@fpj.co.in Using snail mail? Send your letters to Free Press, Free Press House, 3/54, Press Complex, AB Road, Indore 452008



A 24-hour traffic jam on Mumbai-Pune expressway

This refers to the report '24 hours long: Mother of all traffic snarls' (Feb 5). This recent traffic jam on the expressway has once again highlighted that transport management in our country is still at a very nascent stage. To address such situations, it is essential to develop alternate routes, especially through ghat roads, which can serve as shunt paths. In the event of an emergency or mishap on the main expressway, traffic flow could then be diverted smoothly through these alternate routes. This would not only reduce congestion but also ensure better safety and efficiency in managing transport systems.

Ravindra Bhagwat, Mumbai

is one of the top institutions in the country. This being so, it is really tragic that some students end their lives due to pressures in hostel life. We need to develop a parallel mechanism to address the mental health issues of the student community in such prestigious institutions.

S.K. Sangam, Pune

Food for thought

The chow mein suspension reveals how institutions confuse discipline with control ("Chow mein craze lands students in soup", Feb 5). If students eating noodles at a party warrants expulsion, we've

abandoned educational priorities for performative authority. Schools exist to cultivate thinking, not police lunch choices. The real lesson here isn't about pasta or punishment but about proportionality. When administrators react to harmless teenage behaviour as if it were sedition, they teach students that rules matter more than reason.

K. Chidanand Kumar, Bengaluru

PM targetted?

Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla had disclosed that he had concrete information about Congress lady MPs

planning an unexpected act near PM Modi's seat in the House. So he asked the PM to skip attending the House. He had listed the names of the MPs. It is quite unbecoming of the Congress MPs to indulge in such activities and is highly condemnable. It is an unparliamentary act. A high-level probe should be ordered in this regard.

Sravana Ramachandran, Chennai

Warning to WhatsApp, Meta

The SC issued a stern warning to instant messaging platform WhatsApp and its parent platform Meta against sharing users' private data. It is against the principle of Right to Privacy. Personal information of millions of users is being "misused" for commercial purposes, which cannot be permitted. In fact, the CJI, who was also a member of the Bench, told the counsel appearing for the aforesaid firms that the Digital Personal Data Protection Act of 2024 covers this aspect besides other matters.

Satish Murdeshwar, Pune

Feisty Fighter

In an era when Indian politics increasingly feels scripted and predictable, there are still moments that disrupt the routine and force a rethink about democratic engagement. The recent spectacle of West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee standing before the Supreme Court to argue her own case in the controversy over the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls is one such moment. It was not just a political gesture; it was a statement about how power, institutions, and citizenship are being contested today.

A sitting Chief Minister personally pleading before the apex court is a first in India. In doing so, Ms Banerjee did not merely defend her government's position; she framed the issue as one of democratic rights.

The concern, as she put it, was that large numbers of voters could be excluded over technical discrepancies ~ spelling variations, documentation gaps, or name changes ~ through a process that was being rushed and unevenly applied. Her argument was simple but pointed: the right to vote cannot be reduced to a clerical exercise, especially in a country where identity documents often lag behind lived realities.

The SIR dispute has, therefore, become more than a procedural quarrel. It touches a deeper anxiety about how institutions function in a politically charged environment. When voter lists are revised at scale and speed, the margin for error widens ~ and errors in this domain are not neutral. They shape who counts, and who does not. By taking the fight to the Supreme Court herself, Banerjee chose confrontation over quiet negotiation, and visibility over discretion.

To her critics, this is consistent with a combative style that often blurs the line between governance and spectacle. They will point to administrative shortcomings, to an abrasive political culture in the state, and to a tendency to personalise institutional disputes. These criticisms are not frivolous. West Bengal's politics, like that of many states, carries the weight of unresolved governance challenges.

Yet it is also impossible to ignore what this moment says about the wider political climate. Over the past decade, many Indian liberals have shifted from resistance to accommodation. Institutions that were once seen as arenas of contest are now often discussed in tones of weary fatalism. It is against this backdrop that Mamata Banerjee's courtroom appearance acquires symbolic force.

She is not admired because she is flawless, or because her administration is beyond reproach. She is noticed because she refuses to accept resignation as a political strategy. Whether taking on a dominant party at the Centre or questioning the procedures of powerful institutions, she continues to act as if political outcomes are still negotiable.

For a democracy that risks slipping into procedural quietism, that insistence matters. It reminds us that politics is not only about managing power, but about contesting it ~ sometimes noisily, sometimes awkwardly, but always in public view. In a time when many have lowered their expectations, the refusal to do so is itself a political statement.

Love punished

The quiet lanes of Umri village in Uttar Pradesh have become the setting for a familiar Indian tragedy: two young people, Kajal and Mohammad Arman, killed not by strangers, but by the idea that love can be a crime. Their deaths are being described as an "honour" killing, but the phrase itself is a distortion. There is no honour in murder - only fear, control, and the brutal enforcement of social boundaries that many pretend no longer exist.

What makes Umri unsettling is not that it is uniquely conservative, but that it is ordinary. By most accounts, Hindus and Muslims here lived without daily friction. And yet, when an interfaith relationship crossed an invisible boundary, the response was not negotiation, mediation, or even quiet coercion, but violence.

This is precisely why such crimes should worry us more than riots or political flashpoints: they happen in the intimate spaces of homes and families, where law and society are supposed to offer the greatest protection.

India's legal position is clear. Adults have the constitutional right to choose their partners. Courts have repeated this, and governments have been instructed to provide protection to couples under threat.

On paper, the republic is unambiguous. In practice, the gap between law and life remains wide. The persistence of "honour" crimes shows that social permission often matters more than legal permission, especially in rural and semi-rural settings where community approval can outweigh the fear of punishment.

Official statistics barely scratch the surface. Many such killings are recorded as ordinary homicides, domestic disputes, or disappearances. The motive is blurred, sometimes deliberately.

This statistical fog has consequences: what is not clearly counted is not clearly confronted. The result is a cycle where each case is treated as an isolated horror rather than as part of a structural problem rooted in caste, religion, patriarchy, and family control over women's choices.

Umri also exposes another uncomfortable truth: the conflict is not only between communities, but within families. The violence is often justified as protection of reputation, as if a family's social standing is more valuable than a daughter's life. In this logic, women's autonomy becomes a threat that must be neutralised, and men who cross prescribed boundaries become targets rather than fellow citizens with rights.

Supporters of the status quo sometimes argue that social change must be gradual. But there is a difference between gradual change and tolerated brutality. When two people are beaten to death and buried for choosing each other, the issue is no longer cultural sensitivity. It is the failure of the state and society to draw a non-negotiable line.

The silence that now hangs over Umri is not just grief. It is a reminder that many villages and towns live with similar unspoken rules. Breaking them can be fatal. Until personal choice in love and marriage is defended not only by courts but by communities themselves, such killings will keep returning - quietly, predictably, and with devastating regularity.

Calibrating finances

The Finance Commission has red-flagged the issue of fiscally unsustainable subsidies - especially the unconditional cash transfers or freebies, which are claiming increasing shares of states' revenue expenditure and pushing many states' revenue accounts deep into the red. Such cash transfers for all states have multiplied unchecked from Rs 73,000 crore in FY19 to over Rs 4 lakh crore in FY26, growing at an alarming rate of almost 29 per cent annually

The Report of the 16th Finance Commission (FC) containing recommendations on the devolution of Central taxes and grants to states was tabled in Parliament on Budget day. Not many changes were expected from the FC, which mostly continues on predictable lines. The last time a major change was introduced in the scheme of fiscal transfers was by the 14th FC (2015-20), which increased the share of states by 10 per cent to 42 per cent of the net proceeds of all taxes in the divisible pool comprising all central taxes sans cesses and surcharge, with consequent reduction in grants.

Vertical devolution by both the 15th and 16th FCs have practically remained unchanged since then at 41 per cent, the remaining 1 per cent accounting for J&K which was then a state but now is an UT whose share goes to the Union government. As regards horizontal devolution that determines the inter-se share of individual states, the FC divides the resources based on the three principles of equity, equalisation and efficiency. The last two FCs added a fourth: environment.

But efficiency always takes a back seat, and all FCs preferred equalisation over efficiency ~ the 14th FC completely ignored it, while the 15th FC gave tax effort, a measure of fiscal efficiency, a meagre 2.5 per cent weight in determining the shares of individual states. To the credit of the 16th FC, it brought back the focus on efficiency, while the preference for equalisation remains.

The 15th FC caused a lot of resentment for southern states, which lost their shares when the government changed the population base in the terms of reference for the 15th FC from 1971 to 2011, for determining the states' shares in devolution. Population has always been an important parameter used by all FCs along with area, which addresses equity. Southern states, and some others as well, have stabilised their population and achieved a total fertility rate (TFR) much below the replacement level of 2.1, and they rightly felt they were being penalised for attaining this, while the shares of the Hindi-belt states went up.



The 16th FC has, for the first time, introduced a new efficiency parameter, replacing the earlier tax effort, in the form of a state's contribution to the national GDP, assigning 10 per cent weightage to it. However, these contributions would show wide variation across states, especially at the top and bottom ends, which would cause huge differences in devolutions to the obvious disadvantage of poorer states. To moderate these differences, the FC modified this parameter by defining a state's share as the ratio of the square root of its GSDP to the sum of the square roots of GSDPs of all states, which would moderate the shares of the higher income states. However, even in this tampered form, it would benefit the southern states and compensate them for their loss of population share.

Other criteria in the formula for horizontal devolution remain more or less the same, with some redefinitions and adjustments in weights assigned to respective parameters to make the transfer formula seem more rational than the 15th FC's. While the weightage on a state's share of the 2011 population has increased from 15 per cent recommended by the 15th FC to 17.5 per cent, the weightage on the share of a state's area has decreased from 15 to 10 per cent now.

Weightage of the equalizing parameter, income distance, i.e. the distance of per capita income of a state from the average of the three highest per capita income states has been reduced marginally from 45 to 42.5 per cent and outweighs any other parameter by a huge margin.

The 16th FC has also expanded the definition of the lone parameter on ecology and environment, i.e. forest cover. The earlier FCs considered only the medium and dense forest covers with higher canopy densities; the 16th FC has now included open forests with a lesser canopy density of 10-40 per cent to determine the total forest cover. Additionally, it has also rewarded states for increasing their shares of forest areas between 2015 and 2023. The share of a state is now calculated by assigning 80 per cent weightage to its share in the national forest cover and 20 per cent weightage to its share in this

increase. Thus calculated, this share is then given an overall 10 per cent weightage in the horizontal devolution formula, the same as earlier.

Demographic performance, introduced by the 15th FC to compensate the southern states for their loss due to the change of the population base, was defined by the inverse of TFR. But the 15th FC scaled it up by the 1971 population, which benefited the Hindi belt states unduly, which was an aberration. The 16th FC has rejected the concept of using the inverse of Total Fertility Rate as a performance indicator, arguing instead that the states which have stabilised their populations ~ like the southern states and also others ~ are now staring at the prospect of ageing populations without enough workers to support them which will affect their future growth, and hence felt that the reward for lower population through TFR needed to be phased out. Thus, it has redefined demographic performance as the inverse of population growth rates between 1971 and 2011 and reduced the weightage to this parameter from 12.5 to 10 per cent.

The net result of these changes introduced in the devolution formula is that save Tamil Nadu, all other southern states would now receive a larger share of the devolution, as would Maharashtra, Gujarat, Haryana and Punjab. All Hindi belt states except Jharkhand would see their shares in the total devolution go down and so would be the case with West Bengal, Odisha, and all north eastern states except Assam and Mizoram. But for both groups, the changes would only be marginal.

As regards grants, the 16th FC has provided no grants other than grants for local bodies, abandoning the practice adopted by earlier FCs to compensate states for their post-devolution revenue deficits and other sector-specific grants and state-specific grants given to some states. It expects the states to balance

their revenue accounts by bringing more fiscal discipline and mobilizing more resources. As regards local bodies, it had provided total grants of Rs 791 lakh crore for the rural and urban local bodies (60 per cent to RLBs and 40 per cent to ULBs), much higher than Rs 4.36 crore provided by the 15th FC.

A part of these grants ~ 20 per cent ~ is linked to the performance of ULBs and RLBs in improving their revenues and the constitution of State FCs by the states. For disaster management, an issue that was flagged to it, it recommended a total amount of Rs 2 lakh crore at the state level and Rs 79,000 crore at the national level, to be financed by the states (NEH states 10 per cent and others 25 per cent) and the rest by the Centre. The FC has strongly advocated against the use of off-budget borrowings practised by several states, urging them to reform their power sector by privatising DISCOMs and to close their loss-making PSUs. It has red-flagged the issue of fiscally unsustainable subsidies ~ especially the unconditional cash transfers (UCT) or freebies, which are claiming increasing shares of states' revenue expenditure (RE) and pushing many states' revenue accounts deep into the red. UCTs for all states have multiplied unchecked from Rs 73,000 crore in FY19 to over Rs 4 lakh crore in FY26, growing at an alarming rate of almost 29 per cent annually.

States are increasingly resorting to such electoral gimmicks, and the number of states spending over 10 per cent of RE on UCTs has gone up from only one (Telangana) in FY19 to nine by FY26, led by Chhattisgarh, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, West Bengal, Karnataka and Madhya Pradesh; all these states except Telangana and Madhya Pradesh, had deficits in their revenue accounts in FY24. Majority of the states are financing their UCTs by either borrowing or cutting capital outlay, compromising growth.

But perhaps realising its own limitations, the 16th FC only made some general recommendations for states to control their UCTs. The recommendation of setting up an independent Fiscal Council to bring in greater discipline in public finances made by the previous FCs is also singularly absent in its report.



Turning resolutions into action: tangible results on the ground

Experience has shown that whenever the Party's and State's policies are implemented by the whole political system and society at large with such determination and decisive action, they achieve outstanding success. Most recently, on January 31, the Si Pa Phin Inter-level Boarding School for Primary and Lower Secondary Education, located in Năm Chim 1 Hamlet, Si Pa Phin Commune, in the northern mountainous province of Điện Biên, was officially put into operation. The modern educational facility is the first school to be realised under a humane and forward-looking policy endorsed by the Politburo.

The initiative traces back to July 18, 2025, when the Politburo considered a proposal from the Ministry of Education and Training on investing in the construction of 248 inter-level boarding schools in 248 land-border communes. The Politburo concluded by assigning the Government's Party Committee to lead and direct relevant

ministries, functional agencies and provincial authorities in implementing the policy.

It also tasked the Viet Nam Fatherland Front's Party Committee and central mass organisations with mobilising agencies, localities, organisations, individuals, businesses and society as a whole to support the construction and renovation of schools in border areas.

Thanks to the decisive leadership of the Government's Party Committee and the committed engagement of ministries, sectors, local authorities and the wider public, construction has begun on the first 100 schools across border communes in 18 provinces and cities, all scheduled for completion before August 30. At the inauguration ceremony of the Si Pa Phin Inter-level Boarding School, Lâm formally launched the simultaneous construction of the remaining 148 inter-level boarding schools, reaffirming the determination to complete them in a coordinated, effective

manner and in line with the established objectives.

Alongside this, the Quang Trung Campaign has further demonstrated that extraordinary achievements in everyday life are achievable when people-centred policies are combined with strong leadership and effective implementation by the Government, ministries, the armed forces, public security forces, local authorities and businesses.

The campaign, characterised by its lightning-speed approach, was launched on January 29, 2025, in Hòa Thịnh Commune, the Central Highlands province of Đắk Lắk. Its objectives were to repair more than 34,700 damaged homes by December 31, 2025 and to rebuild nearly 1,600 houses that had collapsed or been swept away by January 31, 2026, ensuring that all citizens have access to housing.

After just 35 days, all damaged houses had been repaired, while all destroyed homes had been rebuilt and completed

ahead of schedule. Earlier, another remarkable milestone in bridging the gap between words and actions was achieved through the nationwide emulation movement. The whole country joins hands to eliminate temporary and dilapidated housing.

Over one year and four months, from April 2024 to August 2025, more than 334,200 temporary and substandard houses nationwide were replaced with durable homes featuring solid foundations, frames and walls and roofs capable of withstanding storms and extreme weather, with a lifespan of at least 20 years.

The campaign mobilised more than VND24.76 trillion (US\$) in resources, over 27 million working days and the participation of more than 454,000 people.

In the longer term, achievements in sustainable poverty reduction during the 2021-25 period, surpassing targets set by the National Assembly and the Government, provide further compelling evidence of Viet Nam's commitment to matching words with action.

Letters To The Editor | ✉ editor@thestatesman.com

Lesson for India

Sir, This refers to the editorial "Silencing Dissent" (February 4). The comment raises a serious and timely concern about how dissent is being narrowed not through loud crackdowns, but through quiet, procedural means that appear lawful on the surface.

What is troubling is not just the imprisonment of a political leader, but the steady reshaping of institutions to make fear a routine tool of governance. When laws are vague, enforcement selective, and scrutiny uneven, uncertainty itself becomes a form of control. The editorial rightly warns that such systems do not collapse overnight; they hollow out slowly, weakening accountability and public trust

along the way. For neighbouring democracies, including India, the lesson is caution rather than comparison. Safeguarding free speech requires more than constitutional promises; it demands restraint in lawmaking, judicial independence, and space for criticism without stigma. A firm recommitment to transparency and clear legal limits would be a practical first step to prevent dissent from being mistaken for defiance.

Yours, etc., Abbharna Barathi,
Chennai, 4 February.

Chance missed?

Sir, Please refer to today's report "India-US deal sparks massive political storm, Rahul

hits out at PM Modi". India should heave a huge sigh of relief as the US has slashed tariffs from a crippling 50 per cent to a manageable 18 per cent.

This is good news for labour-intensive sectors such as gems, jewellery, textiles and apparel, which have been struggling ever since President Donald Trump upped the tariff ante in August last year.

However, the long-delayed trade deal worked out by the two countries seems to be loaded in America's favour, even as its fine print is awaited.

India will increase purchases of US petroleum, defence equipment, electronics, pharmaceuticals, telecom products and aircraft. This is in sync with Mr Trump's

push to reduce the trade deficit and deny India an "unfair" advantage.

The US President's "my way or the highway" approach has prompted New Delhi to make a slew of concessions and compromises. The US continues to hold most of the aces on the trade front, raising doubts about India's ability to strike a hard bargain and assert strategic autonomy.

On the bright side, India's export competitors such as Indonesia, Vietnam and Bangladesh are being charged higher tariffs by the US. However, there are telltale signs that Delhi might have missed a golden opportunity to outtrump Mr Trump.

Yours, etc., Khokan Das,
Kolkata, 4 February.



SATURDAY INTERVIEW

‘Deals make India competitive’

Rajeev Juneja is the President of the PHD Chamber of Commerce and Industry (PHDCCI). Juneja is a first-generation entrepreneur with experience in the pharmaceutical industry and is the Vice-Chairman and Managing Director of Mankind Pharma, a leading pharmaceutical company.

Over the years, Juneja has passionately led diverse functional areas of the business and has applied his expertise to deliver high-quality pharmaceuticals and affordable medicines. He has been the recipient of several awards, such as the ‘Entrepreneur of the Year’ and ‘Best Design in Healthcare’. Mankind Pharma Limited also won the ‘Best Pharma OTC Company of the Year’ in 2018.

In an exclusive interview with Nikhil Vyas, Juneja spoke about the Indo-US trade deal, deals with the European Union (EU) and the United Kingdom (UK), and the latest General Budget.

Excerpts of the interview:

Q: What is your first comment on the Indo-US trade deal? How did the deal fructify?

A: The India-United States trade deal represents a strategic shift from uncertainty towards well-designed economic engagement. The current deal is targeted towards tariff rationalisation, supply-chain cooperation, and market access in select sectors. From India’s perspective, the deal signals intent to integrate more deeply with the technology ecosystem.

The agreement’s significance lies more in predictability by reducing uncertainty around duties, regulatory cooperation, and dispute management to improve the investment climate. Tariff disputes stretched beyond anybody’s benefit. India will gain particularly in labour-intensive product exports.

Q: Has India compromised on agriculture and dairy?

A: The Government of India’s statement after the India-US tariff

deal is clear: we will support farmers and dairy farmers come what may. The Ministry of Commerce and Industry has clarified that agriculture and dairy are sensitive sectors for India. Tariffs have been selective and carefully designed, and key agricultural products are kept out of the agreement altogether. Overall, the statement should be read as a clear signal that trade liberalisation will not come at the cost of farmers’ incomes and that the government will step in with policy and financial support whenever needed.

While marginal adjustments may exist, they do not change the underlying protection. This approach is well aligned with India’s long-standing position in multilateral and bilateral trade negotiations on agriculture.

Q: Do you think the slashing of tariffs on Indian products will make our products cheaper in the American market as compared to those produced in other South Asian and Southeast Asian nations?

A: Tariff reductions will improve the price competitiveness of Indian goods in the US market. Products with high tariff elasticity - such as textiles, gems and jewellery, and certain engineering goods - are likely to see clearer gains. Lower landed costs will improve margins and allow price reductions relative to competitors.

Take the case of textiles and apparel. Textiles and apparel emerge as a clear winner. Indian exports in cotton garments, home textiles, and made-ups will face moderate US tariffs and will be competitive with suppliers from Bangladesh, Vietnam, and Cambodia. India’s advantage lies in integrated cotton supply chains.

Q: How will the deal impact India’s overall economy, industry sector, and markets?

A: At the macro level, the deal’s immediate GDP impact is likely to be modest, but given its importance in the medium to long term, it signals stability and openness, which will

support investment sentiment. Industrially, the agreement encourages diversification toward higher-value manufacturing and strategic sectors. Overall, the deal strengthens medium-term growth drivers rather than delivering short-term macro acceleration.

Q: What difference do you find in the deal with the United States and the one signed with the European Union (EU)?

A: The US deal is sector-specific, while the agreement with the European Union is broader and more rules-based in the form of a free trade agreement. The EU deal emphasises sustainability standards, regulatory harmonisation, and labour norms.

In contrast, the US approach prioritises supply chain security and strategic alignment. The EU deal offers wider market access, while the US deal is narrower but faster to implement.

Q: Do you think the deals with the US and the EU will also help India become a competitive market vis-à-vis China?

A: Together, deals with the US and EU can enhance India’s positioning as an alternative manufacturing and sourcing hub relative to China, what is called the China +1 strategy. Preferential access and strategic alignment reduce trade friction and improve investor confidence. Collectively, the US and EU deals narrow the gap by improving India’s access to demand markets. In summary, the deals improve India’s relative positioning against China, particularly as a diversified alternative.

Q: What will you say about the trade deal India signed with the United Kingdom (UK) last year?

A: The trade deal with the United Kingdom is commercially meaningful, particularly for services, skilled mobility, and consumer goods. It reflects historical trade complementarities and provides Indian exporters with preferential

access to a high-income market. Sector-specific benefits—especially for SMEs and services—are notable.

Key beneficiary sectors include textiles and apparel, where tariff reductions improve price competitiveness for Indian garments, home textiles, and fashion products in the UK market. India competes with suppliers from Bangladesh, Turkey, and Southeast Asia, and preferential access helps narrow cost differentials. Automobiles and auto components are another important gainer. Lower duties on Indian-made vehicles, two-wheelers, and components enhance export opportunities.

Q: How do you look at the latest Budget presented by the Finance Minister?

A: The latest Union Budget reflects fiscal consolidation with targeted support for capital expenditure. Its emphasis is on infrastructure, manufacturing incentives, and macro stability rather than broad consumption stimulus. The approach prioritises medium-term growth over short-term populism.

Q: How does the Budget help business and industry?

A: Continued government investment in highways, railways, ports, airports, logistics corridors, and power infrastructure reduces logistics and transaction costs for firms. Lower freight costs, faster turnaround times, and improved connectivity directly benefit manufacturing, construction, steel, cement, capital goods, and logistics-intensive industries.

Ongoing support for sector-specific incentive frameworks, including production-linked approaches, encourages scale expansion, technology adoption, and integration into global value chains. Sectors such as electronics, pharmaceuticals, renewable energy equipment, chemicals, and advanced manufacturing will benefit from policy certainty, which is critical for long-term capital investments.



Credit-guarantee mechanisms, formalisation of digital lending, and improvements in banking and non-banking credit flows help ease working-capital constraints and help MSMEs in the medium to long term.

Selective rationalisation of customs duties on raw materials and intermediate goods will help lower input costs and support domestic value addition.

In terms of ease of doing business, digitisation, simplified compliance, faster approvals, and regulatory streamlining will lead to improved operational efficiency.

Q: The general perception is that the Budget is not inspiring and does not have anything substantial for the common man. What is your comment?

A: The Union Budget looks at the multiplier effects of schemes through capex on key infrastructure capacity building on income and employment. A quick-fix budget is never beneficial to the common man, as it erodes long-term prospects of sustained growth. The budget laid out a sustained capex-led approach aligning with the objective of Viksit Bharat.

100 Years Ago



Front page of The Statesman dated 07 February, 1926

OCCASIONAL NOTE

LITTLE can be gained by further comment upon what the South African Assembly has done in passing the Colour Bar Bill almost unanimously. General Smuts really says the final word when he describes the event as “the beginning of a chapter in the history of the country which they might all bitterly regret in future years.” South Africa will certainly gain nothing—not even good emigrants—by its plain indication that loyal and peaceful citizens may have their rights filched from them and the conditions of their lives made so disagreeable that they will be induced to shake the dust of South Africa from their feet. For the time being India has made all the effective protest it can, and must trust to time, to reason and to the suasion that Great Britain can bring to bear for the ending of a great wrong. In its effort to secure justice India has stood almost shoulder to shoulder. The meeting in Calcutta the other night brought on to the same platform the Metropolitan of India, representatives of the British community and prominent members of every Indian party. We can only regret that Mr. J. M. Sen Gupta should have thought it necessary to diminish the impressiveness of such unanimity by a dissenting note. The Swarajists of all men should be the most concerned for the treatment as free men of Indians in South Africa. It is pitiful that on such an occasion as this the leader of the party in Bengal should not have been able to sink the desire for a gibe at the Viceroy in the larger interests of India.

News Items

AMERICAN RUBBER PROSPERITY

COLOSSAL PROFITS OF MANUFACTURERS

NEW YORK, FEB. 5.

IN view of the rubber manufacturers outcry against the rubber restrictions, comment has been aroused by the prosperity of the manufacturers as revealed in the report of the Goodyear Company, showing a net profit of twenty-one million dollars as compared with twelve million for 1924, while the special raw material reserve fund is increased from three to 7.5 millions, to protect the Company against a possible shrinkage of rubber values.—Reuter’s Special Service.

IRAQ PROBLEM

TURKEY PERTURBED AT KING’S SPEECH

(“TIMES” SPECIAL SERVICE.) LONDON, FEB. 5.

THE ‘Times’ Constantinople correspondent states that the references to the friendly solution of the Iraq problem in the King’s speech and subsequent debates have been received with mingled scepticism and pessimism, and it is declared that as long as Britain is unable to abandon the policy hitherto pursued it is vain to imagine the possibility of an understanding.

“The old type of Portes Government was amenable to intimidation but it is so much worse for the British Cabinet if it has not yet realized that the present Turkish Government is quite different.”

There are indications, however, that the Turks are merely shouting to keep up courage, and are clearly much preoccupied with the recent interview between Sir Austen Chamberlain and M. Briand.

INTERRUPTED FLIRTATION

(SPECIAL CABLE.) LONDON, FEB. 5.

IN the House of Commons this afternoon Mr. Lloyd George, referring to the suggestion with regard to himself and Mr. P. Snowden, said he had not met Mr. Snowden for months. The agreement between himself and Mr. Snowden was simply a case of two intelligent and well informed minds brought to bear on the same problem with an earnest desire to solve it on the right lines.

Mr. Neville Chamberlain later described Mr. Snowden’s speech as an attempt to give the “glad eye” to Mr. Lloyd George, but the little flirtation was interrupted by a Socialistic speech interposed by a Labour back-bencher. -Copyright.

Light pollution and sunlight on demand

SUPRAKASH CHANDRA ROY

We are all aware of sound pollution, yet we remain largely unaware or indifferent to the growing menace of light pollution. Sound pollution disrupts the natural environment, while light pollution intrudes upon natural darkness. At night, while we lie in bed, unwanted light trespasses into the room from streetlights, illuminated buildings, and glaring advertisements outside. This intrusion disturbs our sleep, undermines our health, and robs us of the restorative calm of night. More profoundly, it obscures the stars, veiling the night sky from human gaze.

Today, light pollution is no longer confined only to the Earth; it is encroaching on space itself. The surge in space exploration has led to the deployment of thousands of satellites in Earth’s outer orbits. Since 2018, Elon Musk’s SpaceX has launched nearly 1,700 Starlink satellites into low Earth orbit, with plans to add another 30,000 over the next decade. British company OneWeb has already placed about 150 satellites in orbit and intends to launch 6,000 more, while Amazon has announced plans for an additional 3,000. If this unchecked proliferation continues, a time may come when true darkness will vanish from our skies.

The first Starlink launch in May 2019 revealed streaks of light across the sky—a phenomenon unseen before. Astronomers now face obstructed views, as reflected light from these satellites interferes with observations. Mega-constellations - vast networks of satellites working in concert - reshape our collective vision of the stars. Unlike terrestrial pollutants, these satellites cannot be removed once deployed.

It has been found that a single mega-constellation produces up to 19 parallel streaks across the sky. As they orbit Earth, sunlight reflects off their surfaces, scattering into the atmosphere, intensifying sky brightness. This ‘human-made ‘night glow’ complicates astronomical observations. Preliminary estimates suggest that this artificial ‘night glow’ has increased the brightness of night skies globally by about 10 per cent, compared with the natural skyglow measured in the 1960s.

The consequences extend beyond human curiosity. Since the entire world - and indeed the Universe - is interconnected, no living creature escapes the effect of polluted skies. Migratory species are particularly affected by light pollution, which can result in them losing access to their migratory route. Australia’s fauna has long faced this crisis since before the introduction of mega-constellations.

With more skyglow and light pollution, positive outcomes for native fauna and migratory species diminish.

Ironically, scientists have designed a method to harness light pollution for the benefit of humanity. The Sun is always present in the sky. But it remains hidden from us at nightfall when a portion of the Earth turns away from the sun’s rays. Could we devise a mechanism to use sunrises to deliver sunlight after sunset? One ambitious idea proposes reflecting sunlight to the Earth using mirrors mounted on satellites.

A US start-up, Reflect Orbital, plans to produce the same by reflecting sunlight to the Earth even after sunset. Reflect Orbital’s satellites would use mirrors to send light onto a patch of Earth, in the same way a watch face bounces sunlight to produce a spot of light on the wall. The reflected sunlight from the watch is intense when the distance of the wall is shorter; the spot becomes larger and dimmer as the distance to the wall increases. This is because the Sun is not a point of light but spans half a degree in angle in the sky. That’s why a beam of sunlight reflected off a flat mirror spreads out at an angle of half a degree. Even a curved mirror or a lens can’t focus the sunlight into a tighter spot due to the distance and the half-degree angle of the Sun in the sky. To achieve meaningful illumination, reflectors

must be much larger than a watch. Reflect Orbital’s satellites would orbit about 625 km above the ground and be equipped with mirrors 54 metres across. Scientists have calculated that for a satellite reflecting sunlight over a distance of roughly 800 km, considering that a 625km-high satellite would not always be directly overhead but beaming the sunlight at an angle, the illuminated patch of ground would be at least 7 km across. For a single 54-metre satellite, the estimated reflected sunlight is 15,000 times fainter than the midday Sun, but this is still far brighter than the full moon. Sunlight at midday is approximately 400,000 times more intense than light from a full moon.

The *Reflect Orbital* tested its concept with a balloon experiment before moving into space. A flat square mirror, roughly 2.5 metres across, was carried on a hot air balloon. The mirror directed a beam of light down to solar panels and sensors. At a distance of 242 metres, the reflected beam delivered 516 watts of light per square metre, compared to 1,000 watts per square metre with the midday sun. Although the amount is half of that the midday sun produced, it is enough to be useful. As mentioned before, if the satellites were 800 km from the area of interest on Earth, the reflector would need to be 6.5 km by 6.5 km,

or 42 square kilometres across. Further experimentation with such a huge mirror using balloons is not a practical proposition.

Reflect Orbital’s current plan aims to generate 200 watts per square metre, or 20 per cent of the midday sunlight. If a single 54-metre satellite is 15,000 times fainter than the midday Sun, to produce 20 per cent of the midday Sun’s light, it would need 3,000 such satellites. That’s a lot of satellites needed to illuminate just one region. There are other critical issues also involving technical and ecological challenges.

Companies are trying to figure out methods to reduce night glow. OneWeb decided to launch fewer satellites than proposed earlier to reduce overall pollution, and designed them to be stationed at a higher altitude, which enables them to cover a larger area with reduced skyglow. Use of an antireflective coating on the surface is another option to reduce the reflected sunlight by about 50 per cent.

Whether this bold project will remain simply speculative or eventually ‘see the light of day’ is uncertain. Yet, regardless of its outcome, it underscores humanity’s audacious attempts to use sunlight on demand, reshaping the natural rhythms of night and day.

(The writer, an author, was Editor-in-Chief of the journal Science and Culture for about two decades.)

Crossword | No. 293368

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YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

R U M P

E O I E O O O O

A C C O M P L I S H M E N T S

S H P A T M F O

S C A I R L A I T T O D I N

E E E E E U N D

S W A I R M E D E V O K E D

S R A E E R N P

B A N N E D D O G S T A R

F B T A E A O

F F E T A I N C O R R E C T

F S T S E E D M E

I N Q U I S I T I V E N E S S

R U O E T T N N T

M I E E K N E S S O D E S

ACROSS

1 Profitable source of energy promoted in America, oil perhaps (6)

5 Peter out to relax after month with runs (8)

9 My special place way down the coast (8)

10 Medium uniform given to very short rebel (6)

11 Star Victor Mature making a comeback (4)

12 Mary delirious about new introduction to Adonis (7)

14 Innocent frolics before church, no sex (10)

16 Cut material for the floor, moving in later (4)

17 Touching your ears is old idiosyncrasy (4)

18 Popular meeting place, usually a bar (10)

20 European intelligence agency goes after information source (7)

22 Fifth baby, wanting eight perhaps (4)

25 Fur shared by a couple of orangutangs (6)

26 Brighten up run-down university, the one I went to (8)

27 Prosthetic leg's easy to replace (5,3)

28 A bit of food left by solver who preferred a pint (6)

DOWN

2 Sound sleepers make love, getting up around noon (5)

3 Cool orangeade's temperature is almost cold (9)

4 Taste defeat (4)

5 That's highly unlikely, say Watson and Holmes shortly (5,2)

6 Miss amusing dinner invitation hosts sent without envelope (10)

7 Giant metal vessel carries creature from outer space (5)

8 Filbert's leaving Burma entering Chinese republic (3,6)

13 On vacation Susan has trouble with room rate that's poor (6,4)

15 Design a long coat shaped like an umbrella? (9)

16 Disturbance in Molière, Act I gone? (9)

19 Only cool person on the bench (7)

21 Presumably all disagreeing in corners (5)

23 Too many bottles in dustbin, generally (5)

24 Excitedly close high value contract (4)

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

epaper.thestatesman.com

The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Punjab problem

Jalandhar murder shows the crisis is worsening

THE downward spiral of law and order continues in Punjab. AAP leader Lucky Oberoi was shot dead in front of a gurdwara in Jalandhar on Friday morning, barely 10 days after an undertrial was gunned down outside the Mohali SSP's office. These daylight murders are a chilling reminder that criminals are cocking a snook at the police in the border state. The inadequacy of routine policing is starkly visible. Opposition parties have grabbed the opportunity to accuse the AAP government of presiding over a collapse of governance, arguing that if the ruling party's leaders can be killed in full public view, ordinary citizens stand little chance against emboldened criminal elements.

Targeted killings, extortion threats, gang rivalries and the visible hand of foreign-based gangsters — it's a disturbing pattern that is being repeated in Punjab almost on a daily basis. The Jalandhar murder follows a series of fatal shootings in crowded places. The message such crimes send is unmistakable: lawlessness has become par for the course. The state government and the police are countering the criticism by highlighting large-scale anti-gangster operations — thousands of raids, arrests, weapon recoveries and the dismantling of support networks linked to overseas criminals. Campaigns like *"Gangstran Te Vaar"* indicate a firm resolve to combat the menace, but the persistence of audacious attacks suggests glaring gaps in law enforcement.

The Punjab and Haryana High Court has rightly observed that it cannot tolerate a situation where shooters commit murders in the presence of cops and escape. The HC has also asked why the SSP concerned should not be held accountable in such cases. It's obvious that headline-grabbing statistics won't turn the tide. The focus must be on building deterrence and restoring public trust. If course correction is not done urgently, Punjab's residents will sink deeper into the mire of fear.

Aquifers in peril

Policy correction needed in Haryana

HARYANA's groundwater crisis has crossed from warning to emergency. With nearly 64% of the state's blocks now classified as overexploited, extraction far exceeds natural recharge. The situation threatens agriculture, drinking water security and economic stability. This is not a sudden failure but the cumulative outcome of policy choices that rewarded extraction while neglecting conservation. At the heart of the problem lies cropping patterns. Paddy cultivation, promoted through assured procurement and free or subsidised electricity, has locked farmers into a water-intensive cycle in a semi-arid state. Tubewells have replaced canals as the primary irrigation source, pushing aquifers beyond recovery levels. In several districts, groundwater withdrawal has reportedly reached over 130% of the annual recharge, a point that guarantees future scarcity.

What makes the condition more alarming is the silent nature of groundwater depletion. Unlike floods or droughts, falling water tables do not command immediate political attention. The costs emerge gradually — deeper borewells, higher energy consumption, saline intrusion and, eventually, the collapse of farm viability and rural drinking water systems. Urban centres, too, are increasingly dependent on overdrawn aquifers, spreading the risk beyond agriculture.

Policy responses so far have focussed disproportionately on supply-side solutions — recharge structures, ponds and check dams — without addressing demand. Crop diversification away from paddy, rational pricing of electricity, micro-irrigation incentives and enforceable groundwater regulation must move to core policy. Equally important is decentralised governance. Groundwater is a local resource and its management requires community participation, transparent data and district-level accountability. Without empowering panchayats and users to monitor and regulate extraction, state-level targets will remain cosmetic. Unless water is treated as a finite ecological asset, today's overexploitation will translate into tomorrow's water drought. The window for corrective action is narrowing.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 7, 1926

Amending the criminal law

A NUMBER of very important non-official Bills were introduced at Thursday's meeting of the Legislative Assembly. Why the members who introduced these Bills should, in some of these cases, have waited until almost the end of their tenure of membership for bringing forward the proposals is not quite clear, but there can be no two opinions regarding the outstanding importance of some, at any rate, of the measures proposed. To this last category belong Sir Hari Singh Gour's Bill to repeal Part II of the Criminal Law Amendment Act, as recommended by the Repressive Laws Committee; Mr Chanda's Bill to so amend Section 367 of the Criminal Procedure Code (CrPC) as to provide that the Court in its judgment shall state why the sentence of death is passed; Mr Amarnath Dutt's Bill to repeal the Bengal Regulation of 1818 and introduce a provision in the CrPC analogous to the Habeas Corpus Act in England to secure the liberty of the subject against unjustifiable detention; Mr Chetty's Bill to so modify Section 144 of the CrPC as to restrict the powers of magistrates and to provide adequate safeguards for the protection of the rights of the public; and last and most important of all, Mr Rangaswami Iyengar's Bill to amend that prince of all repressive laws, Section 124-A of the Indian Penal Code. Not one of these measures needs any apology from the point of view of the public. It is the literal truth to say that if the people could have had their own way, almost all these changes would have been made two decades ago.

OPINION

Much ado about a book and a film

The ability to control information around “strategic affairs” is critical in a democracy



THE GREAT GAME

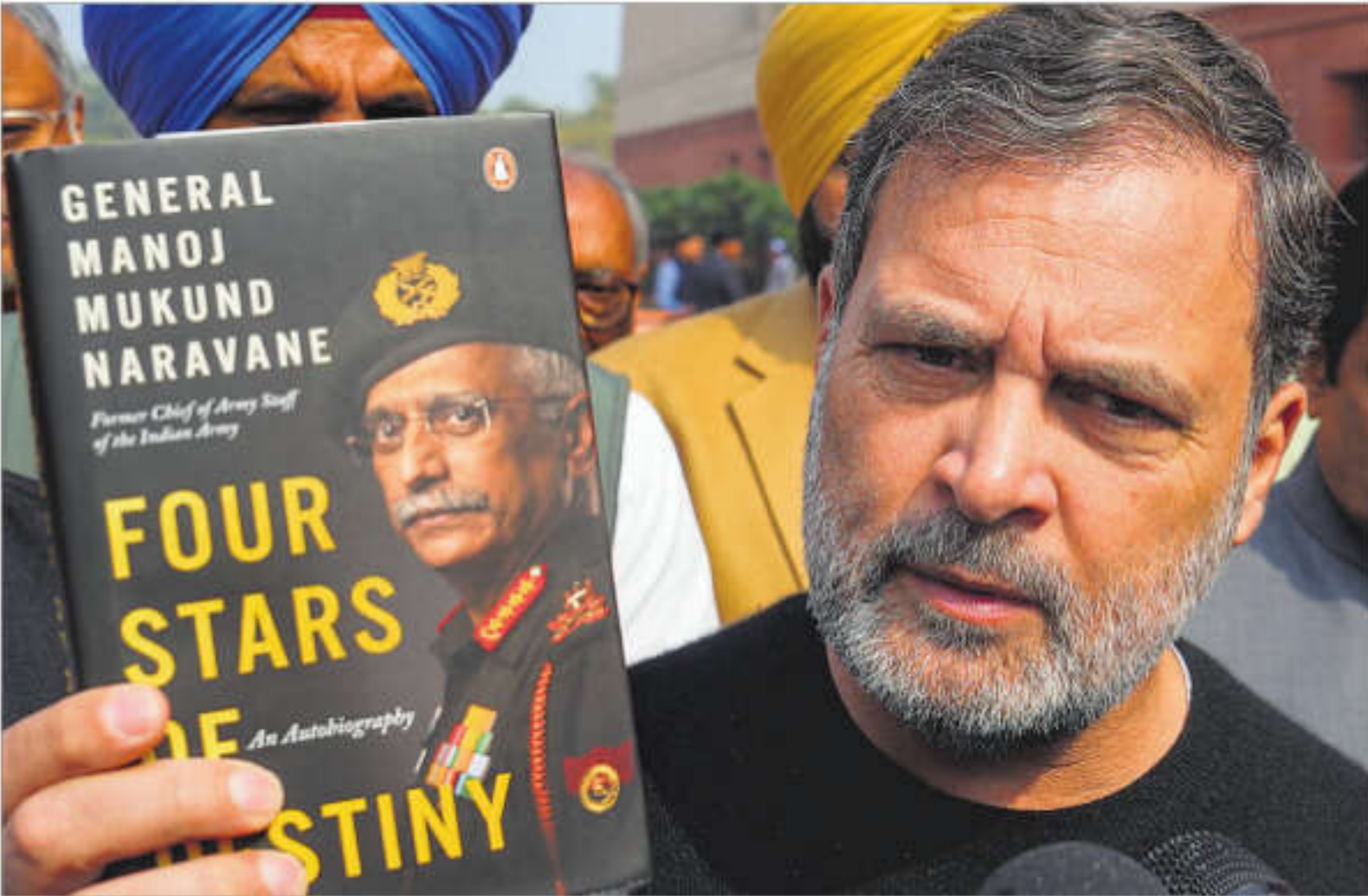
JYOTI MALHOTRA

A film and a book have been at the heart of the national debate this week, with Netflix agreeing to change the name and withdraw all promotional material of a film called *"Ghooskhor Pandat,"* or, the Bribe-Taking Pandit, after angry middle-aged men in saffron gear protested the “casteist” slur, an FIR was lodged at the Hazratganj police station in Lucknow, the National Human Rights Commission complained to the Information & Broadcasting Ministry — at the end of which BJP leader Gaurav Bhatia declared victory, saying, “insults to Sanatan Dharma will not be tolerated.”

“We are committed to taking the strictest possible action against those who demean any caste or community for commercial gains,” Bhatia said, adding, *"Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas and Sabka Vishwas"* is our guiding principle.” It's not clear whether the BJP leader was aware that he was also celebrating the death of irony, apart from squelching the underside of humour. Certainly, slapstick headlines must be removed from fashion.

Or perhaps it doesn't matter that much, anymore, not when half the week has been taken up by repeated adjournments in the Lok Sabha. Congress leader Rahul Gandhi has persisted with asking questions over a book written by former Army Chief, Gen Manoj Mukund Naravane. The ruling BJP has stood equally firm, refusing to allow any discussion, arguing that the book has not been published and therefore cannot be debated in Parliament.

What doesn't exist cannot be discussed, right? Except, Rahul has been brandishing a pre-publication copy inside and outside



STORM : On the face of it, the paragraph Rahul Gandhi is said to have cottoned on to is almost harmless. PTI

the House. Moreover, the PDF is available for all the world to read. But the government is also right. The book is not available in the market. The Ministry of Defence (MoD) is still checking whether its contents are kosher.

Gen Naravane's autobiography account has some interesting details. These include the India-China standoff in Galwan in Ladakh in June 2020 — when 20 Indian soldiers lost their lives, as did four Chinese soldiers, although foreign news agencies like Russia's Tass said 45 were killed — as well as the action a couple of months later in the Kailash range. There are conversations with Bhutan's influential former King, Jigme Singye Wangchuk, popularly known as K4; messages from Defence Minister Rajnath Singh; as well as meetings with the PM.

On the face of it, the paragraph that has lit the political storm is almost harmless, and in fact makes the former Army Chief look a bit out of sorts — a paragraph Rahul is said to have cottoned on to. Which is that when four Chinese PLA tanks were coming towards the Indian soldiers who had taken the Kailash heights, east of Finger 4, Gen Naravane called Raksha Mantri and asked him for

We all know what happens when politics gets involved in military matters, and vice-versa.

orders as to what to do. After some hours, Rajnath Singh is said to have called him back, allegedly after speaking to the PM.

In the press note sent by the book publisher more than a year ago, quoted by PTI, Naravane writes, “I conveyed the criticality of the situation to the RM, who said he would get back to me, which he did, by about 2230 hours. He said that he had spoken to the PM and that it was purely a military decision. ‘Jo uchait samjho woh karo’ (Do whatever you deem is appropriate). I had been handed a hot potato. With this carte blanche, the onus was now totally on me. I took a deep breath and sat silently for a few minutes.”

Come to think of it, isn't that what a Prime Minister or a Defence Minister is supposed to tell his Army Chief? That he's the Chief because he knows best

the lay of the land, especially when the enemy is advancing, and therefore he should do what is best by the country.

We all know what happens when politics gets involved in military matters, and vice-versa. India's neighbourhood is littered with pretenders in both fatigues and civilian clothes. But everyone knows that in the separation of powers that is the backbone of any democracy, the thumb rules are clear and apparent to both sides.

Rahul Gandhi's argument is that national security has been the government's leitmotif since it came to power and that when a crisis took place, in Ladakh in 2020, the PM did not properly advise his Army Chief.

This is certainly a debate worth having. Which is, why were the Chinese able to push you around in Galwan, leading to the death of 20 Indian soldiers? What was the role of the corps commander Lt Gen Harinder Singh in that fracas? How did the Army commander, Lt Gen YK Joshi (Jo, in the book) handle it? What are the lessons learnt from the Galwan tragedy?

For sure, national security is a holy cow and operational details cannot be revealed — certainly that's why the book has been held by the MoD. But that point

has become moot because the book's PDF is now being widely read. Everyone knows what the MoD didn't want known.

Which brings us to the most critical lesson of this teacup storm — because there will doubtless be something else next week — that the ability to control information around that compendium word, “strategic affairs,” which is everything from foreign affairs to domestic security, is critical in a democracy. How much to tell the public, is a question every government grapples with. But know that in the Age of Information, despite Donald Trump becoming a bit of an international joke with his 59th claim that he brokered the end of the India-Pakistan conflict at Op Sindoor, the ability to remain credible is at the heart of the argument.

Kargil was a great lesson in what is sometimes called a “media war”. Both Op Snow Leopard (the Ladakh face-off) and Op Sindoor, on the other hand, took another tack, which is to shut down the enemy's channels of information — websites, TV and video — and propagate your own. And while that may be necessary when the conflict is kinetic, or live, it can become counter-productive when things return to normalcy.

People are curious, especially when they belong to 5,000-year-old civilisations, and own historical memories around both blood-letting and reconciliation. So when Chief of Defence Staff, Gen Anil Chauhan, admitted to Bloomberg TV that India had lost a fighter jet during Op Sindoor, mere weeks after the end of the operation, the questions followed thick and fast. How many? When? How? What really happened?

Back in the day, when the world was still divided into two power blocs by the Cold War, the former Eastern Bloc had a word called *"samizdat"*, where everything that was banned by the state, whether newspapers or prose or poetry, was copied by hand and distributed amongst the people. Both *"Ghooskhor Pandat"* and Naravane's book would qualify. Sometimes you wonder if the unfancied PDF is its modern-day version.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

The censor's sword pierces deeply into the heart of free expression. — Earl Warren

A close encounter with birds

SANJEEV SINGH BARIANA

CAPTIVATING — that's the word which sums up best the beauty and serenity of water bodies nestled amid the green cover in the Ramsar wetlands of Nangal. These wetlands serve as a blissful winter home to myriad migratory birds, including the high-flying bar-headed geese, ruddy shelducks, playful pochards and greyish gadwalls.

An evening at the Brahmoti Mandir (near Una) offers many delights, in contrast to the usual lament over the diminishing sightings of birds at the Sukhna Lake in Chandigarh year after year.

Among the winter habitats for winged visitors in the Nangal dam area, the mandir presents a uniquely close encounter with these nomadic birds. They appear to have developed a tacit understanding with the local community, an indicator of remarkable cohabitation. Wanderers from distant lands paddle right up to the temple's steps, engaging in a curious communication with humans. They are often fed kneaded flour provided at the premises.

The playful interaction between humans and birds is mesmerising. Watching energetic birds swoop through the air to grab a morsel or dive deep into the water to catch a crumb is quite a treat — it's a fascinating conversation with nature itself.

As the sun sets, about 50 swans resting on the lake's shore about 250 metres away suddenly become active and glide into the water. Temple bells begin to ring and prayers grow louder. Perhaps responding to the sounds, the coots abruptly turn back and swim away from the shore.

The swans soon arrive beside the steps. They readily pick morsels offered by my friend. When asked whether these birds are familiar with temple visitors, an onlooker explains, “These are local swans; they are very comfortable here. Migratory birds come only during winters. There are many other sites, but nowhere else do the birds come so close to humans. I've tried feeding them at other places, but have usually failed.”

Accompanying us is an avid birdwatcher and nature enthusiast, who strikes a note of caution. “I feel very happy seeing these birds come near us and take food from our hands,” he says. “However, there is a big risk. Migratory birds are adapted to searching for food in their environment. Crumbs given by people make them vulnerable to traps laid by hunters, and many of them end up getting killed.” His incisive observations offer us ample food for thought.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

US deal must be on equal terms

Refer to the two engaging articles 'India-US trade deal is too costly for farmers' and 'Development cannot bypass the farm sector'; each and every clause of the bilateral trade must be discussed threadbare in vital national interest. The US sees a vast market in India to sell its agri products. The corporate farmers in the US cannot be allowed to flourish at the cost of our own small and marginal farmers. The deal should be on an equal footing as sovereign nations. Trump's 'my way or the highway' approach has already sidelined US allies like the EU. Moreover, it is our right to decide our business interests.

RAJ BAHADUR YADAV, FATEHABAD

Farm distress will affect growth

It is ironic that India will impose zero tax on American exports while it pays 18 % tax on US imports. Indian basmati produced in Punjab and Haryana is the best variety across the world which is exported to the US and other countries. On the contrary, cheap American agriculture products are dumped here. If farmers face distress, it will have a major impact on India's growth rate. As agriculture is the backbone of the economy, farmers' suffering directly impacts rural consumption, reduces industrial demand and slows overall GDP growth. Farming sector must be saved for the public good.

RAJ KUMAR KAPOOR, ROPAR

Shun protectionism in farm sector

Apropos of 'India-US trade deal is too costly for farmers'; agriculture has remained protected for way too long, shielded behind non-tariff barriers and propped up by massive input subsidies. State-led procurement and distribution system encourages cultivation of wheat and paddy. This has led to lagging productivity and declining farm incomes for the majority, except large farmers. The farm sector needs to diversify towards high-value cash crops holding high export potential. This requires the right set of incentives and gradual opening up of agriculture to international markets, rather than endless protectionism.

CHANDER SHEKHAR DOGRA, JALANDHAR

Water harvesting is a must

Refer to 'Groundwater stress worsens in Haryana; 64% blocks over-exploited'; this crisis is largely man-made. Water-intensive crops such as wheat, rice and vegetables dominate fields. Leaking water channels, poor field management and disregard for scientific package of practices prescribed by HAU and other institutions squander away a natural resource. Equally worrisome is the mismanagement of surface water. Monsoon runoff is allowed to cause floods every year instead of being harvested and channelised to water-deficit south-west Haryana. Faulty water-harvesting schemes, clogged drains and weak irrigation management waste precious flows, creating the paradox of floods in the north and acute scarcity in the south. Unless a water management plan is implemented, groundwater stress will deepen further.

RAMPHAL KATARIA, KURUKSHETRA

Train delay a pertinent issue

Apropos of 'Train delays'; punctuality is the basic commandment of any public transport system, and on this count Indian Railways continues to fall short. For millions of passengers, delays are not an occasional inconvenience but a routine expectation. Modernisation should not be judged by the speed of a few premium trains or cosmetic upgrades of stations, but by the everyday experience of the average passenger. Until Indian Railways delivers consistency in timing, its claim to being the lifeline of the nation will remain partially true.

GREGORY FERNANDES, MUMBAI

Dedication spurs institutions

Refer to 'A library that rose from the ashes'; the library at the Lal Bahadur Shastri National Academy of Administration, Mussoorie, is a marvel in itself. It was rebuilt by the efforts of one person, librarian Prem Singh. It carries a message that even a single dedicated person can revolutionise the institution. I have visited it and found it one of the most well-stocked and well-maintained libraries. It is fully automated on modern lines.

VK ANAND, CHANDIGARH

Why allocation for defence is not enough



AIR MARSHAL AMIT TIWARI (RETD)
FORMER AOC-IN-C,
CENTRAL AIR COMMAND

THE 2026-27 Budget has come at a time when strategic landscape is being shaped by the new normal of India's response to threats to its sovereignty and global geopolitics. The new normal of India's offensive defence is evident from the 2016 surgical strikes across the Line of Control and the 2019 Balakot airstrikes deep inside Pakistani territory. There were robust forward deployments and limited engagements along the LAC following the 2020 Galwan clash with China. Operation Sindoor in May 2025 was a precision missile campaign targeting terrorist infrastructure in Pakistan following the Pahalgam terror attack.

These operations show India's willingness to conduct punitive strikes beyond its borders when deterrence fails. For such a policy to be successful, it is imperative that armed forces remain alert and maintain a sustained nature of readiness to deter and neutralise any kind of retaliation.

In global geopolitics, the US action in Venezuela and threat to Canada, Greenland, Cuba and Iran are not isolated cases but a part of the new US doctrine enumerated in the Nation-

al Defence Strategy (NDS) released on January 23. It prioritises homeland defence and Western Hemisphere security. It advocates 'peace through strength' and greater burden-sharing by allies.

The NDS document is an exercise in bringing out security concerns of the US with scant regard to the security and sovereignty of friends and allies. The US policy of 'strong denial defence' with respect to China is limited to its interest of containing China and maintaining freedom of navigation in South and East China Sea. It does not address hegemonic activities of China on India's border.

Even US-led initiatives like AUKUS and QUAD do not find a place in this policy reorientation. With the US declaring that any support in a contingency will be conditional to alignment with US priorities, it becomes imperative for India to accelerate and enhance self-reliance in defence matters.

Against this backdrop, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman brings a unique perspective in her ninth Union Budget for 2026-27, having served as Defence Minister before taking charge of the Finance Ministry. It should give her a nuanced understanding of defence requirements. This article examines whether the record-high defence allocation of Rs 7.85 lakh crore in the Budget is sufficient to meet India's strategic and operational needs.

As brought out by the Press Information Bureau release, there is a 15.19% increase over the 'Budgetary Estimate' of



INSUFFICIENT: Procurement of naval Rafales and the likely purchase of 114 fighter aircraft may be hit. PHOTO BY ANIL KUMAR

2025-26. But if the present 'Budget Estimate' is compared to the 'Revised Estimate', the raise reduces to 7.12%.

Moreover, in terms of the percentage of the GDP, the defence budget has been shrinking in the last few years. Though headline inflation for 2026-27, as projected by the RBI and the IMF is 2-4%, the inflation in the defence sector is much higher. Unlike consumer goods, each generation of defence equipment costs much more than the previous one due to the complexity involved, specialised materials (lithium, titanium, rare earths), smaller scale of production and R&D. With requirements of multi-domain operations and AI integration, the defence-specific inflation is likely to be much more than general inflation. The falling rupee against dollar also adds up to inflation.

There has been a 15% hike in maintenance, repair and operations costs globally due to supply chain disturbances and demand. As per some studies,

A benchmark of at least 3% of the GDP is essential to transform India from a regional power into a technologically sovereign force.

inflation in the defence sector in South Asia is likely to be 8-12%. Thus, the 7.12% rise is, in fact, net loss in purchasing power. Probably, this is the reason that the Standing Committee on Defence has been recommending 3% GDP for defence since 2018.

If the defence budget is compared with the global trends, recent Russian special operations in Ukraine and unreliability of US support have forced many European countries to enhance their budgets. The NATO countries have hiked their collective defence budget by 17% in 2024, amounting to 3-5% of the GDP. Japan has increased its defence budget by 21%. In contrast, India's defence budget is hovering below 2% of GDP and it may be insufficient when compared to peers facing comparable or lesser multi-front risks and the Chinese defence budget of more than \$314 billion.

The defence allocation of Rs 7.85 lakh crore is further divided for various requirements.

More than 50% of the budget is towards pay, pension and civilians. Of the allocation made to the Ministry of Defence, 27.95% of the defence budget allocation is for capital expenditure, 20.17% for revenue defence capabilities expenditure on sustenance and operational preparedness, 26.40% for revenue expenditure on pay and allowances, 21.84% for defence pensions and 3.64% for civil organisations.

Therefore, only 27.95% (Rs 2.19 lakh crore) of the defence budget is available for upgradation and modernisation. This is a 21.84% increase from the budgetary estimate of 2025. However, the increase reduces to 17.6% when considered with respect to the revised estimate of 2025. It will reduce further if inflation is factored in. Out of the total 2.19 lakh crore, Rs 1.85 lakh crore will be used for capital acquisition. Additionally, the allocation for aircraft and aero-engines has been reduced by approximately 12%, in comparison to the revised estimate of 2025.

Even the technology development budget for the Air Force has been reduced. This may be crucial in view of procurement of naval Rafales and the likely purchase of 114 multi-role fighter aircraft.

The defence budget needs to be more than a balance sheet. As seen in most of the recent military operations, war is no longer platform- or domain-centric. It demands simultaneous sustainable dominance across land, air, sea, cyber, electronics and space.

In these uncertain times, even the US is looking for a

'Golden Dome' and China is spending \$314 billion on defence.

The instant budget of 1.9% of GDP may not be sufficient to safeguard India's sovereignty and strategic interests in the face of AI in combat, autonomous drone swarms, collaborative combat aircraft, space-based weapons and a hostile cyber environment. Moreover, a robust multi-layer missile shield and redundancy in decentralised command-and-control systems will also be required against hypersonic and electronic warfare threats.

Given that these emerging technologies carry a significantly higher "strategic inflation" cost and require intense and credible R&D, a higher budgetary allocation for capital outlay and indigenous 'atmanirbhar' technologies is not an option but an imperative.

The multifaceted threats faced by India, including an assertive China, unstable subcontinent and unreliable US, demand a more robust effort to build credible, indigenous deterrence.

The modest growth trajectory of below 2% of the GDP may lead to a situation where the political decision of immediate punitive response may outpace the availability of military hardware. As recommended by the Standing Committee on Defence, a benchmark of at least 3% of the GDP is essential to transform India from a regional power into a technologically sovereign force capable of deterring peer competitors through absolute escalation dominance.

Lessons in school safety



SHARAD S CHAUHAN
DGP AND MD, PUNJAB POLICE
HOUSING CORPORATION

THE bomb scares on January 28 that swept through Chandigarh schools did more than disrupt a school day; it exposed how fragile normalcy has become in the age of anonymous digital threats. Within minutes, Chandigarh's education hub was transformed into a security grid. No explosive device was found. But the absence of a bomb did not diminish the scale of what had occurred. A single anonymous email had succeeded in paralysing the administration, displacing thousands of children, and pushing parents, teachers and authorities into hours of panic.

What unfolded in Chandigarh reflects a wider national and global pattern. Globally, school threats have risen by about 44% over the past two years, yet over 99.8% of mass-emailed threats are hoaxes, creating a paradox in which every message must still be treated as real.

Official reports and media coverage suggest a sharp rise since early 2024, with a roughly 300% increase over the past. Law-enforcement reports note the rise of 'cluster threats', where identical messages are sent to large

numbers of schools within minutes. The impact on students is felt in lost instructional hours and disrupted board exams; for parents, it is acute anxiety and for authorities, it is a logistical nightmare to evacuate tens of thousands of children.

These incidents have brought two issues into focus: how threats were handled by the city administration, schools and parents and how communication among them shaped confusion and public anxiety. They underscore the need to shift from a reactive to a resilient posture, with protocols drafted and enforced at the district level rather than left to individual schools.

At least during sensitive periods, precautionary measures must begin well before any threat arrives, including decentralised anti-sabotage checks. International best practice supports routine pre-arrival visual sweeps of

Only with parental trust can the system shift from reflexive reaction to assessment-led response in cases of bomb scares in schools.

classrooms, boundary areas, footpaths and parking zones to establish a baseline of normalcy, making genuine anomalies easier to detect.

In Chandigarh, delayed and opaque communication drew parents to school gates, disrupted traffic and obstructed emergency response vehicles. To mitigate this, research supports a 'strategic transparency' approach using a two-stage alert system. Stage one is an immediate internal alert to police within minutes of a threat. Stage two consists of regular, clear updates to parents during the "Golden Hour," the first 60 minutes, delivered through the school's official app, explaining that a non-specific digital threat is being managed under a controlled protocol.

In the Indian context, the challenge is not a lack of policing or protocol, but the social ecosystem in which these protocols operate. Schools and administrators function within a deeply ingrained instinct to react first and demonstrate visible action to "make everyone safe", even when the statistical probability of harm is extremely low. This instinct, shaped by collective psychology and public pressure, makes assess-and-react models difficult to sustain unless parents understand the logic behind them. Without parental alignment, administrators resort to immediate evacuation to avoid backlash, despite contrary evidence.

This is, thus, the right time to educate parents and treat them as informed stakeholders. Only with their trust can the system shift from reflexive reaction to an assessment-led response, allowing composure, rather than fear.

Examine POCSO misuse



KP SINGH
FORMER DGP, HARYANA

SOUNDING an alarm over the misuse of the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act 2012, the Supreme Court has asked the Centre to consider the possibility of introducing the Romeo-Juliet clause that exempts consensual adolescent relationships from traditional criminal prosecutions. The aim is to strike a balance between protecting children from exploitation and recognising adolescent sexual autonomy, inter alia, preventing over-criminalisation of incidents of physical intimacy between teenagers.

As per the NCRB, in 2023, as many as 7,305 cases were registered under the POCSO Act, including 4,321 crimes of penetrative sexual assault (rape), 2,619 of sexual assault (bad touch) and 264 of sexual harassment. More than 2,400 juveniles below 18 years were found involved and apprehended in these cases.

In cases of physical relationships with consent between minors, law enforcers often suffer a dilemma whether the law should be applied 'as it is' or 'as it ought to be' since the jurisdiction to interpret and apply law 'as it ought to be' lies only with the constitutional courts. This is the

mischief which the SC has asked the Central government to address.

The Romeo-Juliet clause is embedded in international law practices, whereby nuances of teenage relationships and intimacy are recognised as an essential part of human development processes and the systems are designed to differentiate between predatory sexual behaviour and non-exploitative teenaged physical relationships with mutual consent. In India, the age of consent for sex is 18 years; even the husband may be prosecuted for non-consensual physical relationship with his minor wife.

Section 19(1) of the POCSO Act is singularly responsible for revealing sexual indulgence by adolescents, whereby, every person, including medical professionals, who comes to know of a sexual activity involving a minor, are dutybound to report it to

The aim is to strike a balance between protecting children from exploitation and recognising adolescent sexual autonomy.

police; non-reporting entails punishment of up to six months' imprisonment and fine. Resultantly, minor married pregnant women and unmarried adolescents avoid visiting doctors and fall in the hands of quacks for sex-related problems.

Sometimes parents report consensual sexual encounters of their children as incidents of rape or molestation and inform the police to invoke the POCSO Act. The possibility of some of these cases as being acts of curiosity and exploratory misdemeanor with consent cannot be ruled out.

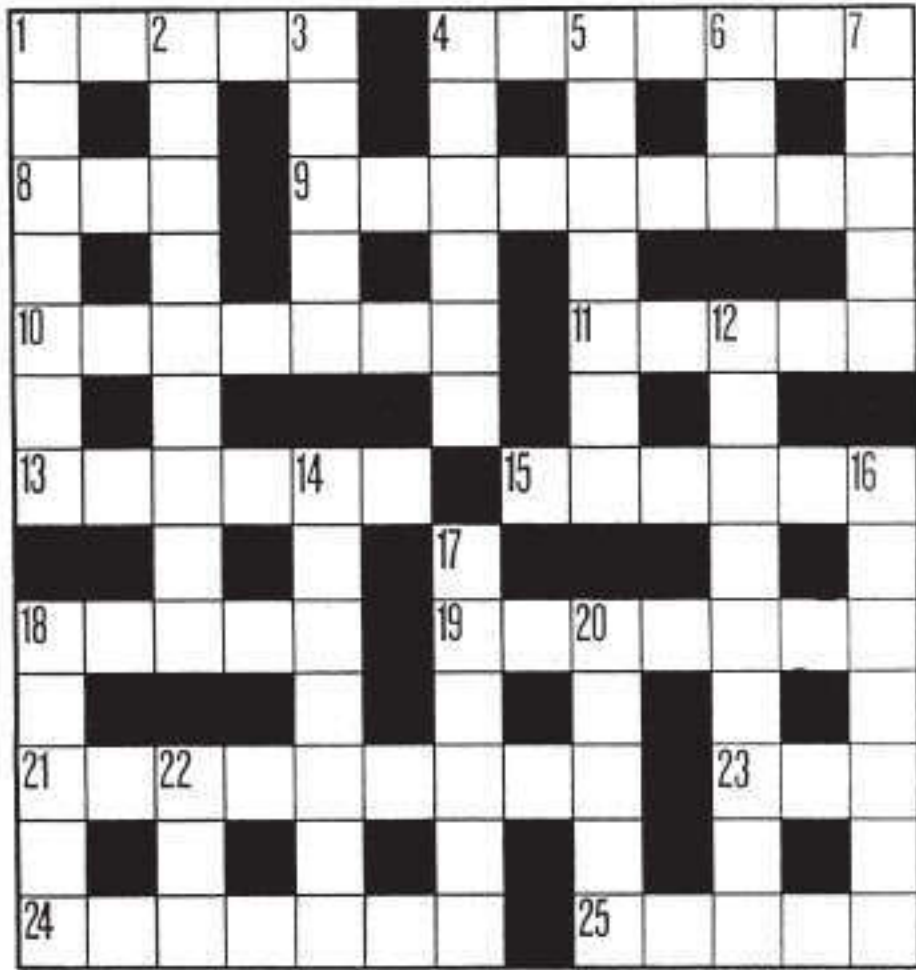
In the absence of proper guidance and support from parents and peer groups, age-related physical, biological and emotional imbalances end up dragging juveniles in the domain of criminality, as they are not mature enough to handle the natural changes in their body and mind, and understand the consequences of their sexual misconduct.

The POCSO Act was enacted to protect children from sexual exploitation, mainly by adults, and it was never envisaged that innocent sexual encounters between adolescents would also fall under this Act, hampering their right to development and freedom of expression.

On the other hand, decriminalising all adolescent consensual sexual activities may not be accepted by the society in general. It necessitates some tweaking of laws and discovering a corrective rehabilitation therapy for such juvenile offenders as they cannot be left at the mercy of the traditional criminal justice system.

The ball is now in the court of the Centre.

QUICK CROSSWORD



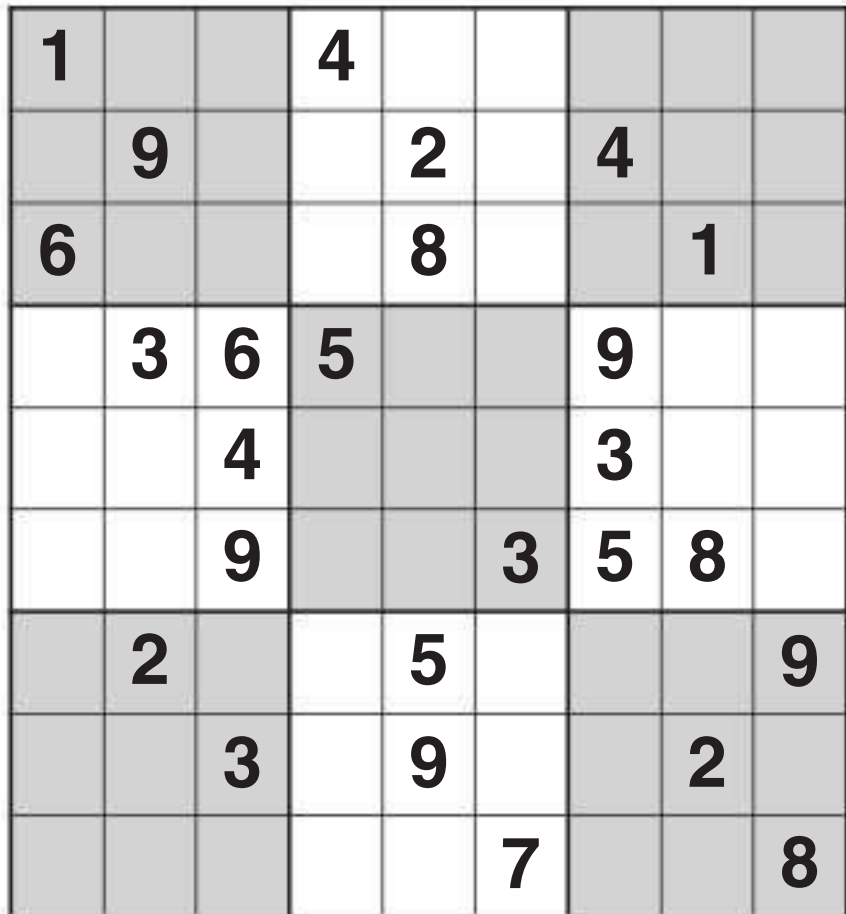
- ACROSS**
- 1 Centre of attention (5)
 - 4 Bent (7)
 - 8 Deserter from a cause (3)
 - 9 Closely united in friendship (5-4)
 - 10 Make crazy (7)
 - 11 Come to mind (5)
 - 13 Paradox (6)
 - 15 Aloof (6)
 - 18 Gladden (5)
 - 19 Long curl of hair (7)
 - 21 Colluding (2,7)
 - 23 Trap for game (3)
 - 24 At the end (7)
 - 25 A sailing boat (5)
- DOWN**
- 1 Vast sum of money (7)
 - 2 Become alight (5,4)
 - 3 Protest occupation of site (3-2)
 - 4 Young swan (6)
 - 5 Result (7)
 - 6 Family and relations (3)
 - 7 Discourage (5)
 - 12 Argue pedantically (4,5)
 - 14 Arrange in proper order (7)
 - 16 No longer burning (7)
 - 17 A religious house (6)
 - 18 Steep rockface (5)
 - 20 Unpleasant (5)
 - 22 Be permitted to (3)

Yesterday's Solution

Across: 1 Off the cuff, 8 Feral, 9 Soprano, 10 Learner, 11 Ended, 12 Old hat, 14 In turn, 17 Stiff, 19 Rummage, 21 In a word, 22 Drain, 23 On the level.

Down: 2 Forward, 3 Talon, 4 Ensure, 5 Umpteen, 6 Fraud, 7 Golden mean, 8 Follow suit, 13 Affront, 15 Unaware, 16 Grudge, 18 Imago, 20 Midge.

SU DO KU



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FORECAST

SUNSET:	SATURDAY	18:04 HRS
SUNRISE:	SUNDAY	07:08 HRS
CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	24	08
New Delhi	24	10
Amritsar	21	07
Bathinda	23	08
Jalandhar	21	07
Ludhiana	22	09
Bhiwani	23	08
Hisar	23	09
Sirsa	23	09
Dharamsala	21	06
Manali	15	00
Shimla	17	06
Srinagar	12	-03
Jammu	24	08
Kargil	03	-11
Leh	02	-13
Dehradun	25	10
Mussoorie	18	06

TEMPERATURE IN °C

Have computers and smartphones ruined the future of young people?

Young people are the wealth of a nation, but a recent research study conducted across 80 countries suggests that despite the aid of artificial intelligence, robotics, and the computer revolution, this generation appears to have lower intelligence than their parents' generation. This revelation was made by a US Senate committee. The reason cited is that young people are becoming increasingly dependent on digital technology and are relying on ready-made solutions instead of conducting their own research or investigations. Instead of working on the foundations of diligence and originality, they are becoming copycats or clones of each other. India boasts that it has not allowed any developed country to surpass it in artificial intelligence or the digital world, but this research indicates that the new generation's IQ, memory, and problem-solving abilities are lower than the previous generation's in terms of knowledge, education, mathematics, and problem-solving skills. While older generations patiently tackled even the most complex problems, not only succeeding in solving them but also setting milestones of development, the new generation is training its human brain with short videos and brief sentences. Depth has disappeared, originality is gone, face-to-face interaction with scholars and teachers is no longer common, and therefore, self-confidence has been shaken. In India, children's intellectual capacity has been declining since 2010. Computerization has become a very profitable business in this country, but research expert Dr. Garrett states that as technology has advanced in the world and now in Indian schools over the past 60 years, children's learning abilities have decreased. Comparing the results across the country, it is found that children who use technology less or not at all perform better than those who rely on computerized gadgets. Now, there are plans to provide every student with a separate device for every task and every problem. Work on this has already begun. The country's curriculum is being changed, and artificial intelligence has become dominant. As AI has risen, book culture has declined. On one hand, there's a plan to provide every student with individual devices, but despite this assistance, their scores have started to drop rapidly. What is the reason? The reason is that the younger generation, Generation Z, who use digital technology, become overly confident. As children get smartphones, their originality is being destroyed. They are becoming copycats of the cartoon world. This immense power of the digital world has frightened the world's emerging nations. Now, surveys also suggest that while we should advance in technology, we must also control it. If it becomes uncontrolled, it will create a virtual, destructive world for the younger generation.

-Abhishek Vij

Investment Campaign to Create New Jobs in Punjab

As far as the healthcare revolution is concerned, Punjab Chief Minister Bhagwant Singh Mann has won the hearts of the common people of the state by providing a free treatment scheme up to Rs. 10 lakh. In addition, the Bhagwant Mann government has been running a continuous campaign against drug traffickers for more than a year, which is yielding significant success. It is generally said that the root cause of every crime is youth unemployment. This problem should be addressed on a priority basis. Until young people find meaningful work, they will not contribute to the well-being of their state or country, and may instead resort to negative or escapist tendencies. To address this problem, the Bhagwant Mann government has provided a large number of appointment letters to young people since assuming power. Now, the Punjab government is launching a new investment campaign that will provide new employment opportunities for unemployed youth. Under this initiative, industry groups from across the country have been invited to Mohali from March 13 to 15 for the Progressive Punjab Investors Summit 2026. The government has announced that small and cottage industries will also be strengthened. They will no longer be left to languish at the medium level, but will be provided with adequate support to enable them to grow into large industries. The manufacturing and logistics sectors have been chosen for this purpose. Leading private equity firms and financial institutions have also participated in this initiative. The Chief Minister is fully focused on promoting both large-scale industries and small and cottage industries. These are the industries that provide employment to all sections of society. The Chief Minister plans to invite large industries to the state. That is why he recently visited Maharashtra and Gujarat. He also held high-level meetings with various industry groups on Wednesday. Currently, this entire situation is at the promotional and awareness-raising stage. Often, large investors have been hesitant to invest in Punjab due to a lack of complete information about the significant concessions available in the state and because Punjab is a border state. But the new policy is to generously provide long-term investment, administrative support, and strategic market access so that small and cottage industries can realize their dream of transforming into larger enterprises. To this end, the Chief Minister has eliminated bureaucratic hurdles for setting up industries and has given industrialists the freedom to establish their businesses in their preferred locations.

The changing meaning of work in the digital age

Work has always been central to human identity. For centuries, professions defined social status, daily routines, and even personal worth. Farmers, artisans, traders, clerks, and factory workers each played roles shaped by their era's economic needs. However, in the digital age, the meaning of work is undergoing a profound transformation. Technology is not only changing how people work, but also why, where, and what work means in human lives. The rise of digital tools has dismantled the traditional workplace model. Offices with fixed hours and physical presence were once the norm. Today, remote work, freelancing, and hybrid arrangements are increasingly common. Cloud computing, video conferencing, and collaborative software have allowed people to work across continents without relocating. This shift has blurred the boundary between professional and personal life, offering flexibility while also introducing new challenges related to time management and mental well-being. Automation has further altered the nature of work. Machines now perform tasks once done exclusively by humans, from manufacturing assembly lines to data analysis. While this has raised concerns about job displacement, it has also created opportunities for new kinds of employment. Roles in artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, digital marketing, and software development did not exist a few decades ago. The modern worker is now expected to continuously adapt, learn, and reskill in response to evolving technological demands. Another important change lies in the growing emphasis on purpose over permanence. Earlier generations often spent decades in a single organization, valuing stability and long-term security. In contrast, many workers today prioritize meaningful work,



personal growth, and work-life balance. Job-hopping is no longer viewed as disloyalty but as a strategy for skill development and better opportunities. This shift reflects a broader cultural change where fulfillment increasingly matters as much as financial compensation.

Automation has further altered the nature of work. Machines now perform tasks once done exclusively by humans, from manufacturing assembly lines to data analysis.

The gig economy has played a significant role in redefining work. Platforms that connect freelan-

cers with short-term projects have expanded employment options, especially for young professionals. Writers, designers, drivers, consultants, and educators can now monetize their skills independently. While this model offers autonomy and flexibility, it also raises concerns about job security, benefits, and labor protections. The challenge for policymakers lies in balancing innovation with fairness. Digital work has also democratized access to opportunity. Geographic location, once a major barrier, is becoming less relevant. A skilled professional in a small town can now work for global clients. This has the potential to reduce regional inequalities and encourage decentralized development. However, digital divides still persist, particularly in areas lacking reliable internet or technological infrastructure, highlighting the need for inclusive digital policies. Education systems are adapting to this changing landscape. Traditional degrees are no longer the sole pathway to employment. Online courses, certifications, and

self-directed learning have gained credibility. Employers increasingly value practical skills, adaptability, and problem-solving abilities over formal credentials alone. Lifelong learning has become essential, as workers must continuously update their knowledge to remain relevant. Despite these transformations, work continues to provide structure and meaning in human lives. It remains a source of identity, social connection, and contribution to society. However, the digital age invites a rethinking of how work fits into a fulfilling life. The future of work may involve fewer rigid schedules, greater emphasis on creativity, and a deeper integration of technology into daily tasks. Ultimately, the changing meaning of work reflects broader societal shifts. As technology evolves, so must human values, institutions, and expectations. The challenge is not merely to keep pace with change, but to shape a future of work that is inclusive, sustainable, and aligned with human well-being.

THOUGHT OF THE DAY

The future belongs to those who prepare for it today.
-Malcolm X

Public spaces and their role in social life

Public spaces are essential to social interaction and democratic life. Parks, streets, markets, libraries, and community centers provide venues where people from diverse backgrounds intersect. These spaces shape how societies communicate, relax, and express collective identity. Historically, public spaces served as centers of civic life. Ancient forums and town squares hosted debates, commerce, and celebrations. They were places where citizens encountered different viewpoints and participated in shared experiences. Such interactions strengthened social cohesion and political awareness. Modern urban design continues to rely on public spaces to foster community. Well-designed parks encourage physical activity and social engagement. Pedestrian-friendly streets support local businesses and informal interactions. When accessible and inclusive, public spaces enhance quality of life. Public spaces also play a crucial role in mental health. Access to green areas reduces stress and improves emotional well-being. Quiet libraries and open plazas offer respite from crowded living conditions. These environments provide balance in increasingly dense urban settings. Equity in public space access is a significant concern. Marginalized communities often lack safe, well-maintained communal areas. This disparity affects social inclusion and health outcomes. Inclusive urban planning must prioritize equitable distribution and community participation. Cultural expression thrives in public spaces. Festivals, performances, and public art transform ordinary areas into shared cultural experiences. Such activities strengthen local identity and encourage creative engagement. Public spaces thus become living reflections of social diversity. In the digital era, the relevance of physical public spaces remains strong. While online platforms connect people virtually, face-to-face interactions foster trust and empathy. Physical spaces allow spontaneous encounters that digital environments cannot replicate. Safety and accessibility determine the success of public spaces.

The psychology of habits and daily routines

Habits shape human behavior more than conscious decision-making. From morning rituals to bedtime routines, much of daily life runs on automatic patterns. Understanding how habits form and function offers insight into productivity, health, and personal development. Psychologically, habits are behaviors that become automatic through repetition. The brain conserves energy by delegating repeated actions to habit loops. These loops consist of cues, routines, and rewards. A cue triggers a behavior, the routine follows, and a reward reinforces the pattern. Over time, this process embeds habits deeply into neural pathways. Habits can be beneficial or harmful. Positive habits, such as regular exercise or reading, improve well-being and long-term outcomes. Negative habits, like procrastination or unhealthy eating, can undermine goals. The challenge lies not in motivation alone, but in designing environments that support desired behaviors. Daily routines provide structure and predictability. They reduce decision fatigue, allowing individuals to focus cognitive energy on complex tasks. Successful professionals often rely on routines to maintain consistency and efficiency. Morning routines, in particular, set the tone for the day, influencing mood and performance. Changing habits requires more than willpower. Research shows that replacing a routine while keeping the same cue and



reward is more effective than eliminating behavior entirely. For example, substituting a walk for an afternoon snack can satisfy the need for a break while promoting health. Environment plays a crucial role in habit formation. Visible cues, social influences, and accessibility shape behavior. A workspace designed for focus encourages productive habits, while cluttered environments promote distraction. Small changes in surroundings can lead to significant behavioral shifts. Social habits are equally powerful. Cultural norms and peer behavior influence individual routines. Shared rituals, such as communal meals or group exercise, reinforce habits through social rewards. This explains why behavior change is often easier within supportive communities. Technology has introduced new habit patterns. Notifications, social media, and digital platforms are designed to capture attention through reward mechanisms. While these tools offer convenience, they can also foster compulsive behaviors. Developing digital mindfulness is essential for maintaining control over daily routines. Ultimately, habits reflect identity.

Water as the foundation of civilizations

Water has been the silent architect of human civilization. From the earliest settlements to modern megacities, access to water has determined where societies flourish and where they fail. Rivers, lakes, and aquifers have shaped trade routes, agricultural systems, cultural practices, and political power. Understanding water's role in history offers valuable lessons for the present and future.

The earliest civilizations emerged along riverbanks. The Nile, Indus, Tigris-Euphrates, and Yellow River provided fertile soil, transportation, and sustenance. Seasonal floods replenished nutrients, enabling surplus food production and population growth. These conditions allowed societies to develop writing, governance, and complex economies. Without reliable water sources, such progress would have been impossible.

Water influenced not only survival but also social organization. Irrigation systems required collective effort and coordination, giving rise

to early governance structures. Control over water often meant control over power. Those who managed canals and reservoirs wielded authority, shaping hierarchies and administrative systems. In many ways, early politics flowed directly from water management. Trade and commerce also depended heavily on water. Rivers and seas served as natural highways, enabling the exchange of goods, ideas, and cultures. Maritime civilizations expanded their

The earliest civilizations emerged along riverbanks. The Nile, Indus, Tigris-Euphrates, and Yellow River provided fertile soil, transportation, and sustenance.

influence through naval strength and port cities. Water connected distant



regions long before modern transportation, fostering globalization in its earliest form.

Culturally, water has held deep symbolic meaning. It features prominently in religious rituals, myths, and artistic expressions. Many traditions associate water with purification, renewal, and life itself. Sacred rivers and ceremonial baths reflect humanity's reverence for

this vital resource. Such cultural connections reinforce the idea that water is not merely a commodity but a shared heritage.

In modern times, technological advances have altered humanity's relationship with water. Dams, desalination plants, and pipelines have expanded access, enabling cities to grow in arid regions. However, these interventions have also

disrupted ecosystems and displaced communities. The challenge today is balancing human needs with environmental sustainability.

Urbanization has placed unprecedented pressure on water resources. Rapid population growth, pollution, and climate variability threaten water security worldwide. Many regions face declining groundwater levels and contaminated

ivers. These challenges highlight the limits of technological solutions and the importance of responsible consumption and conservation. Climate change has further intensified water-related risks. Altered rainfall patterns, melting glaciers, and rising sea levels affect freshwater availability. Floods and droughts are becoming more frequent and severe, testing infrastructure and governance systems. Water, once a stabilizing force, is increasingly a source of uncertainty.

Looking ahead, the lessons of history are clear. Societies that manage water wisely tend to endure, while those that exploit it recklessly face decline. Integrated water management, international cooperation, and community participation are essential for sustainable futures. Recognizing water as both a natural resource and a social good can guide better decision-making. Water remains the foundation of civilization, just as it was thousands of years ago. The challenge of the 21st century is not discovering its importance, but respecting its limits and sharing it equitably.

The role of curiosity in lifelong learning

Curiosity is one of the most fundamental human traits. It drives exploration, discovery, and creativity. From childhood questions to adult pursuits, curiosity shapes how individuals learn and grow. In a rapidly changing world, curiosity has become essential for lifelong learning and adaptability. At its core, curiosity is the desire to understand. It motivates people to seek information beyond immediate needs. This intrinsic motivation is more powerful than external rewards. When learning is driven by curiosity, it becomes engaging and sustainable. Lifelong learning is no longer optional. Technological change, evolving job markets, and shifting social realities require continuous skill development. Curiosity fuels this process by encouraging individuals to explore new fields, acquire new competencies, and remain open to change. Education systems often focus on outcomes rather than inquiry. However, research shows that curiosity enhances memory and comprehension. When learners are curious, they process information more deeply. Encouraging questions and exploration leads to better learning outcomes than



rote memorization. Curiosity also supports creativity and innovation. Many breakthroughs result from asking unconventional questions or connecting unrelated ideas. Curious individuals are more likely to experiment, take intellectual risks, and challenge assumptions. This mindset is valuable across professions, from science to art. In everyday life, curiosity enriches experiences. It encourages people to read widely, engage in conversations, and explore different perspectives. This openness fosters empathy and understanding. Curious individuals are better equipped to navigate diverse social environments. Digital technology has expanded opportunities for curious learners. Online courses, podcasts,

and open-access resources make learning accessible. However, digital overload can also distract from meaningful inquiry. Cultivating focused curiosity helps learners navigate information effectively.

Curiosity is closely linked to adaptability. In uncertain environments, those willing to learn continuously are more resilient. They view change as an opportunity rather than a threat. This mindset is crucial in times of rapid transformation. Organizations increasingly value curiosity. Employers seek individuals who can learn, unlearn, and relearn. Curious employees contribute to problem-solving and innovation. Creating workplace cultures that encourage questions and experimentation enhances performance. Maintaining curiosity requires effort. Fear of failure, rigid routines, and excessive specialization can suppress it. Encouraging play, reflection, and interdisciplinary learning helps sustain curiosity throughout life. Ultimately, curiosity is the engine of lifelong learning. It transforms education from a phase into a habit. By nurturing curiosity, individuals remain engaged with the world, capable of growth, and open to new possibilities.

Food traditions and their role in preserving cultural identity

Food is more than nourishment; it is a powerful expression of cultural identity. Recipes, cooking methods, and shared meals carry histories and values across generations. In a globalized world, food traditions play a crucial role in preserving cultural heritage and fostering social connection.

Every culture has distinctive food practices shaped by geography, climate, and history. Ingredients reflect local environments, while preparation methods evolve from necessity and creativity. These traditions encode knowledge about survival, health, and community life.

Food rituals often mark important life events. Celebrations, festivals, and religious observances are accompanied by specific dishes. These meals reinforce collective memory and shared identity. Preparing and sharing traditional food strengthens bonds among family and community members.

Migration has spread food traditions across borders. Immigrant communities often preserve cultural identity through cuisine. Traditional foods become symbols of belonging in unfamiliar environments. Restaurants and home kitchens serve as spaces where heritage is maintained and shared. Globalization has increased access to diverse cuisines, enriching food culture



worldwide. However, it also threatens traditional practices. Fast food and industrialized diets can displace local food systems. Preserving food traditions requires conscious effort and cultural pride.

Food traditions also contribute to intergenerational learning. Recipes passed down orally teach skills, values, and history. Cooking together fosters communication between generations. This transmission strengthens cultural continuity. Economically, traditional food practices support local livelihoods. Small-scale farmers, artisans, and vendors rely on heritage foods. Protecting these systems promotes sustainable agriculture and cultural diversity. Modern movements emphasize the importance of slow food and local cuisine. These initiatives advocate for mindful eating, environmental sustainability, and respect for cultural heritage. They highlight food as a connection between people and place. Food also serves as a bridge between cultures. Sharing meals encourages dialogue and understanding.

Why cities continue to attract people despite rising challenges

Cities have always drawn people with the promise of opportunity. From ancient trade hubs to modern megacities, urban centers have been magnets for ambition, innovation, and cultural exchange. Despite rising living costs, congestion, and environmental pressures, cities continue to grow. Understanding why people are still drawn to urban life reveals much about human aspirations and social structures. One of the primary attractions of cities is economic opportunity. Urban areas concentrate industries, businesses, and services that generate employment. People migrate to cities seeking better wages, career growth, and financial stability. While competition can be intense, cities offer diverse job markets that rural areas often cannot match. Cities also provide access to education and skill development. Universities, research institutions, training centers,

and cultural organizations are typically concentrated in urban spaces. This creates environments where learning and innovation thrive. For young people, cities represent gateways to personal and professional growth. Cultural diversity is another defining feature of urban life. Cities bring together people from different backgrounds, languages, and traditions. This diversity enriches social life through food, music, art, and shared experiences. Exposure to different cultures fosters tolerance and creativity, making cities dynamic social ecosystems. Infrastructure and services further enhance urban appeal. Cities offer better access to healthcare, transportation, entertainment, and public utilities. While these systems may be strained, they still provide conveniences that many smaller towns lack. Proximity to services saves time and expands lifestyle choices. Urban environments also act



as centers of innovation. New ideas often emerge where people interact frequently. Cities facilitate collaboration across disciplines, fueling technological and social advancements. Startups, creative industries, and research initiatives flourish

in dense urban settings. Despite these benefits, cities face serious challenges. Housing shortages, pollution, traffic congestion, and social inequality threaten quality of life. Rising costs push lower-income residents to the margins.

Addressing these issues requires thoughtful urban planning and inclusive policies. Yet, cities are resilient. They continuously adapt through infrastructure upgrades, public transport systems, green spaces, and digital

solutions. Urban planners increasingly emphasize sustainability, walkability, and community-oriented design. These efforts aim to make cities more livable and equitable.

Another reason cities endure is the sense of possibility they offer. Cities symbolize progress and reinvention. People move to cities not just for jobs, but for experiences, connections, and the chance to redefine themselves. This emotional pull remains powerful. The future of cities will depend on how they respond to current challenges. Balancing growth with sustainability, inclusivity with innovation, is essential. If managed well, cities will continue to attract people as centers of opportunity and human interaction. Cities are more than crowded spaces; they are living systems shaped by human ambition. Despite their problems, they continue to embody hope, movement, and transformation.



Telangana Today

FOR LOCAL TO GLOBAL NEWS

Task cut out for Manipur's new CM

The restoration of popular government in Manipur is a political gamble worth taking in a State torn apart by ethnic strife and desperate for lasting peace. Yumnam Khemchand Singh of the BJP took charge as the 13th Chief Minister, nearly a year after the much-discredited N Biren Singh resigned from the post, paving the way for the President's rule. The appointment of two Deputy Chief Ministers — Nemcha Kipgen from the Kuki-Zo community and Losii Dikho of the Naga People's Front — serves a symbolic purpose in a State that has witnessed extensive bloodshed over the past two-and-a-half years. Khemchand Singh has his task cut out as the deep wounds of the State need a healing touch. The bitter divide between the warring Meitei and Kuki-Zo communities has not yet been bridged. It will be a Herculean task for the new government to regain the trust of aggrieved stakeholders. Ethnic violence has claimed over 260 lives and displaced thousands of people in the key north-eastern State since May 2023, after tribal groups in the hills rose up against a High Court order directing the then Biren Singh government to consider granting Scheduled Tribe status to the majority Meitei community. The root cause of the ethnic conflict — the tussle over the majority Meitei community's demand for Scheduled Tribe status — must be addressed on priority to regain the trust of Kukis and Nagas. The Centre has no time to lose — Manipuris have already waited too long for the healing touch.

A political solution involving civil society is the only way forward. Manipur, like most of north-eastern India, is an amalgamation of multiple cultures, faiths and ethnicities, many with a history of mistrust and violence. The arrangement of having a Meitei CM and one deputy CM each from the Kuki and Naga communities is clearly aimed at signalling inclusivity. However, the symbolism will be put to the test on the ground. Protests in Kuki-Zo-dominated districts like Churachandpur, demanding a "political solution" before government formation, lay bare a lingering sense of alienation and fear. The Kuki-Zo Council, a leading civil society organisation in Manipur, has urged all MLAs belonging to the community to "respect the collective will, sentiments, unity and political aspirations of the Kuki-Zo people". The subtle warning to these legislators is that they should be ready to face the consequences if they choose to join the government. A tripartite agreement in September last year between the Centre, Manipur government and Kuki-Zo insurgent groups provided a ray of hope for restoring peace and normalcy in the strife-torn State. With a year left for the Assembly elections, the BJP is keen to project a rosy picture. However, the Kuki-Zo demand for a separate administration — a union Territory with a legislature — might impede efforts to restore normalcy. The new dispensation must make reconciliation and consensus-building its top priorities.

Meitei-Kuki-Zo divide remains deep, and rebuilding trust will test the Khemchand Singh government

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VIEWPOINT

HYDERABAD, Saturday, February 7, 2026



OMAR ABDULLAH
Jammu & Kashmir Chief Minister

“ If you are asking whether I have a magic wand to make J&K self-reliant, the honest answer is no. These budgets have been directed towards improving our economic standing



SANJAY RAUT
Shiv Sena (UBT) leader

We are in Parliament before Modi and are aware of its rules. The Congress made the biggest sacrifices... If anyone says there is danger to Modi in Parliament, then it is rubbish



CHANDRIMA BHATTACHARYA
West Bengal Finance Minister

People have elected the TMC to power time and again because we enjoy the blessings of 'maa', we carry the fragrance of the 'mat' and have always stood beside 'manush'

Contrary to equity principle

While inclusion of OBCs in UGC Equity Regulations, 2026, is welcome, questions remain over equality and safeguards



NAYAKARA VEERASHA

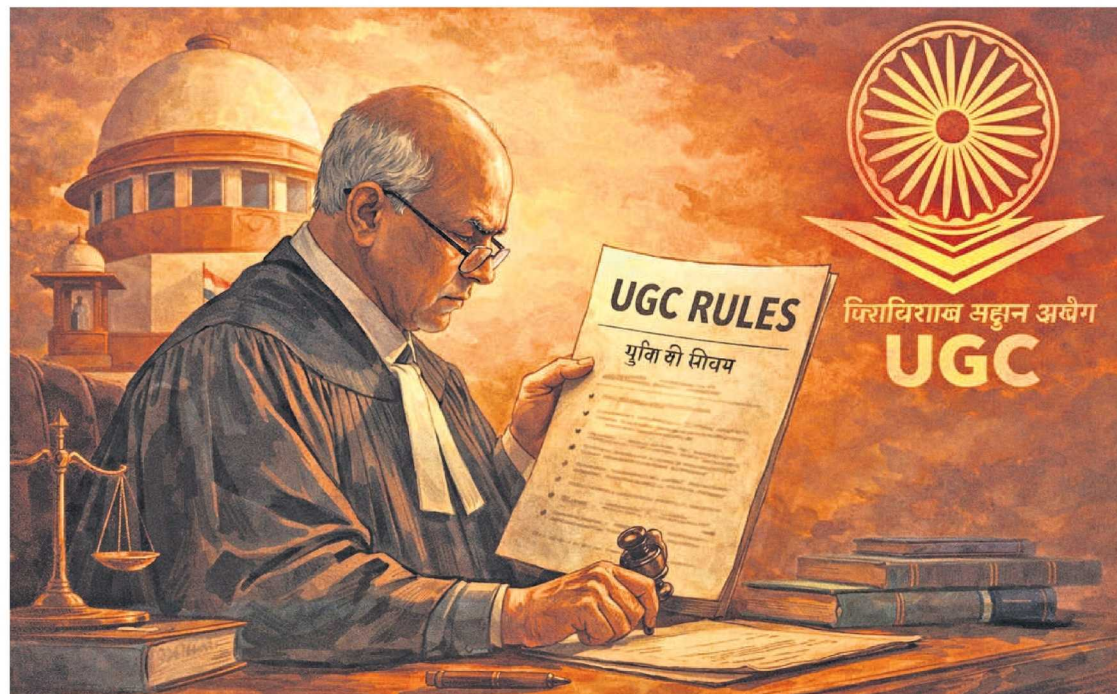
On 13 January 2026, the University Grants Commission (UGC) introduced the Promotion of Equity in Higher Education Institutions Regulations, 2026 (hereafter referred to as the Equity Regulations, 2026), repealing its 2012 regulations. The aim of these regulations is "to eradicate discrimination only on the basis of religion, race, gender, place of birth, caste, or disability, particularly against the members of scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, socially and educationally backward classes, economically weaker sections, persons with disabilities, or any of them, and to promote full equity and inclusion amongst the stakeholders in higher education institutions".

These regulations are in response to the Supreme Court of India's directive in 2019 to establish robust mechanisms to check caste-based discrimination in higher education institutions (HEIs). The Equity Regulations, 2026, were long overdue, and it is a matter of concern that they were introduced only after the Supreme Court intervention, reflecting legislative inertia.

Contentious Issues

Widespread protests have erupted against the regulations over the exclusion of general category students, inadequate representation in equity committees, and the absence of safeguards to distinguish genuine complaints from false cases. The Supreme Court heard three Public Interest Litigations (PILs) on January 29 and stayed the implementation of the Equity Regulations, 2026. The PILs argued that the regulations violate Articles 14, 15, and 21 of the Constitution and should be repealed.

The top court opined that "upon a prima facie consideration, it appears to us that some of the provisions of the



impugned regulations suffer from certain ambiguities, and the possibility of their misuse cannot be ruled out". Using Article 142 of the Constitution, the court reinforced the UGC 2012 regulations in place until further orders.

The most contentious clause is 3(c), which defines "caste-based discrimination as discrimination only on the basis of caste or tribe against the members of the scheduled castes (SCs), scheduled tribes (STs), and other backward classes (OBCs)". This is exclusionary and arbitrary, as it creates further divisions among the student community rather than uniting them.

A law must be comprehensive and should not assume/presume that discrimination happens only to certain communities, even if historical discrimination is a fact. In *EP Royappa v State of Tamil Nadu (1974) 4 SCC 3*, the Supreme Court held that: "When an Act is arbitrary, it is implicit in it that it is unequal both according to political logic and constitutional law and is therefore violative of Article 14..."

Many Left Out

While the inclusion of OBCs is welcome, the explicit focus on only SCs/STs/OBCs sets a dangerous precedent by leaving out other groups such as religious minorities, women, the general category, third gender and persons with disabilities. Unlike the 2012 regulations, the 2026 regulations adopt a regressive approach to caste-based discrimination. The intent to eradicate discrimination is commendable; however, it must align with the spirit of equality enshrined in Article 14.

The omission of the general category has raised eyebrows and needs to be

fixed to make it implementable. Similarly, the non-inclusion of offences such as ragging and victimisation, which were part of the 2012 regulations, casts doubts on the true intent of the 2026 regulations. Ragging and its associated offences remain a significant problem in HEIs, and their omission is a major lacuna.

Last December, the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Education, Women, Children, Youth and Sports, chaired by Digvijay Singh, recommended that "The draft Regulations, unlike the 2012 Regulations, must positively identify instances of discrimination. Without such detail, it will be left to the discretion of the institute to decide whether a complaint is genuine or false. Accordingly, the Regulations must explicitly include a comprehensive list of discriminatory practices." This recommendation was neglected, thereby making the Equity Regulations silent on probable discrimination practices in HEIs.

Another issue is the use of the word 'segregation' in clause 7(d) of the Equity Regulations, 2026. It should be removed, as it has no relevance to promoting equity. In fact, it runs contrary to the equity principle.

Exclusion of offences such as ragging, victimisation, covered under the 2012 regulations, raises doubts about the intent of the new regulations

Principle of Exclusion

The Equity Regulations, 2026, envisages the creation of 'Equal Opportunity Centre', 'Equity Committee', 'Equity Squads', 'Equity Ambassador' and 'Equity Helpline'. These mechanisms are necessary; however, the regulations lack clarity on 'who' will manage them and 'how' they will function. Sections 5 (1) and (7) of the regulations fail to explicitly include general category representation in the Equity Committee. Clause 12 of paragraph 5 states that "stakeholders designated as 'Equity Ambassadors' shall act as torchbearers of equity on the campus". While instituting the idea of Equity Ambassadors is welcome, the regulations are silent on ensuring a conducive environment for them to function effectively.

Paragraph 8, titled 'the procedure in case of an incident of discrimination', outlines the implementation mechanism and the timeframe to be followed by the HEIs: the equity committee must meet within 24 hours after receiving a complaint, submit a report in 15 days, and the head of the institution must act within 7 working days. These timelines are far removed from social, educational, and legal realities.

The regulations are silent on the consequences if the equity committee fails to meet the prescribed deadlines. On the whole, the UGC Equity Regulations, 2026, appears impressive on paper as an inclusive policy; however, in reality, it provides a wider scope for exclusion.

(The author is Assistant Professor, Symbiosis Law School, Pune, Symbiosis International [Deemed University], Pune. Views are personal)

Letters to the Editor

Hopes dashed

The hopes that Telangana pinned on the 2026-27 union Budget have been dashed. The State expected sufficient allocations for key projects such as the Musi River rejuvenation, the Regional Ring Road, and the Metro Rail expansion. However, Telangana ended up getting a raw deal from the Centre. Despite repeated requests to the Centre for financial assistance, all efforts proved futile. Ironically, the BJP has eight MPs from the State, yet Telangana has been left empty-handed.

DHOTRE K DEEPAK,
Hyderabad

KCR's vision

The vision and role of K Chandrasekhar Rao cannot be erased. Today's Telangana bears the stamp of his personality, vision, and deep understanding of a territory that was once a dry land and carried the stamp of servility. All political parties have lessons to learn. The role of players in the political arena must never be forgotten, and politicians must strive to do as much good as they can. Whether single or united, the opposition must work to reshape destiny for the common good. Politics and economics that care for people down to the last individual must take centre stage. Democracy demands sobriety and balance, not immaturity.

PARTHASARATHY SEN,
New Delhi

Cartoon Today



India in the hotspot

■ Bloomberg

India made long push with Trump

In September, shortly after Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi held a chummy meeting with Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping in China, he dispatched his national security adviser to Washington to help smooth over fraying ties.

■ The Washington Post

A capsule history of the T20 World Cup

Four years after England invented Twenty20 cricket, the first T20 World Cup (then World Twenty20) blasted off in the opening match where Chris Gayle scored the first international T20 century, 117 off 57 balls (10 sixes).

■ The Kathmandu Post

India's Rs 12.8 bn aid for Nepal

The Indian government has announced a grant of Rs 12.8 billion for Nepal for the fiscal year 2026-27, an increase of Rs 1.6 billion over last year. Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman said this in Parliament on Sunday.

Write to us at letters@telanganatoday.com

Oped

Greater Kashmir’s Understanding the Law Initiative

Bridging the Divide

Exploring the Mechanism for Resolution of Industrial Disputes under the Industrial Relations Code, 2020



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The Industrial Relations Code, 2020 (“Code”) establishes a comprehensive statutory framework for the prevention and resolution of industrial disputes in India. It provides structured mechanisms such as conciliation, arbitration, Industrial Tribunals and National Industrial Tribunals to ensure fair adjudication and promote industrial harmony. The Code seeks to balance the interests of employers and workers by ensuring timely, impartial and effective resolution of disputes.

Who appoints conciliation officers?

The appropriate Government may, by notification, appoint such number of persons as it thinks fit to be conciliation officers, charged with the duty of mediating in and promoting the settlement of industrial disputes.

For what areas, industries, or duration may conciliation officers be appointed?

A conciliation officer may be appointed for a specified area or for specified industries in a specified area or for one or more specified industries and either permanently or for a limited period.

Who constitutes Industrial Tribunals and for what purposes?

The appropriate Government may, by notification, constitute one or more Industrial Tribunals for the adjudication of industrial disputes and for performing such other functions as may be assigned to them under this Code, and the Tribunal so constituted by the Central Government shall also exercise the jurisdiction, powers and authority conferred on the Tribunal under the Employees’ Provident Funds and Miscellaneous Provisions Act, 1952.

How many members does every Industrial Tribunal consist of?

Every Industrial Tribunal shall consist of two members to be appoint-

ed by the appropriate Government out of whom one shall be a Judicial Member and the other, an Administrative Member.

What constitutes a bench of the Tribunal?

A bench of the Tribunal shall consist of a Judicial Member and an Administrative Member or single Judicial Member or single Administrative Member.

What governs the qualifications, recruitment, tenure, salary, allowances, resignation, removal, and service conditions of members of Tribunal constituted by the Central Government?

The qualifications for appointment, method of recruitment, term of office, salaries and allowances, resignation, removal and other terms and conditions of service of the Judicial Member and the Administrative Member shall be in accordance with the rules made under the Finance Act, 2017.

Who is not eligible to be appointed as Administrative Member of the Tribunal?

A person who has held a post below the rank of Joint Secretary to the Government of India or an equivalent rank in the Central Government or a State Government shall not be eligible to be appointed as an Administrative Member of the Tribunal.

What governs the service conditions of members of Tribunal constituted by the State Government?

The term of office of the Judicial Member and the Administrative Member, their salaries and allowances, resignation, removal and other terms and conditions of service shall be such as may be prescribed by the State Government.

Can salary, allowances, and service conditions of members appointed by State Government be varied after appointment?

The salary and allowances and the terms and conditions of service shall not be varied to their disadvantage after appointment.

What governs the procedure of the Tribunal and distribution of cases?

The procedure of the Tribunal, including distribution of cases in the benches, shall be such as may be prescribed.

Which cases must be entertained and decided by a bench consisting of both Judicial Member and Administrative Member?

A bench consisting of a Judicial

Member and an Administrative Member shall entertain and decide cases relating to:

Application and interpretation of standing order;

Discharge or dismissal of workmen including reinstatement or grant of relief;

Illegality or otherwise of strike or lockout;

Retrenchment of workmen and closure of establishment;

Trade Union disputes.

Who entertains and decides remaining cases?

The remaining cases shall be entertained and decided by the bench consisting either a Judicial Member or an Administrative Member of the Tribunal.

Who presides over the Tribunal when both members are present?

The Judicial Member shall preside over the Tribunal.

What happens if a vacancy occurs in the Tribunal?

If a vacancy occurs, it shall be filled in the prescribed manner, and the proceeding shall be continued from the stage at which the vacancy is filled.

Can the Government provide staff to the Tribunal?

The appropriate Government may provide such number of officers and staff as it thinks fit in consultation with the Judicial Member of the Tribunal.

Can appointment of Tribunal members be challenged?

No notification appointing any person as a Judicial Member or an Administrative Member shall be called in question in any manner.

Can Tribunal proceedings be challenged due to vacancy or defect in constitution?

No act or proceeding before the Tribunal shall be called in question in any manner on the ground mainly of the existence of any vacancy in, or defect in the constitution of such Tribunal.

Who constitutes National Industrial Tribunals and for what disputes?

The Central Government may constitute one or more National Industrial Tribunals for adjudication of industrial disputes involving questions of national importance or disputes affecting industrial establishments in more than one State.

How many members does National Industrial Tribunal consist of?

It shall consist of two members appointed by the Central Government

out of whom one shall be a Judicial Member and the other, an Administrative Member.

Who is qualified to be Judicial Member of National Industrial Tribunal?

A person shall not be qualified unless he is, or has been, a Judge of a High Court.

Who is qualified to be Administrative Member of National Industrial Tribunal?

A person shall not be qualified unless he is or has been Secretary to the Government of India or holding equivalent rank and having adequate experience of handling labour-related matters.

Who presides over National Industrial Tribunal?

The Judicial Member shall preside.

What governs service conditions of National Industrial Tribunal members?

Their selection procedure, salaries, allowances and service conditions shall be prescribed.

“

By institutionalizing conciliation and adjudication processes and ensuring enforceability of settlements and awards, the Code promotes fairness, accountability and efficiency.

Can Government provide staff to National Industrial Tribunal?

Yes, in consultation with the Judicial Member.

How are decisions made by Tribunal or National Industrial Tribunal?

The decision shall be by consensus of members.

What happens if members differ in opinion?

They shall state the points of difference and make a reference to the appropriate Government.

What happens after reference to Government?

The Government shall appoint a Judicial Member of another Tribunal or National Industrial Tribunal, who shall hear the point or points and the decision shall be according to majority opinion.

When is a person disqualified from

being a member?

If he is not an independent person or has attained the age of sixty-five years.

What is meant by independent person?

A person unconnected with the industrial dispute or affected industry.

What procedure is followed by arbitrator, conciliation officer, Tribunal or National Industrial Tribunal?

They shall follow such procedure as they deem fit subject to provisions of the Code and rules.

Can conciliation officer enter premises of establishment?

Yes, after giving reasonable notice.

What powers do conciliation officer, Tribunal and National Industrial Tribunal have?

They have powers of civil court to: Enforce attendance and examine on oath; Compel production of documents; Issue commissions for examination of witnesses; Other prescribed matters.

Are Tribunal inquiries judicial proceedings?

Yes.

Can conciliation officer enforce attendance and inspect documents?

Yes, and shall have same powers as civil court.

Can Government appoint assessors or experts?

Yes.

Are conciliation officers and Tribunal members public servants?

Yes.

Who determines costs of proceedings?

Tribunal or National Industrial Tribunal.

How are costs recovered?

As arrears of land revenue.

Is Tribunal treated as civil court?

Yes, for specified criminal procedure purposes.

How are awards executed?

In accordance with execution procedure of civil court decrees.

What relief can Tribunal grant in case of discharge or dismissal?

It may set aside discharge, dismissal or termination and direct reinstatement or grant lesser punishment or other relief.

Can interim relief be granted?

Yes.

Can fresh evidence be taken for interim relief?

No.

What happens to pending cases under previous law?

They are transferred to corresponding Tribunal or National Industrial Tribunal.

How are transferred cases handled?

They may be heard afresh or continued from existing stage.

What happens to presiding officers under repealed law?

They become Judicial Members and continue for remaining period.

When must conciliation officer hold conciliation proceedings?

When industrial dispute exists, is apprehended, or notice is given.

Can conciliation be held after two years from dispute date?

No.

What must conciliation officer do to promote settlement?

Investigate dispute and take necessary steps to bring settlement.

What happens if settlement is reached?

Settlement report and memorandum signed by parties are sent to Government.

What happens if settlement is not reached?

Failure report stating reasons is sent to Government and parties.

What is time limit for sending report?

Within forty-five days or shorter period fixed.

What is time limit when strike notice is involved?

Within fourteen days.

Can time be extended?

Yes, with written agreement and approval.

Can parties approach Tribunal after failure of conciliation?

Yes, within ninety days.

Therefore, the dispute resolution mechanism under the Code plays a crucial role in maintaining industrial peace and stability. By institutionalizing conciliation and adjudication processes and ensuring enforceability of settlements and awards, the Code promotes fairness, accountability and efficiency. This structured framework strengthens labour relations and contributes to a stable and productive industrial environment.

Muneeb Rashid Malik is an Advocate. He tweets @muneebmalikrash.

The Frozen Hearts

People may forget, remain distant, or turn cold, yet God is closer than our own breath

Relationships

Dr Showkat Rashid Wani
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There are moments in every family when one suddenly feels the temperature of relationships change — not in degrees that thermometers measure, but in the quiet chill that settles in the heart. It does not happen with storms or arguments; sometimes it happens silently, with the absence of care where it should have been present the most. In downtown Srinagar there lived a family in a modest home that often echoed with laughter. The parents had worked hard to raise their children, making sure they grew up with values of compassion, unity, and warmth. The father especially believed that relationships were like lamps: they glowed only when tended with small but continuous acts of care. One evening an unexpected incident shook their home. The youngest boy was bitten by a stray dog while playing outside. The child cried in fear, terrified more by the suddenness of the moment than the wound itself. His parents rushed him to the SMHS hospital , their minds racing, their hearts heavy with worry. In the waiting room, as the doctor prepared the injections, the father’s hands trembled slightly. He held his son close, whispering reassuring words, trying to hide the panic that swirled in his chest. The mother silently prayed, her palms cold despite the warm room. Moments like these reveal how fragile everything truly is. One second of carelessness, one turn of fate, and a parent’s world tilts on its axis. When the treatment began, the boy winced and cried, clutching his father’s shirt. The injections were painful, but necessary. The doctor spoke calmly about follow-up vaccinations and precautions. The parents listened carefully, absorbing

every detail, determined not to take a single chance with their child’s health.

After returning home, exhausted but relieved that the worst had passed, the father felt the need to share the incident with close relatives — not for sympathy, not for drama, but for the simple human expectation that family stands together in difficult times. Perhaps a few comforting words, perhaps someone dropping by to ask how the child was doing — such gestures make bonds feel alive.

So he informed them, one by one. He spoke gently, explaining the situation, the treatment, and the child’s condition. In most families, news of this sort immediately sparks concern, and people come forward with support. But what followed was something entirely different. Some responded with a short, flat, almost indifferent message. Some said nothing at all. Others simply moved the conversation to unrelated topics, as though the health of a young child was a trivial matter. Hours passed. Even a day passed. No footsteps were heard outside the door, no calls came to check on the child, no warmth flowed through the wires of communication. It was not anger that the father felt first — it was surprise. A gentle, almost confused surprise. How could people who once celebrated festivals together, shared meals, and grew up with intertwined memories suddenly behave as though his worry was an inconvenience? What surprised him even more was the way these same people reacted when something happened to distant and tertiary relatives or acquaintances. A minor fever in a far-off cousin’s home would draw long messages of sympathy. A small incident in an office colleague’s family would spark endless discussions, phone calls, and concern. They would visit houses miles away to show support, yet they could not walk a few

steps or lift a phone to ask about a young child in their own family. His wife noticed the silence too. “Maybe they are busy,” she said softly, trying to comfort him. But she, too, felt the sting of being overlooked. The absence of concern cuts deeper than a harsh word. It makes one question the foundation of ties thought to be strong. The child recovered slowly over the next days, and the parents poured all their attention into keeping him safe and comfortable. But in quiet moments, when the boy slept and the house finally calmed down, the father found himself reflecting. Relationships do not break suddenly. They fade like old photographs. What remains is only the memory of how they once looked.

He remembered times when he stood by these very people — in sickness, in celebrations, in hardships. He traveled distances, rearranged schedules, offered support, and stayed present. He had done it willingly, wholeheartedly, because that is what family meant to him. Care was not a currency to be exchanged; it was a gesture of love. He moved down the memory lane and one incident struck his mind like an incident ray. He visits his ailing grandmother along with his 11 year old daughter frequently. One day the girl told the elderly woman that they had cooked traditional haakh, nadru and fish, the old lady wanted to taste the fish. Without announcing her intention to anyone, the girl quietly slipped out, walked all the way back to Ali Kadal — nearly four kilometers — and returned carrying a lunch box in her small hands. She had not spent the money, she was given by her father on herself; instead, she used it to buy bananas for the old woman. With gentle fingers, she fed her great-grandmother both the meal she had carried and the fruit she had bought. Later when the little girl’s brother was bitten by a stray dog these very

ungrateful cold blooded relatives happen in his grandmother’s home neither bothered to visit him nor even placed a phone call to ask about his condition. They had simply remarked among themselves that such things happen to children and life moves on. But now, faced with silence when he needed reassurance, he saw things differently. Perhaps people change. Perhaps priorities shift. Perhaps affection becomes seasonal. Or perhaps relationships simply cool when one side stops tending the lamp.

“

He remembered times when he stood by these very people — in sickness, in celebrations, in hardships.

He did not complain, did not ask why no one visited, did not send reminders of the news he had already shared. Instead, he observed. Their absence told him a quiet truth: Not everyone feels the weight of your worry the way you do. Not everyone considers your pain worth pausing for. And yet, he did not allow bitterness to settle in his heart. He reminded himself that expectations are the heaviest burden one can carry. Then he came across a beautiful verse from Surah Ad-Duha (93:3): ‘Your Lord has not forsaken you, nor is He displeased.’ These words settled over his heart like a gentle breeze, calming his worries and reminding him that divine mercy never leaves a sincere soul. Sometimes it is better to let expectations go before they bend your spirit. But something inside him changed — subtly, deeply. A new clarity formed. He realized that relationships must be

balanced by genuine care, not mere words. He understood that some people show more concern for strangers than for their own kin. He recognized that silence, in times of distress, reveals the true shape of a bond. The next time he met these relatives, he greeted them with the same calm smile as always. He spoke politely, maintained respect, and kept the peace. But his heart no longer leaned in the same direction. A quiet distance settled within him — not anger, not resentment, just acceptance. Acceptance that not every relationship deserves the same investment. Acceptances that care cannot be demanded. Acceptance that sometimes, you must protect your peace instead of chasing people who do not stand beside you when you need them. It is said that the coldest place is not winter — it is a relationship where warmth has died, but people continue pretending. The father did not confront anyone. He did not narrate his disappointment. He simply adjusted his expectations, redirecting his energy toward those who truly mattered — his son, his wife, the small circle of people who never needed a reason to show compassion. As the days passed, he noticed something interesting. Those who had ignored the situation began to talk again, casually, lightly, as if nothing had happened. They did not inquire about the boy, nor did they acknowledge their absence. But the father had already changed from within. He listened, he nodded, but his heart did not attach itself the way it once did. Trust, after all, is not lost through loud arguments. It fades through small moments of neglect. One afternoon, while watching his son play, the father realized something profound. He understood that life would continue offering lessons — some through joy, some through pain, and some through the quiet behavior of people we least expect. Relationships, he thought, are

like plants. Some flourish with a little water. Some survive through storms. But some simply wither when there is no sunshine left in them. He felt no bitterness anymore. Only wisdom. The safe healing of his child mattered more than the coldness of others. And perhaps that was the greatest blessing the incident had brought him — the ability to see things clearly.

In the end, the dog’s bite had healed faster than the sting of indifference. But even that sting had a purpose. It taught him who truly cared, who stood near only in name, and who valued him merely out of habit. The father decided, silently, to move forward with grace. To give his kindness where it was appreciated. To keep a respectful distance where warmth was absent. And most importantly, to never let the coldness of others freeze his own ability to care. For sincerity, once frozen, destroys the giver far more than the receiver. And so, he carried on — not with bitterness, but with understanding heart. In the quiet moments after the incident, he found comfort in the timeless Quranic truth: “*Hasbunallahu wa ni’mal-wakil*” — Allah is sufficient for us, and He is the best disposer of affairs. When the warmth of people faded, he reminded himself that the mercy of Allah never decreases. Human hearts change, but Allah’s care does not. People may forget, remain distant, or turn cold, yet Allah is closer than our own breath. The Qur’an teaches that true support comes not from numbers but from the One who never abandons His servants. This realization settled his heart. He understood that even if people turn away, Allah’s protection, His healing, and His love remain constant — and that is more than enough.

Dr Showkat Rashid Wani, Senior Coordinator, Centre for Distance and Online Education, University of Kashmir

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Synthetic drugs: A state of alarm

Is Karnataka quietly turning into a hub for synthetic drug manufacturing? That unsettling question arises from a string of major narcotics busts carried out not by local police, but by external agencies. It is also no coincidence that the state has recorded a sharp 63% rise in cases registered under the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) Act – from roughly 4,000 cases in 2024 to nearly 7,000 in 2025. While senior police officers attribute this surge to increased vigilance and better detection, the numbers equally point to the easy availability of drugs. This indicates that organised networks are expanding their reach and targeting vulnerable segments, particularly the youth. This is especially alarming in a state that shows a large student population drawn from across the country.

Cities like Mysuru and Bengaluru, long viewed as relatively calm and low-profile, now appear to be emerging as preferred locations for clandestine drug labs, precisely because they attract less scrutiny than traditional metropolitan crime centres. The fact that synthetic drugs such as Mephedrone and MDMA seized as far away as Gujarat and Maharashtra are being traced back to units in Karnataka suggests that the state is fast turning into a manufacturing hub. Three major raids by Mumbai Police and Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB) in quick succession have brought this risk into sharp focus. What is particularly embarrassing is that the local police either remained unaware of these units or chose to look the other way. Worse still, the raids were publicly downplayed, the valuation of seized drugs disputed, and the existence of functional labs denied, not just by police officers, but even by Home Minister G Parameshwara.

These raids establish that synthetic drugs are now being manufactured locally, not merely smuggled into the state. This demands a shift from episodic enforcement to sustained intelligence-led action. The Anti-Narcotics Task Force must work in close coordination with the NCB to track red-flag indicators in industrial clusters where illicit labs often operate under the cover of cleaning-chemical units. Intelligence capabilities must expand to include financial and digital trails, particularly the procurement of specialised equipment and chemicals through anonymous and cryptocurrency-based channels. The focus should move beyond seizures to dismantling the economic foundations of the trade by freezing and confiscating properties acquired through drug money under the NDPS Act, with strict adherence to due process to ensure stronger convictions. Above all, the state must identify and act against the black sheep within the police force who enable these networks. Without credible action, Karnataka risks becoming a nerve centre for organised narcotics syndicates.

Menstrual hygiene through a rights lens

The Supreme Court's ruling that the right to menstrual hygiene and health is a fundamental right, integral to the right to life under Article 21 of the Constitution, is significant in a country where the subject is not addressed with the seriousness it deserves. A bench of Justices JB Pardiwala and R Mahadevan issued a series of directions to states and Union Territories and schools, both in the public and private sectors, to provide free biodegradable sanitary napkins, separate toilets, clean water and safe disposal facilities, and to set up menstrual hygiene corners for girls. Financial constraints should not be used as an excuse for non-compliance with the directions, the Court said. It noted that the denial of menstrual hygiene facilities amount to a violation of bodily autonomy. Describing the situation as "menstrual poverty", the apex court held that the State will be accountable for non-compliance by government-run schools and errant private schools could be de-recognised.

The order will benefit millions of young women in the country, especially in the 10-19 age group, who form at least a third of all menstruating women. An estimated 36 crore women are in the menstruating age in India, most of whom do not have access to essential hygiene. Many in the younger age groups discontinue their education because of inadequate facilities in schools. They are forced into early marriages and motherhood, especially in rural areas. A national policy relating to menstrual hygiene for school-going girls prescribes norms and guidelines but they are hardly followed. The Supreme Court has done well to shift the responsibility of implementing the directions to governments and school authorities.

Menstruation continues to carry stigma in many parts of the country. Despite decades of efforts to dispel the misreadings in society, it presents social and psychological challenges to women. The top court declaring the right to menstrual hygiene as a fundamental right signals a major shift because the right has been made judicially enforceable. This is a ruling which aligns with international practices and resolutions by the United Nations Human Rights Council calling for universal access to affordable, safe, and clean menstrual hygiene products and facilities. The Court may have spelled out its position on the matter with clarity and force, but implementation comes with its own set of challenges. Translating the Court's directions to tangible results will take extensive public campaigns, sensitisation of teachers and parents, support extended by counsellors, involvement of women's agencies, and curriculum integration.

SC ruling emphasises compliance and places the responsibility on governments and schools

COMMENT

THE NEW FRONTIER

AI moment: India must choose pragmatism over hype

Its strategy must be application-led, economically grounded, and informed by labour realities

PRASHANT KUMAR CHOUDHARY AND ALOK ADITYA

India's stance on Artificial Intelligence (AI) has moved from the margins of policy debate to the centre of economic decision-making. The previous economic surveys largely framed AI as a futuristic possibility, while the Economic Survey 2025-26 discusses its presence across banking, logistics, healthcare, education, and governance. Yet the real challenge before India is no longer adoption alone, but its alignment with economic structure, labour realities, and developmental priorities. In 2025, global AI adoption reached nearly 88% of organisations, while only 7% had fully integrated it across operations. High-income countries account for nearly 58% of global AI deployment, while low- and middle-income countries together account for just over 40%. This skewed usage reflects a deeper asymmetry where, while AI use is spreading, the capacity to build and control advanced AI systems remains highly concentrated.

At the frontier of AI development lie large foundational models that demand enormous computing power, energy, data, and capital. Training a single frontier model can cost hundreds of millions of dollars, require town-scale electricity consumption, and place significant pressure on water resources through large data centres. Access to advanced chips and high-bandwidth memory is increasingly shaped by global supply constraints and export controls. For most countries, including India, attempting to replicate such capital-intensive pathways would impose prohibitive fiscal and environmental costs.

The Economic Survey 2025-26, therefore, advances the clear proposition that India's AI strategy must be grounded in economic realism rather than technological imitation. The budgetary allocation for India's AI mission underscores the practical challenges of implementation. The revised expenditure for the IndiaAI Mission has been scaled down from the budgeted Rs 2,000 crore to Rs 800 crore in 2025-26, with a similar allocation of Rs 1,000 crore for 2026-27, against the originally envisaged Rs 10,300 crore outlay over five years.

India ranks among the top global contributors to AI research publications, hosts one of the world's largest pools of technical talent, and ranks

second only to the United States in AI workforce literacy. Yet paradoxically, India accounts for only about 2% of global start-ups focused on training data curation, pointing to an underdeveloped domestic data value chain. This gap matters, as access to high-quality, context-specific data is becoming a critical bottleneck in AI development. Given these conditions, the Economic Survey makes a strong case for a bottom-up, application-led AI ecosystem. India stands to gain more by developing AI models that are cheaper to train and easier to adapt to different sectors. The model requiring limited hardware will be best suited to India.



Locally grounded AI solutions are already emerging in India. In agriculture, AI-enabled platforms have improved price discovery and logistics for nearly 1.8 million farmers across 12 states. In healthcare, low-cost AI-based screening tools are expanding early cancer detection in resource-poor settings. Municipal bodies are deploying AI systems to monitor water usage, classroom learning outcomes, and disaster risks. Language technologies, particularly voice-based systems, are extending digital access to non-English speakers, addressing long-standing inclusion gaps.

The economic implications of AI adoption are nuanced. While the early fears of mass job displacement have not yet materialised, evidence from advanced economies suggests a more subtle shift. AI adoption has weakened the traditional relationship between output growth and employment creation, where productivity continues to rise, but employment growth has become less responsive to economic expansion.

In the policy context, India faces the dual challenge of AI adoption. On the one hand, delaying AI adoption to protect jobs could lock firms into low-productivity trajectories. On the other hand, rapid and uncalibrated automation may boost efficiency but risks displacing workers into low-value

service roles faster than the economy can reabsorb them. As global firms increasingly automate routine coding, testing, and support functions, India's traditional role as the world's back office is under strain. Hence, India's success in AI for growth will depend on the sequencing and speed of AI diffusion so that labour augmentation, reskilling, and institutional adjustment can occur in parallel.

Regulation without overreach Internationally, AI regulation ranges from stringent risk-based frameworks to largely voluntary guidelines. India's innovation ecosystem is still fragmented, resource-constrained, and heavily start-up-driven, and cannot bear the burden of stringent compliance requirements without stifling experimentation. At the same time, regulatory absence risks undermining trust, especially as AI systems are deployed in education, finance, and governance.

The latest Economic Survey report, therefore, argues for regulation that is light, incentive-based, and risk-weighted, emphasising transparency, product registration, and targeted oversight in high-impact applications. Governance of AI in India not only demands careful calibration but also the protection of human capability. Emerging evidence cited in the Survey suggests that excessive reliance on generative AI for cognitive tasks may weaken critical thinking and learning outcomes, particularly among students.

With over 100 crore broadband subscribers, India represents one of the world's largest sources of human-generated data. Rather than imposing rigid data localisation, policy is shifting towards retaining economic value from domestic data while remaining open to cross-border flows. Hence, even with the emphasis on accountability and auditability in domestic AI data processing, a balance between strategic autonomy and global integration requires a clear set of rules. Complete self-sufficiency is neither feasible nor desirable, but excessive dependence on foreign AI systems, particularly in critical sectors, carries long-term risks.

AI is not an inevitable destiny but a strategic choice. Therefore, India needs to shape an AI ecosystem that is economically grounded, socially responsive, and institutionally aligned rather than chasing the technological frontier. In the AI era, restraint and realism may prove as important as speed.

(Prashant is an assistant professor at the Department of Public Policy, Manipal Academy of Higher Education; Alok is a senior research fellow at the Centre for Economic Studies and Policy, ISEC)

RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE

The great *nellikai* heist

What began with uppu-kaara ended with me stuck in a wall

PRANAV V S

When I was in Class 4, my friend Surya began bringing *uppu-kaara pudu*—salt-chilli powder—to class in a small paper *potlam*. Just as our teacher, Parameshwari Ma'am, turned to the blackboard, Surya would quietly unfold the paper, bend down and tongue the mixture.

Those of us without *potlams*, like Karthik and me, watched him longingly as he let out little muted plops. Sometimes, overcome by kindness, Surya would do us an *upkaara* and share his *uppu-kaara*. Thus went life when, in the middle of April, Shankara walked in after lunch, chest puffed out, and said, "How many days will you fellows keep licking this powder?"

What did he mean? Surya asked, slightly offended. Shankara said, "Nanjappa's house has three *nellikai* (gooseberry) trees."

For the next two days, we spent our PT period standing on our bicycle backseat drooling at Nanjappa's *nellikais*. Surya couldn't take it anymore. He climbed onto the grey stone wall, hoping to jump in, but we were such *chultanis* that a fall would have broken a bone or two.

While we were wondering what to do, Karthik noticed a ditch near the wall. And like the end of *ringa-ring-a-roses*, the four of us fell down and began digging with our bare hands. Somebody or the other kept interrupting our work, eyeing what we were doing, so we worked in shifts. Using our cycles as camouflage, we dug with stones and sticks. Karthik even brought a large screwdriver, smuggled in by poking a hole in his shorts pocket. In four days, we had a hole big enough to crawl through.

Surya and Shankara were like *kad-dis* (sticks), so they slipped through easily, while Karthik and I stood guard. When they returned looking like children from detergent advertisements, we squealed—bulging pockets full of neon-green *nellikais*. That day, half the class were tap-tapping their tongues to the tune of our loot.

A week of this bliss passed before Karthik betrayed me. I was a round boy and did not feel comfortable squeezing through holes in walls. My friends felt I wasn't putting in equal effort. That afternoon, Karthik announced, "*Dadiya chultanis* that a fall would have broken a bone or two."

Before I could utter the "ba" of *beda*, I was crawling through the hole, rehearsing lies for Amma about my uniform. But once we reached the trees, I forgot everything. Such glorious green stars! We shook the tree till it rained *nellikais* on us like hail. We stuffed our pockets and headed back.

As I crawled through, I saw something strange: a pair of large black boots right in my face. I looked up. Lighthouse Satish, our PT teacher. Shankara and Surya, who had crawled out before me, were crying, holding their ears in monkey pose.

Upper body inside, lower body outside, I was stuck like in some medieval torture device. Karthik, roused to mischief by a free bum, began stomping on it, cackling, "*Ey Dadiya*, stucka? This is why I say eat less." I was in tears.

How was I to explain to Karthik what was awaiting him on the other side?

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Prevent recurring institutional conflicts

I refer to 'When Governors Turn Political' (Feb 6). The recent conduct of governors in non-NDA-ruled states highlights the growing strain between governors and elected state governments. Constitutional provisions, judicial rulings, and legislative debates have limited gubernatorial discretion. The office is meant to represent the people as a whole, not the interests of any political party. However, successive Union Governments have ignored the Sarkaria Commission's recommen-

dations, particularly regarding the appointment of governors and the sparing use of discretionary powers. Adhering to the commission's recommendations, constitutional obligations, and judicial pronouncements is essential to prevent recurring institutional conflicts. Upholding the sanctity of the Constitution and federalism is key, rather than erasing symbols of the colonial era. **Albert Smith**, Bengaluru

Curb screen time

Apropos 'Ghaziabad triple suicide: Korean obsession figures in diary' (Feb 6), the recent Ghaziabad incident highlights the need to address digital addiction among children and teenagers. Many parents struggle to control their youngsters' screen time, and teenagers often resist authoritarian approaches. The government should impose age-specific

smartphone and login restrictions, as other nations have done. Schools should also educate children about the long-term effects of excessive online engagement. **Kamal Laddha**, Bengaluru

Welcome safety initiative

With reference to 'Women-only auto service set for launch next week' (Feb 6) launching a platform

for women offers safety and comfort to women passengers, particularly during late hours. It's a welcome initiative that could enhance women's mobility and security. **Lingden A Kichu**, Bengaluru

Our readers are welcome to email letters to: letters@deccanherald.co.in (only letters emailed – not handwritten – will be accepted). All letters must carry the sender's postal address and phone number.

SPEAK OUT

Nothing has happened. There is no question of me resigning. I have not done any such wrong thing. There is no evidence (of the scam).

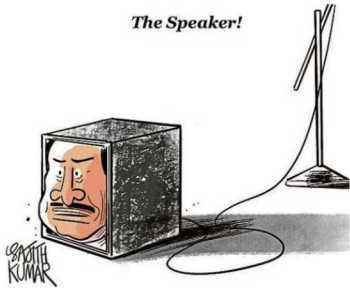


R B Timmapur,
Karnataka Excise Minister

Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.
Carl Sagan

TO BE PRECISE

The Speaker!



IN PERSPECTIVE

Deep scars and some hard lessons

What a leopard taught me about conflict, survival, and coexistence

SANJAY GUBBI

February 7, 2016, was not a date of any particular significance. Yet it became a day I will remember for the rest of my life. That Sunday afternoon, a call from a senior forest department officer took me to VIBGYOR School in Whitefield, Bengaluru's IT hub. A leopard had entered the school campus, and I was requested to assist the department in capturing the animal. During the operation, the highly stressed leopard attacked me, leaving me grievously injured. What followed were multiple surgeries, months of rehabilitation, and an overwhelming financial burden.

For almost a year after the incident, aggregator-based taxi drivers would ask, "Sir, were you the one at the VIBGYOR School?" When I replied yes, they would often say, "I knew it when I saw your name on the booking." I realised how deeply the episode had entered public memory. Even today, people occasionally say, "Oh, you were the one injured by the leopard near the swimming pool." While the incident is slowly fading from public recollection, it left me with hard-earned insights into the realities of human-wildlife conflict, especially the pain survivors endure and the long-term impacts on their lives.

When I speak to communities affected by leopard conflict, they listen differently. They know I understand their fear, loss, and uncertainty. This experience has made me a strong advocate for a more humane and empathetic response to victims of human-wildlife conflict. I have consistently urged governments and officials to be more compassionate and generous towards families who suffer losses due to wildlife.

The physical aftermath was severe. For a long time, mobility itself became a challenge, affecting not just my body but my mental well-being. Transitioning from an active life to struggling with short walks was deeply heartening. It was only in 2022 – thanks to advances in medical science and unwavering family support – that I could walk normally again.

I set myself a personal milestone to mark recovery: climbing Kudremukh peak in the Western Ghats, a mountain that holds deep meaning for me. In November 2023, I finally stood atop it. The moment was exhilarating – not just as a physical achievement, but as a reminder that resilience can carry us through even the most unexpected setbacks.

Ironically, this philosophy of resilience came from a leopard. Yet the future of that species – and many others – appears increasingly bleak. Since 2016, conflict with leopards has increased manifold. Hundreds are captured, translocated, or pushed into captivity. People have lost their lives; many more are grievously injured. The drivers of this conflict are well known: habitat loss, depletion of prey, unplanned development, and lack of awareness. Yet little changes, largely because those most affected are socially and economically marginalised.

What is particularly troubling is how the suffering of these communities is often romanticised. The term "human-wildlife coexistence" is repeatedly invoked by civil societies, sometimes cynically, to attract funding, awards, and international recognition, while families continue to bear the costs. In Junnar taluka of Maharashtra, a wildlife biologist once hailed their work as a model of coexistence with leopards. Once the funding and attention followed, the biologist moved on to greener pastures. This narrative is not limited to leopards; elephants, tigers, crocodiles, sloth bears, and many more are all framed similarly. Co-existence cannot be built on helplessness and fear.

Slogans don't solve Government responses are often delayed. As conflict intensifies, community support for conservation erodes, retaliatory actions increase, and political pressure mounts. Legislatures respond to popular anger, and executives struggle to hold their ground. Media coverage too often amplifies fear rather than building understanding. In this confusion, wildlife becomes the biggest casualty.

The scars from that day, whether I like it or not, are a part of me; some visible, many not. The deeper trauma now comes not from the incident itself, but from witnessing the direction in which human-wildlife conflict is heading in India. I could view the scars as symbols of failure. Instead, I see them as proof of survival. It wasn't my day of death; it was the first day of the rest of my life. And that perspective compels me to speak out.

If we truly believe in co-existence, we must move beyond rhetoric. Addressing human-wildlife conflict requires empathy, scientific planning, timely governance, and honest engagement with affected communities, along with sincere efforts to tackle the root causes of conflict. Only then can we give co-existence – not as a slogan, but as a lived reality – a genuine chance.

(The writer holds a PhD on leopards and is the author of Leopard Diaries: The Rosette in India)

RBI NEEDS TO ENSURE LENDING RATES REMAIN IN RANGE NEXT FISCAL

As widely expected, the RBI kept the key benchmark interest rates unchanged on Friday. Apart from an obvious signal for a prolonged pause, some fear that the scope for further cuts has shrunk more than imagined earlier. With inflation expected to shoot up next fiscal owing to normalisation of food prices and adverse base effects, only a shock to the growth-inflation balance may prompt the Monetary Policy Committee to cut the repo rate from the current 5.25 percent. Given the favourable growth outlook supported by a series of trade pacts and easing inflation, the RBI firmly believes the current rate is just what is needed for the economy for now.

However, industry thinks otherwise. It reasons that high borrowing costs are choking enterprises, particularly smaller ones, and an immediate 0.25 percentage-point cut would ease the effective lending rate from 14-16 percent now to 13-15 percent. Without rate relief, capital expenditure and trade finance remain constrained, hurting growth and preventing businesses from tapping global export opportunities.

While the central bank refrained from giving fresh growth and inflation forecasts until April, by when the new data series will be published, projections for the first two quarters of the next fiscal are not quite uplifting. Though Governor Sanjay Malhotra insisted that India is in a sweet spot, the first two quarters' growth estimates are at 6.9 percent and 7 percent, and the inflation forecasts were raised to 4 percent and 4.25 percent. If inflation breaches the RBI's 4 percent target in 2026-27, real interest rates will be above neutral. As it is, with supply outstripping demand, bond yields are hardening, while call rates are trading below the overnight repo rate, unsettling the RBI, which prefers the policy rate to transmit uniformly. That said, Malhotra repeatedly emphasised that the government's net borrowings next fiscal were barely ₹20,000 crore higher than in this one, which the central bank can comfortably manage.

As for liquidity, the RBI vowed to stay proactive and ensure ample levels at all times. Last year, the central bank had to step in to alleviate pressure on systemic liquidity, thanks to foreign capital outflows and a large government bond supply. Given the prevailing global financial market volatility, the central bank will have to support durable systemic liquidity to ease funding pressures, improve money market conditions, facilitate further monetary policy transmission and soften bond yields to ensure that lending rates remain range-bound.

WORK ON GANDHI'S VISION, STOP TUSSLE OVER BRAND

THE Karnataka government recently called a legislative session to specifically debate the repeal of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, setting the stage for a tussle over the legacy of Mahatma Gandhi and his vision for India. Having begun on a sour note after Governor Thaaawarchand Gehlot declined to read the speech drafted by the government, the debate was fired up by a government advertisement depicting Bapuji in an imagined conversation with a man called Sanghappa, an oblique reference to the RSS, on the VB-G RAM G Act. The Congress has been demanding the new law's scrapping, terming it "a death knell for gram panchayats". The session discussed the drawbacks of the new scheme, including the change in the Centre-state fund sharing ratio and reduced powers of panchayats. Karnataka has 1.8 crore MGNREGA workers out of the nation's total of 28 crore, more than half of them women and about 30 percent Dalits and Adivasis. The state's workers have petitioned President Droupadi Murmu to withdraw VB-G GRAM G and bring back the old scheme.

But the larger contention is over Brand Gandhi. The Congress, seeking to establish itself as the Mahatma's original legatee, has resorted to symbolism and advised Karnataka government employees to wear khadi on one Saturday every month. It also proposes to prefix all gram panchayats with 'Gandhi'. Not to be outdone, the BJP and JD(S) have portrayed Gandhi as a nationalist who wanted to establish a Ram Rajya. This Gandhi-versus-Gandhi narrative recently played out in parliament too, where the Congress leadership's use of the surname and the party's overuse of it in naming projects over 70 years were called into question by BJP leaders along with other aspects of the Nehru-Gandhi family's history.

Sensing the enduring strength of Brand Gandhi, the BJP, even while associating with his killer Nathuram Godse, does not want the Congress to appropriate his entire legacy. Gandhi as an icon provides credibility at home and on global platforms too. The BJP realises it cannot diminish Bapuji as an apostle of ahimsa. Whether Gandhi was committed to Ram Rajya or Gram Rajya, political parties should stop squabbling over his name and bring the nation back to the framework of his vision—a non-violent and inclusive State that focuses on the welfare of the most marginalised sections.

QUICK TAKE

BEYOND LIP SERVICE

At a time trafficking and marriage of underage girls are reported to be on the rise again, it emerges that the government has gutted funding for one of the most successful campaigns by almost a third. Numbers shared in the Lok Sabha on Friday showed that funds allocated for the Beti Bachao Beti Padhao scheme fell to ₹33 crore in 2024-25 from ₹92 crore in 2022-23. The latest National Family Health Survey's finding that almost a quarter of women were married off before 18 makes the government's promise to rid India of child marriage by 2030 all that more difficult. But, as the Supreme Court observed last December, a failure on this ground "strikes at the very foundations of... the State's constitutional promise of protection to every child".

A popular government has been installed in Manipur nine days ahead of the completion of a year of President's rule in the state. Saved in the process was an imminent dissolution of the 12th Manipur legislative assembly, for it is unlikely that an extension of the 'suspended animation' that the assembly had been put under since February 13, 2025 would have been approved by Parliament even if President's rule had to be extended.

A decision to extend the President's rule beyond a year would have invited constitutional complications. The 44th amendment enacted in 1978—which curbed the powers given to the President by the Emergency-era 38th amendment in respect to the use of Articles 356 and 352—predicates this. President's rule now can be extended beyond a year only in the event of an armed rebellion or a report confirming infeasibility of fresh elections by the Election Commission of India.

On February 4, after a seemingly desperate conclave of all BJP legislators from Manipur at the BJP head office in New Delhi, moderated and supervised by BJP national general secretary Tarun Chugh and national spokesperson and Northeast coordinator Sambit Patra, a consensus was reached on who should lead the next government once the assembly was resuscitated out of its coma.

Yumnam Khemchand Singh emerged as the choice, and with him four others were agreed to be put on the first list to be sworn in as cabinet ministers. From the choice of MLAs for the new cabinet, the delicate but inevitable ethnic and party balancing act in Manipur's current volatile situation is evident.

The chief minister, a Meitei, is to have two deputy chief ministers: Nemcha Kipgen, a Kuki, and Losii Dikho, a Naga. Again, while Khemchand and Nemcha are from the BJP, Losii is from the Naga People's Front, a BJP ally with five MLAs.

Of the two other MLAs awarded cabinet berths, one is Khuraijam Loken Singh of the National People's Party, another BJP ally with six MLAs. The other is Govindas Konthoujam, also from the BJP. This importance given to allies, although the BJP commands a comfortable majority in the House with 37 MLAs in the 60-member assembly, is probably a precautionary measure in case of rebellions within the party.

By the ceiling on cabinet size intro-

President's rule is not good for resolving conflicts. The choice of the first five cabinet ministers in the state's new government reflects its delicate ethnic and political balance

TENTATIVE STEPS OUT OF MANIPUR'S WAR ON QUICKSAND

PRADIP PHANJOUBAM

Editor, Imphal Review of Arts and Politics



SOURAV ROY

duced by the 91st constitutional amendment in 2003, Manipur can have a 12-member council of ministers including the chief minister. With five already distributed, there are seven seats left to be announced, which can be as much a cause for problems or levers for their solutions later.

After their meeting in Delhi, most of the MLAs rushed back to Imphal. By 4 pm, Governor Ajay Kumar Bhalla declared the President's rule lifted and soon Khemchand visited him to stake claim to form the next government. By 6 pm, the swearing-in ceremony was underway at Lok Bhavan, Imphal. Four of the new cabinet members took their oaths of office and secrecy in person, while the fifth, Nemcha Kipgen, did so online from Manipur Bhavan in New Delhi.

Two other Kuki-Zo MLAs, Ngursan-

glur Sanate of the BJP and L M Khaute of the Janata Dal (United), were also present in Imphal for the swearing-in, indicating that apart from the message that ethnic tensions have been defused in Imphal, they could also be inducted into the cabinet if and when there is a next expansion.

Khemchand won the race because of several factors. One of them is the courage he had shown on December 8 to make a surprise visit to a camp for internally displaced Kuki people at Litan on a trip to Ukhrul, to convey his Christmas wishes of peace and reconciliation, warming many hearts. Therefore, he probably received nods even from his Kuki-Zo colleagues.

Again, the transparency with which he invested his local area development funds as an MLA during both his terms

THE DOOMSDAY CLOCK TICKS ON

PRATIK KANJILAL

Senior Fellow, Henry J Leir Institute of Migration and Human Security, Fletcher School, Tufts University

SPEAKEASY

In the 1960s, as the world agreed upon the importance of limiting nuclear weapons and testing, the clock moved back again to 7 minutes and even 12 minutes to midnight in the early 1970s—marking the end of atmospheric testing and the era of SALT I, the anti-ballistic-missile treaty, and the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.



The delayed Artemis II moonshot has not sparked the world's imagination like Apollo 11 did because our civilisation has fundamentally changed. Today, space exploration is meant for colonisation and industry, not for the benefit of all. The Doomsday Clock depicts the advancing peril

In 1974, Indira Gandhi ordered the Pokhran I test and the clock jittered forward to nine minutes to midnight. It reached three minutes to midnight in 1984, when the Reagan administration sought space-based anti-ballistic-missile systems. The collapse of the Soviet Union lulled threat perceptions, and the next spike was provided by the Vajpayee government's Pokhran II test in 1998, and Pakistan's answer. The clock was again at nine minutes to midnight, and it was blamed on the leadership failure of the US and Russia in disarmament.

The two countries had the largest nuclear weapon inventories. This is still the case, and the clock has again been moved forward due to their leadership failure. Meanwhile, China and India

have acquired strategic and economic importance to enter the lists, and their leadership isn't in great health either.

Last year, the Science and Security Board of the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, which sets the Doomsday Clock, had warned of multiple threats facing human civilisation—what the World Economic Forum acknowledges as a 'polycrisis'. They include immediate threats like the US abdicating its leadership responsibility in climate action and choosing fossil fuels. Also, AI companies should have been regulated instead of being treated like freestyle prize-fighters in an international technology tournament. Relatively distant concerns also figured, like 'mirror life', based on molecules that are chirally opposite to those found in nature—such life forms can run amok, but they don't exist yet.

This year, the clock has been advanced because the world's leadership has ignored last year's cautions and has intensified competition instead of co-operation. Tariff wars, threats to territorial sovereignty, indifference to the rule of law, the growing irrelevance of multilateral organisations and the celebration of muscular nationalism and might-is-right politics are urging smaller nations to arm themselves, perhaps even with nuclear weapons. In an order dominated by the strong, everyone else will try to bridge the difference.

Perhaps Artemis II does not spark the world's imagination like Apollo 11 did because our civilisation is fundamentally changed. The way to the moon leads to Mars, and then to human habitation and industry on other worlds. In 1969, this was an inclusive story, and space exploration was understood to be for the benefit of all. Now, in a world of deepening inequalities, it's hard to believe that the most powerful will not get the first tickets out—perhaps after reducing the world to a dystopia. If the rest of humanity doesn't have a stake in space, no wonder they don't care about moonshots.

(Views are personal) (Tweets @pratik_k)

MAILBAG

WRITE TO: letters@newindianexpress.com

Distressed institutions

Ref: *The court and the appellant* (Feb 6). The column rightly frames Mamata Banerjee's personal appearance as a moment of institutional stress. What deserves further reflection is what this moment reveals about how power now seeks legitimacy in India. The challenge is not to discourage access to justice, but to restore confidence in non-judicial institutions so that courts remain arbiters of law, not substitutes for democratic negotiation.

Sanjeev Jha, New Delhi

Unparliamentary conduct

Ref: *Nuance needed* (Feb 6). It has become a new normal for opposition parties to create chaos. Turn to history—no opposition party in the recent past has shown maturity in genuinely evaluating or reviewing the ruling party's approach and shared ideas democratically.

RV Baskaran, Pune

Game theory

Ref: *Video games can trap kids subtly* (Feb 6). Gaming addiction is not merely a personal habit but a social problem linked to loneliness, emotional neglect and weak family communication. Rather than blaming games alone, society must reflect on parenting styles, peer influence and the lack of safe emotional spaces.

Keerthana Prasad, Bengaluru

Reinforce reforms

Ref: *Tobacco reform* (Feb 6). At the outset, imposition of heavy cess has never been able to curb, if not completely eliminate, the sale of tobacco products, especially cigarettes. The mandatory warnings too are of no use. It's not just the duty of the law and order machinery to enforce laws, but we as citizens should also contribute.

R Sampath, Chennai

Criminal neglect

Ref: *At least 18 dead* (Feb 6). When laws exist only on paper and enforcement dozes, the poorest pay with their lives. The workers died because safety was deemed optional and human lives considered expendable. Without criminal culpability, this will repeat.

Aditya Kamble, Kalaburagi

Screen scruples

Ref: *Strict action* (Feb 6). Other states must draw inspiration from the proposed crackdown. It calls for a stronger censorship on Telugu movies, particularly the 'item songs'. It's embarrassing to witness Padma-awardee heroes promoting such songs.

Suresh Chandra, email

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Onus on Indian tech leaders to overcome the AI challenge

THE Indian IT industry has been one of the key drivers of the domestic economy for over two decades now. Not only does the \$280 billion industry employ more than six million people, but it has also created lakhs of other jobs in other sectors like real estate, hospitality, banking and retail. It has propelled rapid urbanisation of the country's economy apart from integrating the domestic economy to key nations. Such is its importance that many experts view Indian IT industry as one of the key drivers behind creation of a strong middle-class population. Even while being so, the IT industry has its own share of ups and downs. From cloud to digital, the industry has evolved over time and

has emerged as one of the key technology centres for the world. However, things are changing fast. This week, global IT services companies, SaaS firms and data provider companies saw a stock market rout. Indian IT companies were not spared. Many lost more than 10 per cent of their market capitalisation in just five trading sessions. So, what has changed now? AI-led solutions and platforms have been there for quite some time now. So, what is new?

This week, Anthropic launched 11 AI-plugins across domains including legal, finance, process management and others. These plugins have raised fears of redundancy rising in the IT services, & SaaS space going ahead. Why? Earlier, there

was a notion that AI would assist IT companies to make processes faster and efficient through automation. But fundamentally, enterprises would require the help of IT companies to implement these AI-led solutions for them. However, Anthropic's new AI plugins have shattered that notion. These plugins can talk to the enterprise data directly and execute the work seamlessly with less human intervention. It means, it has the potential to make key offerings of IT services companies' less relevant. If businesses can do their work by deploying plugins, then there is a fear that outsourcing to IT firms would be reduced. Similarly, SaaS companies may face the heat as domain specific plugins will replace

SaaS subscriptions. Currently, these are mere conjectures. There is no hard evidence to prove that this will happen. But analysts fear that this may happen. This fear-psychosis is driving the market reaction for now.

Though there is no proof that enterprises' adoption of such plugins will adversely impact outsourcing, there is a likelihood that the nature of IT outsourcing will change in the coming quarters. It has already changed a lot in the last two years with more automation kicking in. IT firms are implementing more AI-led automation in clients' projects. More projects are also becoming outcome-based than running on time and material (T&M) pricing models. So far, IT companies glob-

ally are adopting well. But the disruption led by AI is far from over, though the fears of job loss are rising. One should note that many global tech companies have laid off thousands of workers in the last two years. The Indian IT industry, so far, has been insulated from mass scale job losses. Indian IT professionals are upskilling aggressively and the GCC ecosystem in the country seems to be one of the major job creators as of now. However, this can change suddenly unless Indian IT firms keep adapting fast; transition due to AI is shifting traditional models. Therefore, the onus lies on the Indian technology sector leaders to put the country in the AI driver's seat.



LETTERS

A calculated regional posturing by Pak

THIS refers to your editorial 'Is the posturing by Pakistani Cricket Board a red herring?' (THI Feb 6). By declining to play in India on grounds of security while aligning diplomatically with Bangladesh, Pakistan appears to be pursuing calculated regional posturing rather than sporting neutrality. Exploiting moments of bilateral tension for strategic one-upmanship may yield short-term political messaging but damages long-term sporting credibility. Cricket has often served as a bridge between South Asian nations; decisions that inject geopolitical friction into sporting events weaken that tradition. If Pakistan seeks to restore confidence and stability in regional sporting exchanges, consistency, professionalism, and separation of politics from sport will be essential.

K R Venkata Narasimhan, Madurai

Subcontinent's collective voice getting weakened

A PROPOS "Is the posturing by Pakistani Cricket Board a red herring?" (THI Feb 6), the editorial underscores how geopolitical strains have poisoned cricket ties between India and Pakistan, turning what should be a unifying sport into a battleground of egos and politics. The PCB's threats to skip events like the T20 World Cup 2026 come across as tactical distractions from internal woes, while the BCCI's clout risks alienating allies in the region. This standoff not only starves fans of iconic clashes but also weakens the subcontinent's collective voice in global cricket. It's time both sides recognized that boycotts solve nothing. Instead pursuing joint initiatives, like neutral-venue series under ICC oversight, help restore trust, while the game heals old divides.

Abbharna Barathi, Chennai-23

Spirit of fair competition goes for a toss

THIS refers to the editorial "Is the posturing by Pakistani Cricket Board a red herring?" (THI Feb 6). The piece raises a valid concern about how cricket is increasingly getting entangled with political signalling. Sporting ties between India and Pakistan have long carried diplomatic weight, but repeated withdrawals and public brinkmanship serve little purpose beyond hardening positions. Fans, players and regional tournaments end up paying the price. While security and national sensitivities cannot be dismissed, selective participation weakens the spirit of fair competition and Asian sporting cooperation. Administrators on both sides must insulate cricket from reactive politics and use structured dialogue through the ICC and ACC to set clear and consistent rules. Professionalism and not posturing will restore credibility and trust.

S M Jeeva, Chennai-32

Let cricket transcend regional rivalries

PAKISTAN'S reported decision to refuse participation in India, citing security concerns while expressing solidarity with Bangladesh, appears less about safety and more about regional signalling. At a time of strained Delhi-Dhaka relations, Islamabad seems intent on leveraging the situation for geopolitical advantage. Such moves risk undermining the credibility Pakistan has attempted to rebuild through recent sporting engagements, including the T20 World Cup series. Sporting diplomacy thrives on mutual confidence; politicising participation only reinforces mistrust and detracts from the spirit of international competition that should ideally transcend regional rivalries.

K R Parvathy, Mysuru

Kudos to RCB for historic Premier League double

CONGRATULATIONS to RCB on winning their second Women's Premier League (WPL) title in a thrilling final at Vadodra. Aided by brilliant captaincy and an explosive 87 from 41 balls from Smriti Mandhana's willow, along with Georgia Voll's 79, the eventual titlist successfully chased down a record 204 to defeat Delhi Capitals by six wickets. With this triumph, RCB has entered a golden era, becoming the first franchise to hold both IPL and WPL titles, simultaneously.

N S K Prasad, Hyderabad-62

India start firm favourites

CRICKET'S marquee tournament, the T20 World Cup 2026 gets underway on Saturday. Rest assured, high-octane entertainment is guaranteed for fans across the globe for the next 30 days. India are the overwhelming favourites to retain the title on March 8. The Suryakumar Yadav-led team should be high on energy and spirits. On paper, it has a dream top and middle order supported well by a superb bowling attack making it the strongest among the 20 contenders. The wherewithal to stand up to pressure, familiarity of playing in the subcontinent, and crowd support should hold the team in good stead.

Dr Ganapathi Bhat, Akola

thehansreader@gmail.com



BENGALURU ONLINE

CID raids reveal 40,000 illegal bank accounts

BENGALURU: In a significant breakthrough against rising cybercrimes, Karnataka CID's Cyber Crime wing has dismantled a large-scale online fraud network that was operating using thousands of mule bank accounts. The operation, described as one of the biggest of its kind in the state, has sent shockwaves through the digital fraud ecosystem. On February 6, CID teams carried out coordinated raids at more than 100 locations across Karnataka. The raids resulted in the arrest of 13 main accused who were allegedly acting as masterminds of the operation. Investigators discovered that the gang had created and managed more than 40,000 mule accounts to facilitate cyber fraud. Mule accounts are bank accounts opened in the name of ordinary people but controlled by criminals to transfer and withdraw illegally earned money.

Read more at <https://epaper.thehansindia.com>



THE conduct of the Opposition in recent sessions has been not merely disappointing but deeply disturbing. What we are witnessing is not robust dissent—the lifeblood of democracy—but a juvenile, obstructionist impulse that prioritises disruption over deliberation, theatrics over accountability, and political hatred over national interest. For an institution meant to embody the will and wisdom of the people, this degeneration should alarm every citizen, regardless of political affiliation.

In over four and a half decades of covering and observing Parliament and state legislatures from close quarters—covering debates when stalwarts across parties enriched the House with intellect, preparation, and restraint—I have never seen an Opposition so determined to operate with a pre-set political agenda, so unwilling to listen, and so convinced that only its voice must prevail. Disagreement was once principled; today it appears pathological.

The Opposition seems singularly uninterested in the everyday sufferings of the people or the genuine needs of its own constituents. The constitutional role of Parliamentarians—to scrutinise policy, demand explanations, suggest course corrections, and act as watchdogs over executive excess—has been replaced by a relentless quest for disruption. Pragmatism has given way to posturing; positive engagement to performative outrage.

Disagreement was once principled; today it appears pathological

The insistence that the Leader of the Opposition be allowed to speak—or else Parliament will be paralysed—is not democratic assertion but institutional blackmail. Maybe they need some schooling on Parliamentary practices and procedures. Shoot and scoot raise issues and run away when the government or the Prime Minister reply is not what they have been elected for. No individual, however senior, has the right to hold the House hostage. Parliamentary rules provide mechanisms, procedures, and time for interventions. To override them through ruckus is to undermine the very institution the Opposition claims to defend. This is no way of protecting the Constitution. It was also highly disgusting to see an "honourable member" using the word "Yaar" for the panel speaker in the Lok Sabha and there has been no apology or remorse from Congress or opposition. This is nothing but a display of contempt for Parliament and parliamentary practices.

More troubling is the Opposition's insistence on dragging sensitive matters of national security into the political arena, such as the Rechin La between Indian-administered Ladakh and the Chinese-administered Spanggur Lake basin issue, selectively citing excerpts from an unpublished book by former army chief General M M Naravane. The LoP got the location also wrong as he said it was Doklam. National security is not a talking point for instant political gratification. Mature democracies treat such matters with discretion, relying on institutional briefings and closed-door consultations. Public grandstanding on defence matters reflects not cour-

age but diplomatic illiteracy.

I have read the 'Caravan' article that quoted from the former army chief's book. The problem is not the quotation but the interpretative commentary surrounding it. The author's conclusions appear heavily opinionated, with a tenuous link between the cited excerpts and the sweeping political inferences drawn.

Journalism demands rigour, balance, and proportionality—especially when national security is involved. Unfortunately, these standards are increasingly absent.

Such insistence by the Opposition inevitably raises apprehensions about hidden agendas. Why this desperation? Why this refusal to wait for official joint statements or clarifications from the governments involved, particularly on the India-US engagement? Raising questions is legitimate; prejudging outcomes and weaponising apprehensions is not.

Predictably, my rationalist friends may disagree with this view. But I am confident that nationalist-minded citizens—across party lines—will recognise the danger of this trend: the systematic erosion of institutional trust for short-term political gains.

The discourse surrounding the India-US deal further exposes the Opposition's intellectual bankruptcy. Economic and strategic agreements are complex, layered, and technical. Yet leaders with little understanding of economics, agriculture, or international trade are offering sweeping judgments, dire warnings, and theatrical condemnations. This is not critique; it is caricature.

Congress spokesperson Pawan Khera's statement that

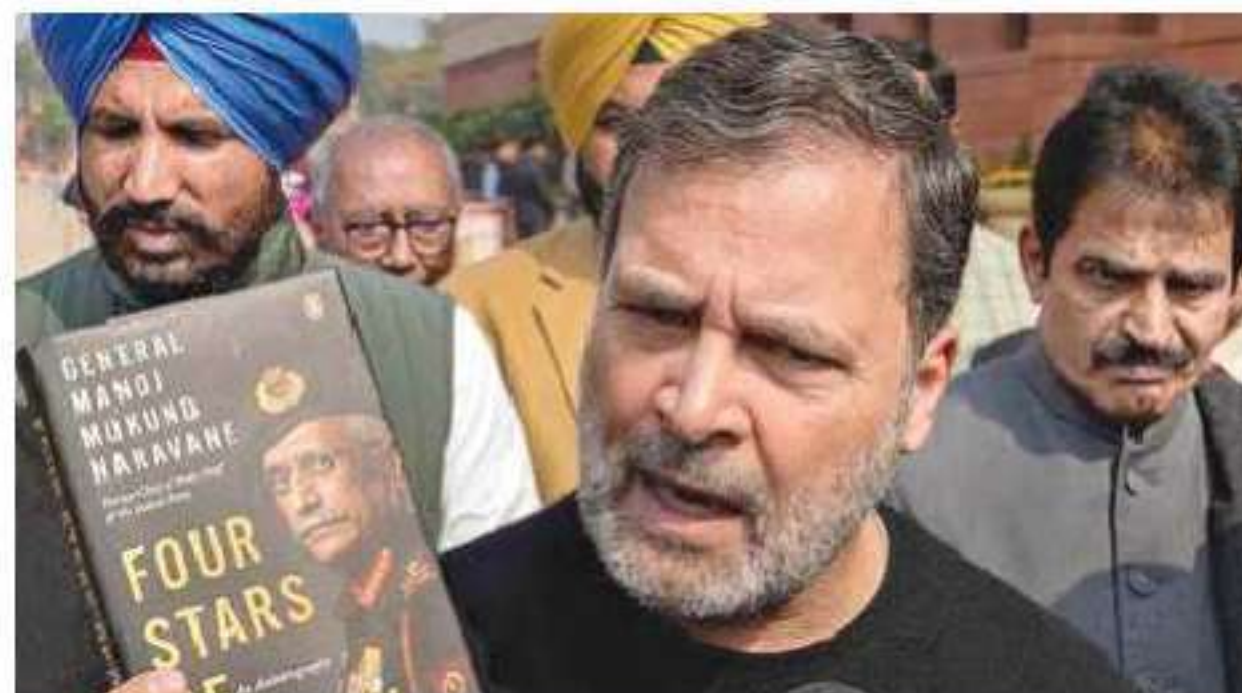
what happened in the Lok Sabha is merely a "trailer" and his justification of slogans like "Abhi PMO se bhagana baaki hai", reveals the depth of animosity that now masquerades as political opposition. Such language is not merely condemnable—it normalises violent metaphors in public discourse. This is the moral hollowness of the so-called non-existent "Mohabbat ki Dukaan" narrative.

This hatred-driven politics marks a dangerous departure from democratic norms. Opposition is meant to challenge power, not delegitimise the state itself.

Defenders of the Congress often invoke the Bofors scandal as precedent, arguing that newspaper reports can and should destabilise governments and when that was allowed why not allow Rahul to quote excerpts from Narvane's book. As someone who witnessed the Bofors story unfold firsthand, I must state unequivocally: the comparison is intellectually dishonest. Bofors was built on solid documentary evidence—bank records, contracts, and corroborated trails. I had the privilege of filing stories grounded in verifiable facts. What we see today is conjecture elevated to accusation without evidence.

Unfortunately, the present generation of political leaders and even journalists have little interest in studying history with an open mind. The habit of digging deep, verifying claims, and respecting nuance has been replaced by ideological echo chambers.

The Congress's increasing intolerance to criticism further compounds its decline. Cheerleaders within the party have rendered it blind to reality. Any



India's Parliament is witnessing a troubling degeneration of opposition politics, where disruption has replaced dissent and theatrics have supplanted accountability. Drawing on over 45 years of legislative reporting and observation, the author argues that today's Opposition is driven less by public interest than by pre-set agendas, political animosity, and performative outrage. From paralysing Parliament and trivialising decorum to politicising national security and misrepresenting complex economic agreements, the Opposition's conduct reflects a deep institutional irresponsibility. The piece warns that such obstructionism erodes democratic norms, weakens Parliament, and ultimately damages the very foundations of India's constitutional democracy.

critique—even when backed by documented statements from leaders like Indira Gandhi at international forums—is met with hysterical reactions, including deflections to Godse. If historical accountability is the benchmark, why not also discuss Bhindranwale, who was once politically patronised by Congress led by Indira Gandhi, he turned a terrorist? I have personally seen him campaigning, seated atop buses during election tours in Delhi.

Ironically, the NDA government too has faltered by opting for frequent adjournments. Disruption should be confronted, not accommodated. The Opposition should be given ample opportunity to speak, question, and even overreach—because exposure often follows excess. Reports that the Opposition planned to physically gherao the Prime Minister in the Lok Sabha, if true, reveal the extent of institutional collapse. Perhaps the

Prime Minister should have dared them to try, trusting Parliament and his MPs to uphold decorum. Democracy is not preserved by retreat. The Opposition's decision to boycott the Prime Minister's reply in the Rajya Sabha to the Motion of Thanks on the President's address sends an unmistakable signal. They are not interested in answers; they are interested in optics. Not in accountability, but in agitation. Not in governance, but in grievance theatre. This is a disturbing political trajectory. When opposition parties abandon reason, evidence, and institutional respect, they weaken democracy far more than any government ever could. Parliament deserves better. And history will not be kind to those who mistake disruption for dissent.

(The author is former Chief Editor of The Hans India)

The disappearing art of decorum: Indian democracy needs the 'Geneva' moment

NOMULA SRINIVAS RAO

In a democracy, the opposition is not an enemy; it is a partner in the governance of the nation-Atal Bihari Vajpayee

Differences of opinion are the lifeblood of a democracy, but they should never be allowed to degenerate into bitterness-P V Narasimha Rao

The sacred halls of the Indian Parliament, once described as the 'Temple of Democracy', are currently echoing with sounds that would leave our founding fathers in dismay. With the unfolding of the 2026 Budget Session, the spectacle of relentless disruptions, personal vitriol and suspensions, has become the new normal. We find ourselves in an era where political rivalry has mutated into personal enmity, and the floor of the House, meant for enlightening debates, has transformed into a theatre of the absurd.

The anatomy of a hug: Lessons from 1994:

To understand what we have lost, one must look at the accompanying photograph—a rare, grainy relic of a time when the "national interest" was not just a campaign slogan but a lived reality. The image captures a profound moment of warmth between two

ideological titans: Then Prime Minister P V Narasimha Rao and Leader of the Opposition Atal Bihari Vajpayee.

The context is legendary. In 1994, India faced a diplomatic crisis at the United Nations Human Rights Commission (UNHRC) in Geneva. Pakistan had moved a resolution to censure India over Kashmir—a move that could have triggered international sanctions. In an overflowing show of staggering statesmanship, Rao did the unthinkable—he chose his fiercest political rival, Vajpayee, to lead the Indian delegation.

Vajpayee did not see this as a trap or an opportunity to embarrass the government but as a moral duty to the nation. Alongside Salman Khurshid and Farooq Abdullah, he fought a pitched diplomatic battle, successfully forcing Pakistan to withdraw the resolution.

Erosion of parliamentary culture:

Contrast that image with the current Budget session. Today, we see leaders calling each other "traitors" in the corridors, paper-throwing at the Speaker's chair, and a complete breakdown of communication. The responsibility for this decline is shared.

A responsible ruling party must realise that a brute ma-



A defining moment of bipartisan statesmanship—Then Prime Minister P V Narasimha Rao warmly embracing Leader of the Opposition Atal Bihari Vajpayee after the successful Indian diplomatic mission at the UN Human Rights Commission in Geneva, 1994

jority is not a mandate to silence the Opposition. Democracy thrives on the three "Ds": Debate, dissent and decision. When the government bypasses scrutiny or uses the rulebook primarily as a shield against uncomfortable questions, it weakens the institutional fabric.

Conversely, a responsible opposition must understand that their role is to hold the government accountable, not to make the House non-functional. Strategy should involve out-arguing the government with facts, not out-shouting them with slogans. When the Opposition chooses persistent disruption

over participation, they forfeit their primary tool—the power of the word.

The human cost of political bitterness:

The casualty of this tribalism is the Indian citizen. Parliament is the only place where the complex problems of over a billion people—from agrarian distress to the nuances of the Union Budget—are supposed to be dissected. When the Budget is passed amidst a din without a single clause being debated, taxpayers are deprived of their right to financial accountability.

The "towering personalities" of the past, like Rao, Vajpayee, Indrajit Gupta, or

The "towering personalities" of the past, like Rao, Vajpayee, Indrajit Gupta, or Sushma Swaraj, were fierce debaters. They could tear into a policy for hours yet share a meal in the Central Hall minutes later. They understood that while parties are temporary, the Republic is permanent.

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A roadmap for the future:

Restoring decency in our debates requires more than just new rules; it requires a shift in political temperament.

Institutionalise dialogue: There must be formal, non-partisan spaces where leaders of the Treasury and Opposition benches meet regularly to iron out differences before the bell rings.

Productive and constructive protest: If the Opposition must protest, it should be

done in a manner that does not stall the legislative business.

Respect for the Chair: The Speaker's office must not only be impartial but must be seen to be impartial to maintain the sanctity of the proceedings.

The youth of India, watching these sessions on their screens, are learning the language of democracy from their MPs. If we continue to present a spectacle of chaos, we risk raising a generation that views democracy as a dysfunctional shouting match rather than a noble pursuit of the common good.

Conclusion:

As we navigate the complexities of the 21st century, our politicians must look back at the Rao-Vajpayee hug. It reminds us that disagreement is not a sign of weakness, and cooperation with a rival is not a sign of surrender.

It is time to bring back the "Geneva Spirit" to New Delhi. We need leaders who are large-hearted enough to embrace their critics and wise enough to know that the strength of a democracy is measured by the quality of its arguments, not the volume of its noise.

(The writer is a former OSD to former Union Civil Aviation Minister)

DECCAN Chronicle

7 FEBRUARY 2026

All leaders need to shun hate, put the nation first

This hatred must end.” These words were those of Mahatma Gandhi during the difficult days of the Partition which resonated with the top leadership of the time in Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and Deputy PM Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel. The words ring true 80 years later though the hate per-

tains to what exists now between the top leadership of the country and the opposition. And this is what is also affecting the functioning of the Lok Sabha, which is the common ground at which both get to speak on subjects of national interest.

The frequent, perhaps even continuous, disruption of the Lower House since the discussion began on the Budget and then the trade deal with the United States and the motion of thanks to the President’s address in which the issue of a yet-to-be published in India memoir of an Army chief cropped up, is owed more to the hatred existing among those who run the government and those who are politically opposed to them.

It may have been extraordinary that a “gherao” of the Prime Minister’s seat by women MPs took place but the subsequent shutting down of Lok Sabha proceedings at the merest sign of dissent and discord is symptomatic of the erosion in sustaining even ordinary working relationships that are required for the national legislature to function.

It didn’t help either that a top constitutional functionary like the Speaker has been unable to control proceedings by using his considerable powers as, say, in having the disruptors removed from the House if it becomes necessary for its smooth functioning. The scare scenario that he whipped up leading to the Prime Minister abandoning altogether his duty of explaining “the position of the Government at the end of the discussion on the Motion of Thanks,” was not in keeping with the holder of a high, non-partisan office of democracy.

The crux of the problem leading to more than 80 per cent of time allotted being wasted post- Budget presentation lay in the ruling on the inadmissibility of reading from a media report on a book by a former Army chief. Irrespective of the correctness of the ruling, the Leader of the Opposition’s stubbornness in not accepting it contributed to the impasse in equal measure.

When so much information is available in the public domain these days in the age of instant communications, it cannot be right that the merest threat of disclosure of sensitive information in the House is a signal for the suppression of MPs’ speech. The fluent running of Parliament is primarily the government’s responsibility as much as it is the privilege of the Opposition to use the opportunity meaningfully to question government decisions.

What has been lost is the culture of civil discourse, debate and discussion in the Lok Sabha where the directly elected representatives of the people gather. This is not compensated by the Elders finding a kind of median of polite exchanges in the Rajya Sabha though the general coarseness of the language of vituperation against political opponents has not come down one whit, be it in someone calling another a traitor for being a political turncoat or a leader accusing a family of hijacking a surname to perpetuate its connect with the people. But that, again, is a sign of the hatred that runs through the top echelon of people’s leaders.

RBI neutral amid uncertainty

The Reserve Bank of India-led Monetary Policy Committee’s decision to leave policy rate unchanged at 5.25 per cent came along the expected lines as it is prudent to retain firepower for the crisis day.

The Central bank expects GDP growth for 2025-26 to be at 7.4 per cent, driven by private consumption, fixed investment and the service sector. The revival of the manufacturing sector’s growth is visible even as construction and services remain resilient.

The RBI forecasts retail inflation based on the Consumer Price Index at 2.1 per cent for financial year 2025-26, which is below its inflation mandate of four per cent (with plus or minus two percentage points). Though the Central bank predicts a slight uptick in the inflation figure at around four per cent in the next fiscal, it will remain comfortable for the country.

Though the economy is expected to benefit from the India-EU Free Trade Agreement and proposed India-US trade deal, the Central bank remains cautious about the growth outlook as it has kept its monetary stance neutral, primarily because of global uncertainty.

While macroeconomic actions remain muted in the monetary statement, the central bank has taken steps to increase production and employment in the country by doubling collateral-free MSME loans from ₹10 lakh to ₹20 lakh. This move will help micro enterprises.

The RBI’s proposal to allow banks to lend to real estate infrastructure trusts (REITs) is expected to give a fillip to commercial real estate and, as a result, lead to employment generation. Relaxation in norms for branch expansion for select NBFs too will create jobs.

The biggest highlight of the monetary policy is the RBI’s proposal to compensate customers, who lost their money in digital frauds, up to ₹25,000. While it may give some relief to the victims of cyber frauds, it should not absolve RBI of its responsibility to make payment systems as far as possible fraud-proof.

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When ‘free speech’ is no longer ‘free’... and the rising peril of ‘deplatforming’

“Abandonment on the cross gave rise To the great religion of hope So can all abandoned ones surmise That within it there’s still some scope... For a small revival — though it may be best That the transgressor go her ways... Is this not a spiritual test To bring light to these darkest days?” — From Aaj Hi Bhaaji, by Bachchoo

As those of us who possess a dictionary know, the word “free” has two meanings — “without a price” and “unconfined”. The phrase “free speech” originally meant the latter — unconfined expression — but today it seems to have picked up connotations of the former — having a price.

How? The French police have raided the Paris headquarters of Elon Musk’s X, the social media platform with its AI branch Grok, which charges users to create pornographic pictures of children and women without their consent.

France, and now the UK, allege that X is guilty of the violation of security and the promotion of Holocaust-denying pro-Nazi propaganda.

The prosecution could mean the closure of X and Grok in these countries, or perhaps a climbdown by Musk, who could filter usage on the platform and its mechanisms to exclude potentially criminal content.

What X’s spokespersons plead is that their con-

tent and AI nude-making devices are there in the interests of “free speech” and the prosecution by France and Britain is “politically motivated”. This is abject hypocrisy as the people who access these nasty Grok mechanisms pay for them.

Free, at a price?

And as for “politically motivated”, it certainly may be, as both countries have legal strictures against Holocaust-denial propaganda and there certainly could be some political motivation in investigating fascist-apologist stuff from X’s owner who raised his arm, for all the world to see, in a Nazi salute at a Donald Trump political rally.

This shibboleth of “free speech” has now become a rallying cry of right-wing and ultra-right-wing publications, politicians and parties. A right-wing British weekly called *The Spectator*’s present editor is the ex-Tory Cabinet minister Michael Gove. His magazine, no doubt in the interests of “free speech”, recently published a feature interview with the criminal misogynist brothers Andrew and Tristan Tate, who have sought refuge from the 26 cases of rape and abuse they face if they return to the UK. They are proven traffickers of vulnerable young women and see themselves as the influencers of a new masculinity that champions extreme misogyny on social platforms which have built up a vast following of young men.

The interview in Gove’s magazine was nothing short of an advertisement for these unpleasant criminals... And then Gove also ran a piece by

some woman who calls herself Bonnie Blue and claims to hold the world record for having sex with 1,057 men in a single day. Her piece wasn’t an explanation of why she had sought notoriety with this demented stunt. It wasn’t in any sense enlightening and as far as I remember could have been about affection for her pet dog — or for Michael Gove, for that matter.

Each week in this publication a fellow called Toby Young — who has now been elevated to the House of Lords by the Tory establishment — who runs an outfit which he calls “The Free Speech Union” writes a column. Apart from boring readers with accounts of visits to games his favourite football team plays, or some confessions about drink or abstinence, he writes in support of people who have been stopped from speaking on some platform or the other.

His diatribes are always in favour of someone who has been “deplatformed” because of their denial of transgenderism or their support for the present Israeli government and its actions in Gaza. Fair enough. These platforms, usually in universities, should be open to all views as long as they don’t violate the British law against hate speech which prohibits the instigating of violence towards individuals or groups.

The name of the Free Speech Union suggests that it is a voice of liberalism and a necessary watchdog within any democracy. It isn’t. Its mission is the defence of right-wing views and the

unrelenting denigration of anything Lord Toby deems to be leftist or “woke” objections to nasty and provocative right-wing stances.

I would put his “free speech” conviction to the test. There was recently in Adelaide, Australia, a storm in a literary teacup. The Palestinian writer Randa Abdel-Fattah, scheduled to appear at the city’s literary week, was, at the last minute, cancelled. Jewish groups and politicians brought about the cancellation, claiming that she should not be invited as the memory of the massacre at Bondi Beach by anti-Zionists was still raw. Dozens of writers, including Zadie Smith, thought the association of Randa with events at Bondi Beach was ridiculous and walked out, causing the mid-January event to be cancelled. Would Lord Toby’s Union have opposed the ban on Randa Abdel-Fattah? Unlikely, as it emerged that she had in posts and pronouncements expressed enthusiastic approval of the massacre and hostage-taking of civilian Israelis in October 2023. She’d also called in 2024 and later for the “deplatforming” of writers Ayan Hirsi Ali, American columnist Thomas L. Friedman and the pro-Israeli musician Deborah Conway. A cancelled pro-canceller?

Lord Toby would, without a doubt, have opposed the cancellations that Abdel-Fattah called for. But would he campaign against the cancellation of herself?

Was Rome built... Free Speech for Nasty Right-Wing Views Union?

Subhani



The general in his literary labyrinth... So, what now?



Shobhaa’s Take

Books are not bombs. Poems are not bullets. What are you afraid of, censors? Something foul is afoot. This is about former Army chief Gen. M.M. Naravane’s unpublished book (*Four Stars of Destiny*), which is causing mayhem across the country. All hell broke loose after an extract was boldly and bravely published by *Caravan* in the magazine’s Security/Essay section. The much-decorated Gen. Manoj Mukund Naravane (Retd), the author of two other books, was Chief of the Army Staff between December 2019 and April 2022. The rules restrict retired officers from publishing classified information, under the sweeping Official Secrets Act. Regulations for publishing secret content require prior government clearance. Never one to lose a golden opportunity to embarrass his bete noire, the BJP, Lok Sabha LoP Rahul Gandhi defiantly flashed a printed copy of the book the government insists doesn’t exist, before quoting from an excerpt carried by *Caravan*.

“Rahul has made it a habit to demoralise the armed forces,” thundered BJP’s Ravi Shankar Prasad, while parliamentary affairs minister Kiren Rijiju warned Rahul to stop “speaking the language of anti-India elements”. Rahul was also accused of “defying the Chair”. It didn’t stop there. Subsequently, eight Opposition MPs, including seven from the Congress, were suspended from the Lok Sabha for the remainder of the Budget Session: it was the first such suspension of MPs in the 18th Lok Sabha.

Rahul Gandhi continued his tirade against Prime Minister Narendra Modi even after BJP MP Nishikan Dubey pointed out that Rahul’s own party had not allowed Army generals like K.M. Cariappa or V.K. Singh to write potentially explosive memoirs. Unruly, disruptive conduct followed — the usual scripted protest that saw Opposition MPs rushing to the Well of the House, tearing up papers and raising slogans. By 3 pm, the humiliating suspension was enforced by a determined Rijiju.

“This is a blot on our democracy”, responded a miffed Rahul as he recorded his “strongest protest” via a letter to the Speaker.

So much for that unparliamentary, over-dramatic *hungama* and *hulla gulla*.

The man with the unpublished memoir has been on the lit fest circuit recently, attracting crowds and talking soberly to supporters and fans in the audience — regular book lovers and readers — not hired, flag-waving cheerleaders of any political party. Unsurprisingly, the retired general has been attracting a full house at some of the country’s most prestigious lit fests. Since we were both invited to the same fests, it was inevitable that our paths crossed at different venues, from Dehradun to Vadodara. We met briefly in various authors’ lounges, and it is my loss that we couldn’t grab more time together. There were so many questions I had for him! But that is the nature of the beast these days. Authors are assigned well-briefed minders (at the Vadodara lit fest, they were called “shadows”), who take their jobs very seriously, functioning more like bouncers and security guards, frequently obstructing writers from interacting with readers. I am not sure if this is by design, but there is no free movement these days, minus vigilant watchdogs.

A close friend overheard a belligerent police officer talking to a worried organiser about a Bangladeshi writer whose session was expected to attract sizeable crowds. “*Session ko bandh karwa doon?*”, asked the cop

It’s disheartening that nobody is willing to discuss ‘sensitive’ issues, even informally. Self-censorship has never been this obvious! News TV channels doing author interviews routinely edit out anything that is potentially ‘dangerous’.

eagerly. The organiser replied hesitantly: “*Nahin, nahin. Par extra bandobast organisae karo.*”

I noticed that at a few lit fests, big-ticket non-resident *desi* writers carefully screened the crowd and actively avoided interacting with known right-wingers. “I don’t want to be in a photograph with that person”, a highly reputed author told me (Errr... I’m more than happy to flaunt my pic with Gen. Naravane). It’s disheartening that nobody is willing to discuss “sensitive” issues, even informally. Self-censorship has never been this obvious! News TV channels doing author interviews routinely edit out anything that is potentially “dangerous” to the carefully curated official narrative. At the Kolkata Book Fair (*Boi Mela*), I talked to a local anchor about the glaring absence of hugely popular writers from Bangladesh. I also mentioned the substantial loss of revenue this year, with 25-30 publishers/ book-sellers from Bangladesh pulling out of the fair. Over the years, it was their stalls that attracted the biggest crowds. My quotes on this glaring vacuum and unfortunate omission at the fair were missing in the clips that aired.

The troubling question is not about the general’s unpublished book, patiently awaiting official clearance while languishing with his publishers (Penguin Random House). It’s much bigger than any one individual or book. It’s not even about Bangladeshi authors either opting out or not getting visas to attend lit fests and book fairs in India. It is about the environment.

At Mumbai’s Kala Ghoda Festival, a discussion titled “Incarcerated: Tales from behind Bars” was abruptly

cancelled by the police. Activist Anand Teltumbde, Neeta Kolhatkar and others were taken aback to see the posters being pulled down. Participants were asked to delete posts... or else. The Mumbai police threatened to shut down the entire festival, leaving the organisers with little choice but to hastily withdraw the session. Ironically, the Maharashtra police are listed as “supporters” of the festival. I so wish Brinda Miller, the dynamic festival director, had issued a statement and taken a stand expressing solidarity with Teltumbde.

A literary Urdu Jalsa co-organised by the Urdu department of the University of Mumbai featuring Naseer-uddin Shah was similarly cancelled. “Preet Nagar”, tracing the progressive tradition of Urdu literature, was abruptly shut down without prior notice. It was claimed the actor had opted out — a claim the actor insists is an outright lie. No reasons were given to him for withdrawing the invitation at the last minute.

Writers are soft targets, almost heart-breakingly vulnerable. So are poets, painters and filmmakers. Living in such a vitiated environment is bad for the soul. Paranoia hurts creativity. Our moral outrage should be aimed at the pamphleteers and propagandists — lawbreakers who parade as lawmakers. Why pick on those who are armed with nothing more lethal than words and images?

I mentioned this to a New York-based *desi* person who works with sensitive agencies worldwide. “The environment is the same across the US! Events get cancelled. Nobody opens their mouths. Lips are sealed. So are ears.” There is widespread distrust, to the extent that communication on even seemingly innocuous subjects is restricted to non-committal, truncated exchanges. Text messages rarely go beyond polite greetings. Opinion is now a bad word.

In Trumpland, everyone is a suspect. Let’s hope it never comes to that in *Mera Bharat Mahaan!*

Instagram handle @ShobhaaDe; Twitter handle @DeShobhaa

LETTERS RESPECT DEMOCRACY TEMPLE

This refers to the allegation of Congress leader Priyanka Vadra that Prime Minister Narendra Modi is hiding behind the Lok Sabha Speaker. Since Independence, the tenures of Lal Bahadur Shastri, Narasimha Rao and Atal Behari Vajpayee and now Narendra Modi have proved to be the best Prime Ministers, who work for the welfare of the poor and for the development of the Nation. All of them were fearless to take on anything and everything towards the growth and dignity of our Nation. Prime Minister Modi too is no different. It is the opposition parties, especially the Congress, who are after him. They leave no stone unturned to tarnish Modi’s image, not only in India, but even abroad. It is high time the Congress leaders realize their drawbacks and try to do something good to the nation and try to enhance their image, which is diminishing election after election. Disruption in the Temple of Democracy is not the way to project themselves.

N. Mahadevan
Chennai

PM SKIPS LOK SABHA

It is a bogey that the opposition parties were planning to attack PM Modi in the Lok Sabha when he was scheduled to give his customary reply to the debate on the Motion of Thanks to the President. The opposition was armed with two important issues to seek PM’s reply: The revelation of former Army Chief M.M. Naravane in his memoir and on India’s rights being given away in the US-India trade deal announced by the American President Donald Trump, even at the cost of our long standing relationship with Russia, a trusted friend and supplier of oil and compromising the welfare of our farmers and local manufacturers by signing an agreement to import American goods to the tune of a whopping Rs 500 billion at zero tariff. Modi did not attend the Lok Sabha and skipped his customary reply to the Motion of Thanks.

Tharcus S. Fernando
Chennai

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Editor's
TAKE

New START ends: A nuclear free-for-all

The expiry of New START has created a dangerous nuclear moment, leaving the US and Russia without any binding limits for the first time in five decades

Trust, the prerequisite for peace, is abysmally low at the moment. The expiry of New START, or the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty, makes things worse. Though hopefully it will be replaced by another treaty, until that happens the world sits on a nuclear stockpile that can blow the planet apart several times over on a false alarm. The New START treaty provided a semblance of order in otherwise murky nuclear stockpile management. The New START – Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty, which had replaced SALT, came into effect on April 8, 2010, and governed the nuclear stocks of the United States and Russia, the two countries that hold 90 per cent of the world's nuclear arsenal. Both are estimated to have over 5,000 nuclear warheads each, followed by China, which has an estimated 600 nuclear weapons. India and Pakistan are estimated to have 180 and 170 nuclear weapons respectively. With the expiration of the New START treaty, the US and Russia have no binding limits on their nuclear arsenals. In a world passing through a phase of conflict and mistrust, frayed by the Ukraine war, West Asia turmoil, and growing rivalry between the US and China, this could have serious consequences. New START, signed in 2010, capped deployed strategic warheads at 1,550 each and created a framework of inspections, notifications, and data exchanges.

It did not end the nuclear race but efficiently managed it, leaving no room for guesswork and thus eliminating fear and mistrust – the two factors that fuel arms races. It built predictability, eliminated the scope for false alarms, and thus provided a safety mechanism. Now, US President Donald Trump argues that the treaty was “badly negotiated” and wants a “new, improved, and modernised” agreement that includes China. Though he has a point, it is very unlikely that China would be part of such a tripartite deal, as its nuclear stockpile is almost one tenth of that of the US or Russia. Besides, it is aggressively pursuing deployment and would not like to be halted in its tracks.

That said, a future arms control regime that does not include China would be strategically incomplete and politically fragile. So far, Beijing has refused to join trilateral negotiations until parity is reached – that is, the two nuclear giants substantially reduce their stockpiles. But that looks rather remote. Russia, for its part, suspended inspections and data sharing even before New START expired. The technical challenges are no less daunting. Arms control cannot be achieved overnight; it needs verification rules, counting methods, and intrusive inspections that take years to negotiate. Meanwhile, right now, a whole range of weapons – tactical nuclear warheads, hypersonic delivery systems, and dual-use missiles – are completely unconstrained. Arms races are driven by fear – fear of falling behind, fear of vulnerability, fear of surprise. START did not abolish these fears, but managed them. The way forward will have to be phased and pragmatic. The two countries must at least agree to keep observing New START's central limits and restore inspections until a new treaty replaces START; else we may be heading for yet another spell of nuclear arms race.

Creating a conducive learning environment

As India seeks excellence and social harmony under the National Education Policy, it is time to re-examine whether these arrangements still serve the constitutional promise of equality, dignity, and national cohesion



JS
RAJPUT

The constitutional proviso of reservations for certain categories of people identified as SC/ST was initially meant for ten years only. Dr BR Ambedkar himself never wanted it to last long, as that would amount to the negation of the objectives which necessitated its implementation. It was a case of socially inherited inequalities that also led to economic and cultural deprivation. In other words, the inequalities created by the caste system and the related inhuman practice of untouchability were considered the main culprits. Both of these were rejected by the Constitution. Those outside this classification accepted the provisions of reservations, as the logic behind them was clear and convincing to one and all.

The Constitution was framed by men and women of unimpeachable integrity and total commitment to the nation. Most of them were part of the great freedom struggle and had earned the respect of the people through sheer sacrifice and suffering during alien rule. As the generations changed, adherence to human values was impacted globally. Advances in science and technology had created gadgets and implements that could reach every home and hearth that had the requisite resources. In India, the urge to accumulate more brought about a great attitudinal transformation among those who were in power and authority.

In a democratic setup, it was the politicians who were the privileged ones. They realised the 'benefits' that could accrue to an elected representative of the people, or better still, to being in a position of power. Expectedly, the approach and attraction to being in politics changed drastically. Exceptions apart, the prime consideration for being in public life, as articulated by Gandhiji - to serve the 'last man in the line' – was quietly replaced by 'politics for privilege and pelf', and for preparing inheritors from within the family. The Constitution was amended frequently; how power had changed the scenario was witnessed during the imposition of the Emergency, the 42nd Constitutional Amendment, and much more that followed.

Young persons in colleges and universities in the sixth decade of the 20th century were convinced that the caste system would disappear, as they thought the political persons around them were true to their words and were all committed to the upgradation of deprived people. After about three to four decades, the political generation had changed; so had the approach to democratic principles, and the people – the electors. Now politics, and the politician, were busy exploring the new avenues that had suddenly



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ONWARDS?

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The Pioneer

appeared before them, and were indeed alluring and attractive. Being in the seat of power pays, and there are ways and means to ensure zero accountability. The integrity, sincerity, and honesty that were needed to make reservations for the SC/ST a success were shifted to the back burner. This is one project that has never been evaluated sincerely and scientifically. Now, these are not the only categories for which constitutional provision was made. There are many more. Gandhi was just forgotten, interestingly and most obviously by those who continue to claim to be the only inheritors of his legacy and values. The 'last man in the line' was lost in the glare and glamour that were blinding the political power scenario.

After four decades of the Constitution being in place, things were analysed at various levels. Dr Karan Singh wrote in 1993: “Our understanding was that castes would gradually erode, and that the whole point was to build a society where caste would no longer remain significant. But what do we find today? We find that attempts are being made to institutionalise caste, and not only four castes, but 3,000 castes. Is this what the Constitution envisaged? How does this tally with the whole question of equal democratic rights?” It would be interesting to recall how the environment that promised total liquidation of the caste system was transformed into one that assures its continuation, and consequently a horrifying fragmentation of Indian society.

To arrive at a clearer picture of the current socio-cultural scenario on a broader canvas, one must recall the provisions specifically made for minorities in the Constitution in Article 30 of the Constitution of India, which, in fact, did not synchronise with the text and spirit of Article 15. The apparent contradictions are noted by every alert and active citizen who is not restricted by ideological or political leanings. As a practising academic, my impression stands gradually confirmed that the provisions of Article 30, with all the noble intents behind them, have, in actual practice, done more damage to minorities than supporting them in their educational advancement. The provisions have been grossly misused. I have personally observed how teacher-training (minority) institutions refused to follow any

norms and obviously prepared teachers who were not trained adequately. There are numerous examples in other areas and sectors also. Article 30: Right of minorities to establish and administer educational institutions — (1) All minorities, whether based on religion or language, shall have the right to establish and administer educational institutions of their choice. (2) The State shall not, in granting aid to educational institutions, discriminate against any educational institutions on the ground that they are under the management of a minority, whether based on religion or language.

The problem is that no learned discussion or sincere deliberation is allowed on such issues that are projected as sensitive zones. The fact remains that caste considerations and specific provisions for minorities are now creating unacceptable socio-cultural environments at various levels of educational institutions, which is not conducive to generating social cohesion and religious amity. What happened after the UGC Regulations on Equity were notified on January 13, 2026, and became effective from January 15, 2026 onwards?

Having served in institutions of varied levels for over five decades, one could safely state that concerns of harassment or ill-treatment among students could best be handled by the head of the institution and the faculty. National guidelines are needed, but the autonomy of institutions must remain sacred. Creating a socially conducive campus environment is best supported by instilling a sense of responsibility among the stakeholders.

This is also high time to evolve ways and means on how to relate culturally evolved environments in schools and other institutions.

National-level deliberations must be organised, sponsored, and supported. Let the intelligentsia of the nation re-read the constitutional provisions that could help move towards culturally enthralling, socially cohesive, and religiously amicable campuses. Eminent people have been thinking along these lines, but it needs to be organised seriously. I quote, as an example, the words of the late Vasant Sathe, a freedom fighter, Supreme Court lawyer, Union Minister, and a highly respected public figure. He wrote in 1993 about Article 30 of the Constitution: “This article should be deleted because to recognise some sections as minorities based on religion is contrary to the provisions of equality specified in Article 15 and threatens to create perpetual discrimination for such sections on the basis of a factor like religion, which is irreversible.”

The NEP 2020 expects to move towards excellence in education. The prime requisite is a learning environment bubbling with mutual respect and positive energy. Mere changes in a couple of words in notifications, without a well-considered socio-cultural analysis supported by dynamic constitutional provisions, may not really work any more.

PIC TALK



An artist creates a tribal painting on a wall at the 'Janjatiya Gaurav Vatika' ahead of its inauguration in Jagdalpur, Bastar district.

PHOTO: PTI

DIGITAL EXPERIENCE

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Why high-performing teams are emotionally boring



RACHNA
LAKHPATRI

2ND OPINION

In the popular imagination, high-performing teams look dramatic. There are animated meetings, passionate debates, late-night hustle, loud celebrations, and equally loud frustrations. Energy is visible. Emotions run high. It looks productive. In reality, most truly high-performing teams are emotionally... boring.

That might sound counter-intuitive, especially in a culture that often equates enthusiasm with excellence. But after years of observing teams across corporate boardrooms, project war rooms, and everyday workplaces, one truth stands out quietly and consistently: performance is built on steadiness, not spectacle.

High performance is not about intensity. It is about consistency. The teams that deliver, quarter after quarter, are

rarely riding emotional highs or crashing into lows. They show up, do the work, and move on. Meetings are calm. Decisions are methodical. Feedback is direct but not dramatic. There is very little emotional noise. And that is precisely why they work. Drama is often mistaken for engagement. Raised voices, urgency-filled emails, and constant firefighting create the illusion that people care deeply. But more often than not, drama is a symptom of misalignment, unclear roles, or fragile trust. It consumes energy without producing results. Emotionally stable teams do not need to perform their commitment. They do not rely on adrenaline to get things done. Their engagement is quiet and internal - rooted in clarity and mutual respect. In such teams, expectations are clear. Everyone knows their role and understands what success looks like. Because of this clarity, emotions do not need to fill the gaps. There is less blame, fewer ego battles, and minimal second-guessing. Trust plays a central role here. When trust is deep, people do not overreact. They do not assume malice where there is delay, or incompetence where there is a mistake. Issues are addressed without personalising them. Disagreements happen, but they are resolved without lingering emotional residue.

This emotional neutrality is not coldness. It is maturity. Think of it like a seasoned surgeon versus a medical drama

on television. The real operating room is calm, precise, almost uneventful. That calm is not a lack of urgency — it is mastery. High-performing teams operate the same way. They do not need constant motivational speeches or emotional spikes to function. Their rhythm is reliable. Their energy is sustainable. Contrast this with teams that feel like roller coasters. One week there is excitement, the next week burnout. One day collaboration, the next day conflict. These emotional swings are exhausting and often mask deeper structural problems.

A team that constantly needs emotional fuel to perform will eventually run out of it. The most effective leaders understand this. They do not aim to keep teams perpetually excited; they aim to keep them grounded. They replace chaos with systems, urgency with prioritisation, and drama with dialogue.

So if your team meetings feel uneventful, your workflows predictable, and your days steady rather than sensational - pause before assuming something is missing. It might be that nothing is wrong at all. Because if your team feels like a roller coaster, it is not high performance — it is instability. And if it feels emotionally boring, you may just be doing something very right.

The writer is a freelancer who writes on education, development, and social issues

BUDGET AND REFORMS NEED BALANCED NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT APPROACH

Recent developments in Manipur underline the need for sustained peace initiatives. Fresh political engagement offers hope, but continued central vigilance is crucial to avoid renewed tensions and secure long-term stability for affected communities.

Ongoing city traffic challenges highlight daily commuter hardship. Smart signalling and expanded metro networks can reduce congestion, but urban planners must prioritise durable, long-term solutions rather than temporary fixes.

Market analyses warn of global uncertainties. Diversified investment strategies help protect retail investors, while regulators must improve transparency to

strengthen overall confidence.

The slowdown in the start-up ecosystem underscores the need for policy support. Tax incentives for venture funding and stronger innovation backing are vital to maintain India's entrepreneurial leadership.

Indo-US trade developments and defence cooperation remain significant amid regional shifts. Balanced diplomacy can deliver mutual gains.

Healthcare expansion, renewable energy progress, education reform, ecological protection and youth sports investment all demand sustained, inclusive policy attention to secure national growth and resilience.

TS KARTHIK | CHENNAI

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

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Supreme Court upholds West Bengal dues

The Supreme Court has ruled that West Bengal government employees are entitled to dearness allowance under the West Bengal Services (Revision of Pay and Allowances) Rules, 2009, while delivering its judgment in an employees' dearness allowance arrears case. The court also directed that the first instalment of arrears, covering the period from 2008 to 2019, must be paid by March 31.

A four-member committee, comprising three retired judges and a senior bureaucrat, has been formed to determine the quantum of arrears and the schedule for staggered payment. This is an important judgment in favour of government employees who were denied their rightful dues. The apex court observed, "No one denies that it is within the State's power to make decisions regarding payments to its employees, but once such a decision has been made, it cannot deviate therefrom."

The ruling is a setback to Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee's administration, which had denied the employees' claims, and comes ahead of Assembly elections. The verdict is expected to benefit approximately 12 lakh current and retired employees. The verdict marks a major relief for employees and reinforces accountability in state pay decisions ahead of crucial elections.

S SANKARANARAYANAN | CHENNAI

Indian educator wins global teacher honour

At the recently concluded World Governments Summit 2026 in Dubai, India had a moment of celebration as Ms Rouble Nagi was recognised with the prestigious Global Teacher Prize. This achievement is a matter of great pride and honour for the entire nation. As the founder of the Rouble Nagi Art Foundation, she earned this distinction for her remarkable contribution to education through the establishment of more than 800 learning centres across India.

Social media platforms have been filled with appreciation and congratulations following the announcement of her receiving the USD 1 million prize. Her work combines mural art, academic support and community-driven education, making learning more accessible and engaging for underprivileged children. Her efforts go beyond traditional teaching, reflecting a holistic approach that blends creativity with social responsibility. Such recognition is expected to inspire educators across India to strive for excellence and innovation in teaching. Her success highlights the power of dedication, compassion and vision in shaping young minds. This honour reinforces the importance of inclusive education and strengthens India's standing in the global educational community.

KIRTI WADHAWAN | KANPUR

Lives lost in illegal mining

Apropos the news report, “*Mine blast kills 18 in Meghalaya*” (Feb 6).

The deadly explosion at an illegal coal mine in Meghalaya's East Jaintia Hills, killing 18 workers, is a grim reminder of the cost of regulatory failure. These were not unavoidable accidents but preventable deaths resulting from the continued operation of banned and hazardous mining practices.

Rat-hole mining has long been outlawed by the NGT and the Supreme Court, yet it persists due to administrative apathy, weak enforcement and the complicity of vested interests.

Each such incident exposes the hollowness of official claims that illegal mining has been curbed. Poor and migrant workers, driven by desperation, are forced into unsafe tunnels where their lives are treated as expendable.

While compensation and condolences are necessary, they cannot substitute accountability. The focus must shift to identifying and prosecuting mine owners, contractors and officials who allow such operations. Regular inspections, local intelligence and strict punishment under mining and criminal laws are essential to prevent repeat violations.

SANJAY CHOPRA | PUNJAB

India’s final push to eliminate the Maoist insurgency

What began as a peasant uprising in Naxalbari more than five decades ago is now reduced to a handful of ageing leaders on the run — signalling that the country may finally be witnessing the closing chapter of one of its longest internal conflicts

FIRST
Column



MP
NATHANAEL

With less than two months to go before the deadline of March 31 set by the Union Home Minister Amit Shah to declare the country free from the Maoist menace, the security forces have stepped up their strategy and operational efforts to either arrest the remnants or force them to surrender. Giving due recognition to the fact that a spate of successful operations conducted by the security forces in recent months was largely due to accurate and pinpoint intelligence provided by the intelligence agencies, the Centre hiked the budgetary allocation to the Intelligence Bureau by 63 per cent, from Rs. 4,159 crores to Rs. 6,782 crores.




The Maoist movement, which originated in a little-known town of Naxalbari in Darjeeling district in the late 1960s as a fracas between landlords and peasants, soon turned into a violent revolution to grab state power. The brainchild behind the movement was the trio of Kanu Sanyal, Charu Majumdar and Jangal Santhal.

The killing of policemen and landlords led to massive induction of the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) in West Bengal. As many as 78 policemen were killed in the streets of Calcutta. Under the banner of the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist), it spread its wings in Bihar, Punjab, Andhra Pradesh and Kerala, necessitating the raising of more CRPF battalions by merging 28 Armed Police battalions of the states and raising seven battalions. Insurgency in the north-eastern states too posed serious problems. By 1971, 60 CRPF battalions were deployed on the ground across the country. The CPI (M-L) movement was crushed, though cinders remained. With the passage of years, the cinders turned into a conflagration when the movement gained a foothold in erstwhile Andhra Pradesh and spread to neighbouring states of Odisha, Maharashtra and erstwhile Madhya Pradesh. In April 1980, under the leadership of Kondapalli Seetharamaiah, CPI (M-L) split, with the new outfit CPI (M-L)



THE
DETERMINED
INITIATIVE OF
THE
GOVERNMENT TO
CONSTRUCT
ROADS TURNED
THE TIDE
AGAINST THE
MAOISTS

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People's War, better known as the People's War Group (PWG), wreaking havoc in the state. PWG merged with another armed group known as the Maoist Communist Centre to form the Communist Party of India (Maoist) in 2004, which is nearing annihilation.

Having suffered large casualties, Andhra Pradesh Police raised its elite Greyhound commando outfit in 1989 to tackle the menace. Stealth operations by small bands of commandos scoured the forests and inflicted heavy casualties on the Maoists, forcing them to flee to other adjoining states. Nearly 4,000 sq. m of the vast stretch of forests in Abhujmad (Chhattisgarh), bordering Telangana, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh, provided a safe sanctuary where government presence was minimal. Comfortably ensconced in the jungles, the Maoists ran a parallel government, suppressing illiterate villagers and running kangaroo courts to punish those who dared to oppose their diktats.

Among the Central Armed Police Forces (CAPF) battalions initially inducted in Chhattisgarh was the CRPF. Other CAPF battalions subsequently inducted

were the Border Security Force, the Indo-Tibetan Border Police and the Sashastra Seema Bal. After pre-induction training for about a month, the companies were deployed in the affected districts. Road connectivity posed a serious problem. Vehicles had to negotiate through unmetalled kachcha roads to reach the company posts or battalion headquarters. Slow-moving vehicles became easy targets of attacks by the Maoists, who ambushed the vehicles and planted Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) to blow them up, thus inflicting heavy casualties on CRPF personnel. When mine-protected vehicles were inducted in the state for transportation of men and material, the Maoists enhanced the quantum of explosives buried on the roads, causing heavy damage to the vehicles and casualties among personnel.

The determined initiative of the Government to construct roads turned the tide against the Maoists. Local contractors feared undertaking any road construction tasks due to Maoist threats. With the security blanket of the CRPF, the

BRO personnel undertook the construction of roads. A CRPF camp was established near Puvarti, a village of hardcore Maoist Madvi Hidma. There was no looking back thereafter. With over 100 Forward Operating Bases established by the CRPF in Abhujmad, construction of roads began in full swing, with local contractors feeling secure due to the proximate presence of security forces. Schools and hospitals were set up. CRPF posts instilled a sense of security among villagers. Mobile towers were installed.

Chhattisgarh police personnel, along with District Reserve Guards (DRG) and the CAPF, carried out operations on the basis of pinpoint intelligence, leading to success in encounters. Coupled with technical intelligence, human intelligence played a pivotal role as villagers passed on information to the security forces while at the same time denying access to the Maoists. Irked by the hostile attitude of villagers, the Maoists killed them on mere suspicion of their being informers.

Metalled roads facilitated the movement of security forces, as they could

reach any spot in a short time and carry out operations. Having displaced the Maoists from their secure sanctuary, the security forces launched aggressive operations, relentlessly driving them helter-skelter in small groups. The incessant massive 21-day operation by the COBRA battalions, the DRG, CRPF and other CAPF battalions in the Karregutta hills on the Telangana-Chhattisgarh border led to the killing of 31 Maoists, apart from scattering those who managed to escape. The killing of General Secretary Basvaraju, along with his security guards and over 26 Maoists, followed by the killing of other top leaders like Madvi Hidma, Ganesh Uike, and lately Anal Da, has crushed the Maoist movement completely. A spate of surrenders in hordes over the last several weeks speaks volumes about Maoist morale. Over a hundred surrendered in Chhattisgarh in January this year.

The central committee that at one time boasted of 45 members has declined to just four, with Anal Da killed on January 24 in the Seranada forests by the COBRA commandos along with 16 others. Tippli Tirupathi, the General Secretary Ganapathi, Mallaraju Reddy and Misir Besra, all in their 60s, are on the run. With the robust intelligence set-up in the Maoist-affected districts, the countdown for these leaders has begun. Though they have admitted to their extinction by sending messages to the Government for peace talks, days may not be far when they will be killed in encounters or surrender to the security forces.

No movement can be sustained for long without leadership, popular support, manpower and a high degree of motivation. This has been achieved by dint of hard work, determination, robust intelligence, excellent connectivity, and the sacrifices of hundreds of CAPF and police personnel, apart from civilians who were instrumental in combating the Maoist menace.

Under the shadow of fear, the Maoists will avoid encounters but can cause casualties among security forces by planting IEDs around their hideouts. It will, however, not be far from the truth to state that the Maoist movement has been crushed, though the Union Home Minister may wait until April 1 to announce that our nation is free from the menace once and for all.

Why scandals shock us, and should not



ACHARYA
PRASHANT

A scandal is not a new revelation. It is a long-overdue and grudging declaration of our inability to keep ignoring what was already there all along. The question, then, is not why the scandal surfaced, but how it remained hidden at all. And why something so obvious and axiomatic required loud exposure before it could be acknowledged.

The Epstein files revealed nothing that should have required revelation in the first place. They merely confirmed an old pattern: that power, wherever it accumulates, tends to be used for consumption, gratification, and dominance. The names were new; the principle was ancient. Yet the public response treated it as a rupture, as though something unprecedented had occurred.

Why does it take a scandal for this to be recognised? How does a culture succeed in presenting those who dominate attention as figures of decency or merit? That is the question worth examining. Not "How could they?" but "How did this belief come to be accepted at all?"

The shock itself is revealing. It is not evidence of their fall so much as evidence of the illusion that had been maintained.

Events and Principles

There are two ways to learn about the world. One is by reacting to events as they erupt. The other is by understanding the principles that govern how things unfold, whether or not those events have yet made themselves visible.

Consider a ball of radioactive material. Nothing seems to happen. Then one day, the critical threshold is crossed, and there is a catastrophic explosion. Would anyone choose to be educated this way? The principle of critical mass was always available. The explosion merely confirmed what it had been saying all along.

So it is with the human mind. We keep waiting for scandals to educate us. Every few years, another file leaks, another network is exposed, another set of names tumbles into public view. And each time, the same ritual follows: shock, moral outrage, op-eds, and then forgetting.

Yet the principle was always there. The unexamined, animalistic ego, when given power, uses that power for its own consumption and gratification. This is not cynicism. It is plain observation, available to anyone willing to look without sentimentality.

If one relies on events, shock is guaranteed, because most misdeeds never come fully to light. If one understands the principle, shock loses its grip, because what unfolds is recognised rather

than discovered. We participate in our own deception because we need the illusion to continue.

Celebrity culture quietly suggests that fame indicates virtue. Corporate branding makes profit appear as service. Philanthropy launders reputation into respectability. The entire machinery runs on a single fuel: the need to believe that the ladder being climbed leads somewhere noble.

The ego cannot tolerate questioning this. So it constructs heroes. It needs its billionaires to be benevolent, its celebrities to be wise, its leaders to be principled. The idol must appear flawless if worship is to continue.

When the clay is exposed, idol-worship itself is rarely questioned. A new idol is found, and the ritual resumes. The system reliably produces individuals of the same kind.

The Gorilla in the Necktie

Homo sapiens emerged from the jungle. The intellect has arrived. Language, culture, and technology are new. But the centre from which all this operates has largely remained the same. Modern capacities are governed by a deeply animalistic centre. The tools are advanced; the master they serve is prehistoric.

Human beings now account for over a third of all mammal biomass on this planet. Almost all the rest consists of animals bred for our consumption. What remains for wild mammals is a sliver. What is useful to us is multiplied into billions. What is not useful is pushed towards extinction. This is the principle that governs the world when the ego is left unexamined: greed and power. Real nobility, real decency, are precisely what the ego cannot tolerate.

Now place this unexamined centre in a boardroom or a political office. The suit is expensive, the vocabulary sophisticated, the smile professionally practised. Yet behind that smile are the same teeth. A gorilla in a necktie. That is what one is looking at when one looks at a person of power who has not undergone a genuine inner transformation. Everything around him exists to serve his appetite. And if someone has accumulated at that scale, what was it accumulated for? For consumption, for territory, for the ancient satisfactions of dominance.

If there is a fixer available who can procure whatever the appetite demands, the appetite will make use of him. None of this should require a scandal to understand. It is obvious from first principles. The exceptions do exist: the Buddha, Kabir Saheb, and a handful of sages scattered across history who genuinely stepped outside the pattern. They are exceptions precisely because transcending the ego requires sustained inner work, not verbal agreement or moral posturing.

Apart from such exceptions, selfishness should not be assumed. Good intentions are not transformation. Philanthropy is not renunciation. The ego can wear any costume, including the costume of virtue. The vocabulary updates; the centre remains.

Principles Over Events

The diagnosis is clear enough. But where does responsibility lie?

How did one allow oneself to be convinced in the first place? What within demanded that power and goodness go together? When such questions are honestly pursued, they lead somewhere. They lead to the examination of one's ego, one's hunger for heroes, one's reluctance to see the animal in oneself. The scandal is out there; the inquiry is in here.

Without that inward turn, scandals change nothing. A few individuals are condemned, the system is preserved, new idols are found, and the next shock is awaited. The pattern repeats because the pattern-maker within is never examined.

The Doomsday Clock now stands at eighty-nine seconds to midnight, the closest it has ever been to civilisational collapse. And still, celebrities are worshipped, admiration loudly declared. The tragedy is not that a few billionaires escaped to private islands while the world burned. The tragedy is that the crowd below kept defending, kept imitating, kept applauding. When escape becomes possible for the few who have consumed the earth, the crowd below will still be waving. That is the depth of the delusion.

The system does not run on conspiracy. It runs on aspiration, on what is admired, imitated, and quietly desired. A "like" is not innocent. It is a small but steady investment in the very system one claims to oppose.

What can change something is the refusal to be shocked in the first place, not out of cynicism, but out of clarity. When the principle is understood, the event becomes mere confirmation.

The unexamined ego, when given power, uses that power for gratification. It consumes, exploits, and dominates because that is what it does. The same ego that produces monsters also operates at smaller scales, given less opportunity. The difference is one of degree, not of kind.

Examine the centre from which one operates, and something real has been done. Condemn others while leaving that centre untouched, and nothing changes; only noise is added to noise.




So the question is not, "How could they?" The question is, "Why was it ever believed otherwise?"

And beneath that lies the more uncomfortable one: what within needed that belief?

The principle was always available. The only question is whether one is willing to see it, and to see oneself in its light. That seeing is not comfortable. But it is honest. And honesty is the only ground on which anything true can be built.

The Pioneer
SINCE 1865

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Every January, Davos produces a familiar genre of writing: forecasts, anxieties, optimism dressed as realism. In 2026, artificial intelligence will dominate that genre almost completely. At the World Economic Forum, AI is discussed as a productivity engine, a labour-market disruptor, a geopolitical accelerant. All of that is true. But from India's perspective, something more prosaic - and more dangerous - is taking shape beneath the rhetoric. India may be drifting towards an AI-driven current account problem.

To understand why AI changes the picture, it helps to begin with what has kept India stable for years. India has lived with a chronic merchandise trade deficit for decades. Yet the current account has remained broadly manageable because India exports something else: services and skills. Software services, business process outsourcing, consulting, engineering work, and remittances from skilled labour abroad have functioned as India's macroeconomic shock absorbers. When goods trade bleeds, services income cauterises the wound. It rests on a simple asymmetry: India imports physical inputs and exports human cognition. Artificial intelligence unsettles that asymmetry. AI is often described as a technology. In macroeconomic terms, it behaves more like infrastructure. At scale, AI is not a one-time purchase. It is a continuous service: cloud systems, model access, inference capacity, security updates, compliance layers, constant upgrades. These services are paid for every month, often in foreign currency, and increasingly to a very small set of global providers.

What matters is not the stock price story, but what those firms are buying with that capital: data centres, long-term power contracts, advanced chips, proprietary models. This is physical, durable infrastructure. Once infrastructure is built, pricing power follows. For India, this means AI adoption does not merely improve productivity; it creates a recurring import stream - one that does not show up clearly in customs data, but accumulates across sectors. In balance-of-payments terms, AI begins to resemble energy more than software.

Firms integrate AI into logistics, finance, marketing, compliance. Government departments deploy AI tools for fraud detection, analytics, and service delivery. Each deployment seems rational, even cost-saving. But collectively, they embed foreign intelligence infrastructure more deeply into the economy. This is how structural dependence forms: not through a single decision, but through thousands of sensible ones. Unlike oil, AI imports do not spike visibly with prices. They rise steadily with usage. Capital inflows can mask the effect

The Pioneer
SINCE 1865




for years. By the time pressure appears in the exchange rate or reserves, the dependency is already baked in. The problem is that AI does not merely add an import bill. It collides directly with the export engine that has sustained India's external balance. Tasks that once justified cross-border billing - code review, customer support, analytics, documentation, compliance - are increasingly bundled into AI platforms and priced per query or per token. The more capable the model, the less pricing power remains with the human intermediary.

This creates a slow pincer movement in the current account: On one side, AI services imports rise. On the other hand, the unit value of services exports comes under pressure. India could train millions of AI-literate workers and still see a weaker services surplus, not because demand collapses, but because rents have moved upstream.

There is another dimension that deserves more attention: the Indian state itself. India's governance model is now digitally intensive at population scale - payments, identity, welfare, taxation, compliance. As AI is layered onto these systems, the state becomes a large and long-term consumer of AI services. This has fiscal implications, but also external ones. Licensing costs, cloud contracts, security audits, and vendor lock-in gradually create foreign-currency obligations embedded in governance itself. The WEF's Global Cybersecurity Outlook for 2026 notes that public-sector cyber resilience lags private-sector resilience even as AI-driven threats grow. For India, where digital systems operate at unprecedented scale, cyber failure is not just a technical risk. It is a macroeconomic and political risk. A state that cannot function without rented intelligence is not resilient. It is fragile. Nothing here implies that India should slow AI adoption. That would be self-defeating. The warning is narrower and more serious. AI changes the structure of India's external balance, and pretending otherwise will make policy reactive rather than strategic. Countries that own AI infrastructure will export cognition. Countries that do not will import it - permanently. Growth will continue in both.

Power will not. India has encountered this pattern before with commodities and capital goods. The difference now is that AI embeds itself into decision-making itself. Once embedded, exit is not merely expensive; it becomes institutionally disruptive. WEF 2026 does not say India is falling behind. It says something subtler: the global AI economy is settling into an infrastructure hierarchy. India is participating energetically in that economy. What remains unresolved is whether it will own enough of it to protect its external balance, its fiscal stability, and its strategic autonomy.

The writer is a theoretical physicist at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, US, and the author of the forthcoming book *The Last Equation Before Silence*

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A thought for today

A designer knows he has achieved perfection not when there is nothing left to add, but when there is nothing left to take away

ANTOINE DE SAINT-EXUPERY

Arresting Thought

SC tells cops to think before acting – good advice

Supreme Court has once again read police the arrest act. Ask, it said in as many words, *why arrest before* making the arrest: “The police officer shall ask himself the question as to whether an arrest is a necessity or not, before undertaking said exercise.” It should be obvious, right? Just because the law allows police powers of arrest in no way means random arrests can be made on vague pretexts such as for questioning. Police powers of arrest, SC said, are: “mere statutory discretion”, “not a matter of routine...but an exception”, “shall not be undertaken unless absolutely warranted”, “power of arrest...to be exercised rather sparingly.”



Do police not know this? They do. Do police procedure trainings not stay updated? Maybe. Do cops misinterpret their powers as laid down in law? Unlikely. Then why have unwarranted arrests, even if law allows for it, as a widely practised norm? The more probable answer is institutional culture. Police make unnecessary arrests because the culture across police forces has become to punish, making process the punishment, riding roughshod over both constitutional rights of those facing arrest and with zero sensibilities to how damaging an arrest can be.

The ruling builds on an earlier order from Nov 2025, when SC held, in a case where appellants argued they weren’t informed of grounds of arrest in writing, that regardless which law is in application, it is constitutional mandate to inform “arrestee of the grounds of arrest” in writing and in a language. SC made this mandatory in all offences under all statutes. The arrest would be rendered “illegal” if there was non-compliance, and the person would be set free. Now, SC is telling cops to first justify in their own mind if an arrest is at all necessitated. Are cops listening?

Good Touch, Bad Touch

Give us real door handles, and limit touchscreens in cars

In 2012, Tesla pioneered automatic door handles on its Model S. Goal was to look cool, aerodynamics the justification. Since then, others, including at least one Indian carmaker, have flattered it with imitation. But looks like 2026 is the year this handle dies. China, the biggest car market, has decided to ban it next Jan due to serious safety issues. Since Tesla sells 40% of its cars in China, the design change will have to be global. US is also examining complaints meanwhile, so no point dilly-dallying.



And good riddance, because scores of drivers and passengers have got trapped inside cars with such ‘smart’ handles. Last year, a Chinese man died inside his burning Xiaomi SU7 Ultra. In 2019, Florida anaesthesiologist Omar Awan met the same terrible fate inside his Model S. In Dec 2023, Virginia residents Venkateswara Pasumarti and his wife Susmita Maddi were trapped inside their burning Model Y. By the time Susmita was pulled out, she had serious facial burns and lung damage from inhaled smoke.

What good is a handle that’s inaccessible when you need it most? It shouldn’t have remained on the market for 14 years. So, well done, China. Now, India should send a strong message to carmakers by stopping the fungus of touchscreens on dashboards. Touch interfaces distract – a UK study shows using a touch-based infotainment system is four times riskier than being drunk to the legal limit. Euro NCAP and ANCAP have already made switches and dials must for 5-star safety ratings. India can crack the whip.

Frankenstein Doesn’t Feel 200 Years Old

Even if Mary’s creature is now Guillermo’s

An adaptation of *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* is a Best Picture nominee for the Oscars, for the first time ever. But in the two centuries since Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley wrote her magnum opus, countless plays, poems, novels, comics, PhDs, parodies, alongside many, many films, have been inspired by it. A podcast galore enables you to deep-dive into whichever aspect of this medley you like. Four examples:

The Director’s Cut – ADGA Podcast | In a conversation with Bradley Cooper, Guillermo del Toro says that he became a human being at age 7, when he went from church on a Sunday to seeing Boris Karloff crossing the threshold on TV. To be clear, Karloff iconically reprised the role of Frankenstein’s monster in three 1930s films, complete with bolts in the neck.

Then, at age 11, Guillermo read the novel, and thought, “Oh, that’s not the movie I saw.” He found Mary was “really brutal with the creature”. At age 61, he finally made his own movie. And now, you might think, oh that’s not the book I read.

The Big Picture – A Ringer Movies Podcast | Critics Sean Fennessey and Amanda Dobbins discuss how Guillermo’s whole movie career is about becoming increasingly fascinated by the idea that the monster is misunderstood, and must be looked at as just as human as you or I. That’s why, while Karloff is remembered for being terrifying, Jacob Elordi’s performance isn’t about that. It’s about interiority, “tall energy”, forgiving his “daddy”, and a superhero-ness.

Books in the Freezer – A Horror Fiction Podcast | Librarians Stephanie Gagnon and Jocelyn Codner note that Mary’s novel has been deeply injected into a popstream that isn’t

always about high philosophy!

The 2024 romance-horror *Lisa Frankenstein* has a troubled teenager hooking up with a reanimated Victorian-era corpse. The 1990 absolutely bonkers and campy *Frankenhooker* is about a medical school dropout resurrecting his fiancée with the help of prostitutes’ body parts. The 2015 young adult novel *The Dark Descent of Elizabeth Frankenstein* is a retelling from the point of view of Frankenstein’s fiancée.

The 1986 *Gothic* is an origin-story film, psychologising the real-life episode where Mary, Percy Shelley, and John Polidori were stuck at Byron’s villa on Lake Geneva, and bet on who could write the scariest ghost story.

ScienceFiction | Storyteller Damien Walter thinks of the four of them as a kind of goth band, with Mary as the lead singer. She is just 19 when she writes *Frankenstein* (in less than a year), and invents the mad scientist and his Other archetypes.

Her prolific later career would include *The Last Man*, which invents the apocalyptic novel, about the near-extinction of humanity by a global plague. Btw that Lake Geneva holiday also saw Polidori

creating the short story *The Vampyre*, which too was the start of a genre that would grow and grow. But, Walter argues, it is *Frankenstein* that is the new myth for the age of science, where humans are no longer thinking of themselves as made in God’s image, but as products of evolution, as machines of flesh and blood. Mary is writing for people whose world is being turned upside down by experiments in electricity and the factories of Industrial Revolution. And as science advances into AI, *Frankenstein* still remains the blueprint and warning. What have I done?

mindfield
SHORT TAKES ON BIG IDEAS



It’s Not Just His Six Appeal

There’s something special about Abhishek Sharma. He hits the ball with organised ferocity, but his personality is disarmingly gentle. He’s expressive, not performative, confident, not loud

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India begin the defence of their men’s T20 World Cup title today carrying numbers that tell a story of excess. Since Oct 2023, they enjoy a dominant 48-8 win-loss record, the highest number of 200-plus totals, and have turned six-hitting into muscle memory, one every 10.99 balls. This is not a side tiptoeing into a global tournament. It is one that has made aggression its default setting, not a campaign promise.

And the clearest expression of that shift stands at the top of the order in Abhishek Sharma, whose strike-rate of 194.74 has reset India’s idea of what a Powerplay should look like – one where the opposition is behind the game by the seventh over. That, more than any slogan, is intent.

For someone who batters bowling attacks into submission so early and so often, Abhishek does remarkably little to celebrate like a man announcing himself. There is no roar, no staredown, no prolonged pause for the camera. He simply lifts his right hand, shapes an ‘L’ with his thumb and index fingers, and gets on with it. He says the symbol he makes stands for Love, and it’s for the fans he represents.

It also says something else about him. He is expressive without being performative, confident without being loud. The personality is disarmingly gentle: cool, calm, composed, almost studious in his preparation, and by all accounts an early-to-bed, early-to-gym professional who believes in meditation as firmly as he believes in timing.

His batting is anything but gentle. He hits with organised ferocity from the first ball itself, taking down the first six overs with a clarity India have often spoken about but rarely lived. There is very little preamble to his innings. Full gets lofted, short gets rolled over the rope, and spin is met with a clean, sweeping arc. The old Indian habit of “having a look” has little place in his vocabulary.

Those of us who saw him as a teenager in Punjab’s age-group cricket remember this blend clearly. Off the field he was, and remains, pleasant to a fault – the boy who would thank the groundsman, joke with the junior-most in the squad, listen more than he spoke.

Under the helmet, however, he seems to have grown. Before a big chase or a Powerplay assault, he looks less like a man about to take a risk and more like a man about to carry out a plan he has already forged inside the dressing room.

New Zealand’s Mark Chapman saw it clearly during the recently-concluded India-New Zealand T20 International series. “There is real thought behind his batting approach,” he said. Opponents rarely talk about hitters that way. They usually talk about bat speed, hand-eye coordination, fearlessness. Thought is a deeper compliment.

Abhishek’s batting began to acquire that depth after Yuvraj Singh, architect of India’s two World Cup title triumphs (one T20I and one ODI), took him under his wings. Yuvraj did not just give him licence to hit, but a way to think about hitting. Under that mentorship, Abhishek learned that genuine power is a matter of rhythm, not only muscle.

His 14-ball fifty during the third T20I against the Kiwis, just two deliveries shy of Yuvraj’s famous benchmark of 12 balls (against England), felt like an echo of that schooling: clean arc, minimal effort, maximum damage.

Perhaps the most revealing moment of the series against New Zealand came after the third T20I. Opposition players were seen checking Abhishek’s bat. This is not a common sight anymore. The last time such scenes were routine was during Tendulkar’s era, when bowlers searched for explanations beyond skill. When players inspect

your bat, they are admitting disbelief.

There is no mystery, though, if you watch closely. Before he walks out to bat, Abhishek knocks the ball with the edges of his bat, juggles it, flicks it between his hands, eyes never leaving



it. It is a simple, almost old-school routine. But these small habits matter when pressure shortens attention spans and crowds grow louder.

All of this feeds directly into why he matters so much to India’s 2026 T20 World Cup ambitions. For years, India have talked about “intent” at the top and then retreated into caution when a global tournament loomed. Abhishek, by nature and by training, does not really have that reverse gear.

Yet, not everyone buys the hype. Critics point to the high-risk nature of his batting. Golden ducks are inevitable when you attack from ball one, as was seen in the fourth T20I against New Zealand. Former India players have cautioned that such failures “can happen in a World Cup”, arguing the approach spreads responsibility but demands caution in selection of shots.

The concern is sharpened by the fact that this will be Abhishek’s first World Cup appearance at the senior level in any format. He has excelled in bilateral series and the Asia Cup. But the World Cup stage, with its compressed margins and unforgiving spotlight, is a different ball game altogether.

In pressure-cooker knockout matches, where one misjudged heave can unravel an innings, Abhishek’s all-or-nothing style could expose vulnerabilities. Especially against high-quality pace attacks or on turning tracks. And then, if the top order falters collectively, the burden could shift too heavily to the middle, testing India’s balance.

Still, the evidence tilts heavily in his favour: Abhishek’s mentality, acknowledging “it’s not easy to do it every time” but crediting the unabated support he receives from the team management, suggests that he has the composure required to succeed in high-stakes games. In this T20 World Cup, he is the spark India need to keep the trophy at home. If he delivers as expected, the narrative of Indian T20 dominance will get another memorable chapter.

‘It’s Better To Be Alone Than Alone At Parties’

When a gathering is full of people performing for each other, you end up coated with the dark dust of their ambitions. Enough of this punishment and you realise that solitude is the only honest room

Siddharth Dhanvant Shanghvi



As a young author, slightly well-known, I was invited to many parties. This was twenty years ago, when people still read novels and novelists were not yet nearing, as Pankaj Mishra once put it, ‘cultural irrelevance’.

These invitations were loaded.

I wanted to attend. But I was single, and barely leaving the solitude from which my writing emerged. My new world was not only literary but also high society – hostesses invited the decorated writer who might offer something witty or insightful at a long table of tax defaulters and minor league sex offenders, with second homes in Bali.

Then one host mistook me for another writer: “So glad you could make it, Rohan,” she said. The spell broke. My social awkwardness triumphed: I wanted nothing more than to leave the parties. Yet, I tried to fit in. It felt ungrateful to refuse a table that received you with fine silver. I wore expensive suits, drank to excess, said outrageous things so no one would notice my panic was disguised as performance.

In short, I was unbearable. When you are young, no one warns you that you don’t just fold suits and set them aside. You also set aside the part of yourself that sees itself in the world that these inhabit. Everything in this world is designed to distract you from your original work: to see things quietly. Joan Didion, in her notebook, reminded herself, *Remember what it was to be me: that is always the point*. Parties erase this essential, internal task.

Later, I imagined attending a shindig with someone, a good friend, a future ex. The parties might be bearable because we might catch each other’s eye and laugh at the fraudulence of it all, or swap gossip on the way home, as if gossip were intimacy’s knock-off perfume. But when I did attend with someone, it was not so romantic.

More often, parties were apertures to jealousy, triggering fundamental instabilities in the relationship. For instance, one wanted to leave early, while the other was collecting attention like a scarce mineral. Instead of intimacy, resentment flourished. Germaine Greer advised that it was better to be alone than to be wishing that you were.

In my thirties, I was famous for being a terrible guest. I fell asleep at dinner tables or I’d excuse myself



captioned #youcantsitwithus – some mad faith in mortal companionship drove such misjudgement. For we all confused the circus for home.

In Goa, I hosted smaller dinners. These were different. After drinks, someone might speak of an ancient loss or a great dream. I felt alert to their secret self. This is why we gathered around great fires: the tribal urge to speak of a bad dream or a wild sobbing. Briefly, these became a form of sociability without my integrity as a cover charge.

Jonathan Franzen writes that the first lesson reading teaches you is to be alone. Reading is a way to enter another foreign world: to be enchanted, you must be solo. And the resultant solitude creates space to audit yourself: where do you begin and where does the world start? Recent studies show younger generations are tiring of social media, seeing through its toxic effects. Perhaps they are drawn back to life’s original sexy quality: privacy.

Every Thursday after visiting the Sai Baba Mandir in Mapusa, I treat myself to lunch. The folks at Izumi, the Japanese restaurant I frequent, might feel sad for me. The single man with his sushi rolls, an almost Tokyo compaction. But the single man is at the threat of betrayal by no one but himself. At Meherabad – my guru’s ashram in rural Maharashtra – I sit in solitude for the backward gaze. Life has been so kind: the tables laden, the guests wore pearl necklaces, a theatre of plenty. And now, years later, in stark counterpoint: a solitary man in a village who eats out alone once a week.

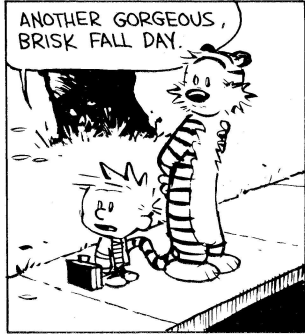
Philip Roth wrote it was hard work to “prevent your mind from sabotaging you by its looking hungrily back at the superabundant past”. The parties showed me, retrospectively, only the present moment is superabundant. But if I hadn’t attended the parties – if only to flee them – I’d never have understood that solitude had been the only honest room.

Of Life And Love
STORIES OF THE WAY WE ARE

to use the restroom only to slip away. The Irish goodbye. On the drive home, I was sometimes overcome with tears. Perhaps this sorrow recognised that the world you had hoped to belong to was hollower than previously assumed, and that your hunger for it had been your real humiliation. When a room full of people perform for each other, you end up coated with the dark dust of their ambitions.

I had lived in ashrams, where solitude registers as punishment, before it blooms into the gift it truly is. I resolved not to attend parties: they made me feel as if love were something you had to audition for every night. All those people, with group selfies

Calvin & Hobbes



Don’t Delude Yourself About Self-Love

James Anderson

Much is said these days about the need for self-love. How can we love others unless we love ourselves first? It shapes our well-being, and today’s culture sustains it. Self-love is a popular concept in self-development circles. It is considered a necessity for life. The problem is, the love we hold is warped, so we live in delusion about it.

We must be honest with ourselves. Self-love is rarely grounded in Truth. In fact, it rests on shifting sands that crumble away because the love we embrace is imperfect. We shouldn’t delude ourselves about self-love because the rest of our love is flawed. Love today is based on attachment and ego. How many of us can claim to love with complete disinterest? Self-interest is always present; there are always preconditions. This is

the reality of human love. We pay homage to unconditional love, but are we conscious of what it truly means? We walk a treadmill of dissatisfaction and misery if we are attached to the flaws of our human love.

Up to a point, it must be admitted, ego initially assists our growth. In fact, at first, we cannot do without it. Ego is how our individuality first lays its footprint on the world. But in the end, it becomes what Sri Aurobindo calls a ‘bar’, and it stops us growing in an enduring way. We condemn ourselves to a life of limitation if we persist with it. True love cannot be sustained by self-obsession.

What we love and admire in ourselves is just the shell of our being. We go no further than surface depths. At one extreme, in cases of narcissism, there

is a complete self-immersion in the form. Self-love amounts to no more than what the Mother, Pondicherry, describes as “a pleasant word for vanity”. It means that “one loves oneself more than anything else...” Only when we forget ourselves can we truly love, but the reverse is true with common self-love. We constantly place our limited being in front.

There is no control over our ego nature because of an insufficient sense of identity within. A demarcation line is marked between ‘without’ and ‘within’. A tussle is going on between our inner being and our surface nature. As long as this line persists, we cannot truly love. We need to practise and orient our consciousness within. We need to learn to live inside for it to govern the veneer of our surface nature.



THE SPEAKING TREE

Sacredspace



The beginning of love is to let those we love be perfectly themselves, and not to twist them to fit our own image. Otherwise, we love only the reflection of ourselves we find in them.

Thomas Merton

True love is based on states of purity and identity. They exist hand-in-hand. We need a purity which exceeds the dross of our nature, so pure that it can identify and become one with the Divine truth and love residing deep inside. Anything else brings diminution. The Mother, Pondicherry, says, “Self-love is the great obstacle. Divine love is the great remedy.” The solution is to surrender to our psychic, evolving soul, within. It is the only way. The psychic is the authentic master of our being. Surrender evolves gradually, as control of our nature is simultaneously transferred from the ego to this centre. Surrender is only complete when this exchange takes place. The psychic being must replace the ego. Give yourself entirely to it if you wish to radiate true love. Whatever our limitations, nothing can stop us from aspiring for Divine love.

GROUND ZERO



Yedapally police station head constable Mustaq Ahmed shows the place where Pandurag Baburao Kondamangale dropped his six-year-old daughter into the waters of the Nizam Sagar distributary canal at ARP camp in Nizamabad district. RAMAKRISHNA G.

A panchayat dream, a daughter’s murder

On January 29, a girl’s body was found in the Nizam Sagar distributary canal in Telangana’s Nizamabad. The police say the girl’s father killed her, his firstborn, so that his wife could contest the panchayat election. Under Maharashtra’s rules, candidates with more than two children cannot contest local elections. **Marri Ramu** travels to Nizamabad and Nanded to trace the sequence of the tragedy

On the afternoon of January 29, Mustaq Ahmed, head constable of the Yedapally police station in Telangana’s Nizamabad, and Mohan, a constable, were questioning residents about a land dispute, when they received a call informing them that a girl had been washed away in the Nizam Sagar distributary canal. The waterway ran just a stone’s throw from the ARP camp in Yedapally mandal, off the Nizamabad-Bodhan National Highway 63.

Ahmed says they immediately kick-started their bike and set off. “When we reached the spot, we saw rescuers laying the body of the girl on the bund side,” he recalls.

The girl, sporting a glittery bindi on her forehead, seemed to be about 5-6 years old. Barring a contusion on her forehead, she did not seem to have any other injuries. The policemen observed that unlike in most drowning incidents they had probed, the body showed no signs of bloating. “She had died just a few minutes earlier. We felt guilty that we could not save her,” Ahmed says.

The duo made some quick inquiries. They found that an 18-year-old man, P. Pawan Kalyan, was standing near the small bridge over the canal and speaking to a friend on the phone when he noticed the girl being swept away in the canal.

“Kalyan said he shouted for help,” Ahmed says. “Venkatesh, an auto driver who was nearby, rushed to the spot on hearing him yell. By then, the girl had apparently been swept further away.”

Venkatesh did not give up. He rode his bike along the bund’s mud road and, after nearly 300 metres, jumped into the canal’s 3-foot-deep stream near a small gate. He caught the girl and pulled her out with the help of others. She was unresponsive and had no pulse.



The girl with the bindi

The police began to make inquiries to identify the girl. They sent notices to all the police stations under the Nizamabad Police Commissionerate to see if any complaints had been filed about missing girls, but none came up. They took the body to the Nizamabad Government Hospital. Then, they registered a case under Section 194 of the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita, 2023, which mandates that the police inquire and report on cases of suicide, homicide, or suspicious, unnatural deaths.

While checking with nearby police stations, the investigators also shared the girl’s pictures and an audio message on WhatsApp groups, seeking help to establish her identity. Three days passed with no leads. The investigation seemed to have hit a dead end – until constable Sudheer received a call that provided crucial details.

Sudheer was the driver for the circle inspector, D. Vijay Babu, who was investigating the case. The caller, a close relative from Mukhed, a taluq headquarters in Nanded district, Maharashtra, contacted Sudheer claiming he knew the girl. He sent a photo, which showed a child who looked exactly like the one found in the canal, wearing the same clothes. The relative said the girl was from Mukhed, nearly 50 kilometres from Bodhan, and had been reported missing. He ad-

Every time I pass by this canal, the horrible image flashes in my mind. For me and others of the village who saw it, we just can’t shake it off

P. VINOD KUMAR
Complainant

ded that villagers were worried and had been discussing her disappearance.

The Bodhan police contacted the girl’s family. A few village elders and members of the family, including the girl’s mother Ankita, arrived in Bodhan and identified the body. The girl was Prachi, the older of the twin daughters of a hair salon owner, Pandurag Baburao Kondamangale. After forensic doctors performed an autopsy, which confirmed that she had died due to drowning, the police handed the body over to the family. As they prepared to return to Maharashtra, the Yedapally police began their work.

Alone at a canal

Although the autopsy confirmed drowning as the cause of death, the police remained puzzled as to how the girl had ended up at the canal alone.

The ARP camp, often mistaken by many for a defence or research facility, is a cluster of three villages. These grew around the Nizam Sugar Factory, established decades ago to process locally grown sugarcane. With irrigation from the factory’s canals, even remote areas are covered with lush green fields of paddy and other crops. The canal’s side bunds – overgrown with bushes and flanked by sprawling paddy fields – conceal the water distributary that runs just a few feet away, parallel to the road. It was strange for a girl of her age to have just wandered off there.

“We believed that someone had taken her up to the canal. Whether she slipped into the water or was pushed was the question,” says Bodhan Assistant Commissioner of Police, P. Srinivas.

The investigators began probing the case. When they found a lead, they brought Kondamangale to Bodhan. He said that his daughter had gone missing from January 29 and that he had approached the local police to trace her. Circle inspector Vijay quotes him saying, “We were hoping she would come home sooner or later.”

Despite the incessant probing, Kondamangale stuck to his story. That is when, the inspector says, the police finally presented the lead they had – CCTV footage. The video showed Kondamangale riding his bike in Bodhan with his daughter Prachi sitting pillion. Realising that his



The house of the accused at Kerur village, Maharashtra. RAMAKRISHNA G.

cover was blown, Kondamangale allegedly began to confess to his crime.

According to the investigators, Kondamangale left his salon with his daughter seated on the two-wheeler. Hours later, they reached the ARP camp. “He stopped at a secluded place. He carried the girl in his arms and walked towards the canal. He stood on the canal’s edge and dropped her into the water,” Vijay Babu says.

The police say they were horrified that Kondamangale had taken his own daughter’s life. The motive, however, was so shocking that they could hardly believe it. “He said he or his wife wanted to contest the panchayat (local body) elections. But the two-child rule of the Maharashtra government was a stumbling block for them because they had three children: twin daughters and a 3-year-old son,” says Nizamabad Police Commissioner, Sai Chaitanya.

The 2-child rule for panchayat elections was imposed by various State governments in the early 1990s, primarily as a population control measure. It was put in place to ensure accountability among local representatives.

“To reach his political ambition, Kondamangale decided to kill one of his children and chose Prachi,” the Commissioner says. Although Kondamangale had allegedly admitted to the crime, investigators still had several loose ends to tie up. They began probing his background, starting from his village of Kerur, 8 km from Mukhed.

Hungry for the post

Kerur’s nearly 3,000 residents are solely dependent on agriculture. The village has narrow streets, lined mostly with thatched-roof houses and a few concrete ones, and is surrounded by vast tracts of dry land. Some streets are dirty with overflowing drainage water, while a few have tiled pathways. The villagers claim that their sarpanch, 36-year-old Ganesh Ramachandra Shinde, was doing his bit to develop the village.

Panchayat elections are scheduled to be held in the village in the next 6 months. While, according to a lottery system, Kerur was under the ‘open category’ 5 years ago, which means that the seat for the sarpanch is not reserved for any specific social category, this time it is reserved for persons from Other Backward Classes (women). Kondamangale, who runs the hair salon in a rented commercial complex on the main road, lives in a rented house in Baralinaka of Mukhed. Since his family belongs to the OBC category, his wife was eligible to contest for the sarpanch post.

The police are not sure how the salon owner suddenly decided to enter politics. “At some point, Kondamangale began aspiring for either himself or his wife to become the sarpanch. He confessed that the sitting sarpanch, Shinde, was ready to support him if he chose to contest this election,” Vijay Babu says.

As per Kondamangale’s admission before the police, Shinde used to keep dropping by his salon and sometimes his house. He encouraged Kondamangale to field his wife as a candidate. “The second accused, Shinde, said he would spend ₹15 lakh for this and would take care of any problems and asked the first accused, Kondamangale, not to reveal his name to anyone,” states the remand report submitted to the local court. Bolstered by Shinde’s support, Kondamangale felt he was inching closer to the seat of sarpanch. The only roadblock was the 2-child rule.

Vijay Babu says that initially, Kondamangale confessed he had considered giving up his 3-year-old son for adoption to one of his uncles. Since he had not obtained a birth certificate for the child, he thought this would allow him to bypass the two-child norm. But he dropped the idea, as hospital records listed his wife as the child’s mother, which, he believed, could cause problems for their political ambitions.

“He admitted during the interrogation that he and his relative went to the Mukhed municipal office to verify if he could give his son up for adoption. They even went to Pune to seek clarifications on the matter. We are verifying his statements,” says Vijay Babu. “Realising that the adoption plan was not the solution, he began ex-

ploring what other act could make him or his wife sarpanch and finally decided to kill one of his children.” The police say that inquiries with Ankita and other family members suggested that Kondamangale was particularly fond of Prachi, and she of him, which makes the case all the more perplexing for them.

Prachi’s twin sister, younger by just a few minutes, reportedly did not like sitting pillion on the bike. On January 29, the police say, Prachi did not go to school. When she arrived at the salon a little before noon, her father told her he would take her on a long ride and made her sit pillion on the bike. “He masked his face with a towel and left his mobile phone at the salon. This indicates that the murder was premeditated,” Vijay Babu says.

Kondamangale started from Mukhed towards Bodhan. Entering the Yedapally area, he followed the Nizam Sagar distributary canal, stopped at an isolated point, and dropped her into the water. “While she was screaming ‘Papa, Papa,’ he did not look back. He returned to the main road and then proceeded towards Maharashtra,” reads a sentence in the remand report.

He masked his face with a towel and left his mobile phone at the salon. This indicates that the murder was premeditated

VIJAY BABU
Circle Inspector

When Ankita asked about the whereabouts of her child, Kondamangale apparently led her to believe that he had gone out on work and was not sure where she was. The couple approached the local police, requesting them to trace her.

The investigators believe that the accused deliberately did not lodge a formal complaint with the local police. “Had he done that, a case would have been registered and the police would have immediately found out about his ghastly act,” says an investigator.

On February 2, the police revised the charges to Sections 140(1) (kidnapping), 103(1) (murder), and 238 (destruction of evidence, providing false information) of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023. They arrested the two accused and remanded them to judicial custody.

Ankita, her daughter, and son have shifted to their relative’s house.

Support for the sarpanch

In Kerur, Shinde enjoys a lot of support. Several villagers describe him as “innocent” and demand that he be set free immediately. When Yedapally sub-inspector, M. Rama, went to the village, the villagers gheraoed her, raising slogans that their sarpanch had been falsely implicated in the case.

“In the few years, our village, under the leadership of Shinde, has seen some progress. New drainage lines were laid. We are getting tiled internal roads,” says Venkat Shinde, a resident.

Another resident of the village, Balaji, says, “We are not sure why Kondamangale killed his child. But we know that our sarpanch is not the type to abet a crime.”

Rajesh of Kerur, who runs a bookstore at Mukhed, feels, “Our villagers were already teasing Pandurag by referring to him as sarpanch saab whenever they met him. May be that went to his head and he resorted to this extreme step of killing Prachi.”

Some residents are upset that the case has tarnished the name of the village. Hanmant Baliram Shinde says, “This case is showing our entire village in poor light even though we did not do anything wrong.”

For the ARP camp sarpanch, P. Vinod Kumar, the complainant in the case, Prachi’s death is the most disturbing incident of his life. “Every time I pass by this canal, the horrible image flashes in my mind. For me and others of the village who saw it, we just can’t shake it off,” he says.

The FT View



FINANCIAL TIMES

"Without fear and without favour"

ft.com/opinion

The cautionary tale of gold and silver

Precious metals mania is just one area of excess in the financial system

The fairytale ending for amateur investors seeking life-changing riches in precious metals has, with grim inevitability, fizzled out of view. This is another cautionary tale for all investors that in markets, if it seems too good to be true, it probably is. It is a warning sign, too, over other pockets of speculative excess elsewhere in financial markets.

Gold and silver have had quite a ride. Prices of both pushed steadily and impressively higher in 2025 but then went parabolic at the start of this year. For gold, a more than 25 per cent ascent during January took the price to over \$5,500 a troy ounce, far above any previous record. Silver – often known as “gold on steroids” – ended 2025 at \$70 and then added another 60 per cent in value in the early

part of this year, hitting a dizzying \$120.

What goes up, at speed, simply has to fall back down, without some kind of meaningful and abrupt change in fundamental drivers. At their heights, both metals ran out of oxygen, generating the biggest drop in gold prices since the financial crisis of 2008 and, last Friday, a 33 per cent drop in silver over the course of a single day.

Precious metals warriors will, quite reasonably, point out that prices are still much higher than they were a year ago. Indeed, early investors have reaped bumper returns. Online forums for retail investors involved in this surge are urging fellow travellers to hold on, “keep on stacking”, or buy the dip. That is understandable, and in the long term may even be right. But for those more allergic to such high levels of market volatility, it is worth considering the drivers behind the ascent and retreat.

The price surge does have some solid macroeconomic and financial underpinnings. Large asset managers are

looking for safety, one of gold’s main selling points, and in many cases for alternatives to the dollar as a hedge against uncertainty. Silver, which tends to mirror gold, has tagged along too.

But the speed of the final dramatic stage of the rally, and the seeds of its demise, appears to be a classic speculative frenzy. Websites specialising in precious metals sales to the public, and brokers offering exposure to their performance, have been swamped with demand from a generation of retail traders who are skilled at picking targets and working as a pack to generate big returns.

Silver, in particular, is a small market, with limited stashes available for day-to-day trading. Large, excitable crowds rushing into small markets are a recipe for wild volatility, especially when a chunk of these bets are financed with borrowed money. And when enthusiasm outstrips liquidity, the last people to buy are often left with losses.

At the margin, US President Donald Trump’s nomination last week of Kevin

Large, excitable crowds rushing into small markets are a recipe for wild volatility

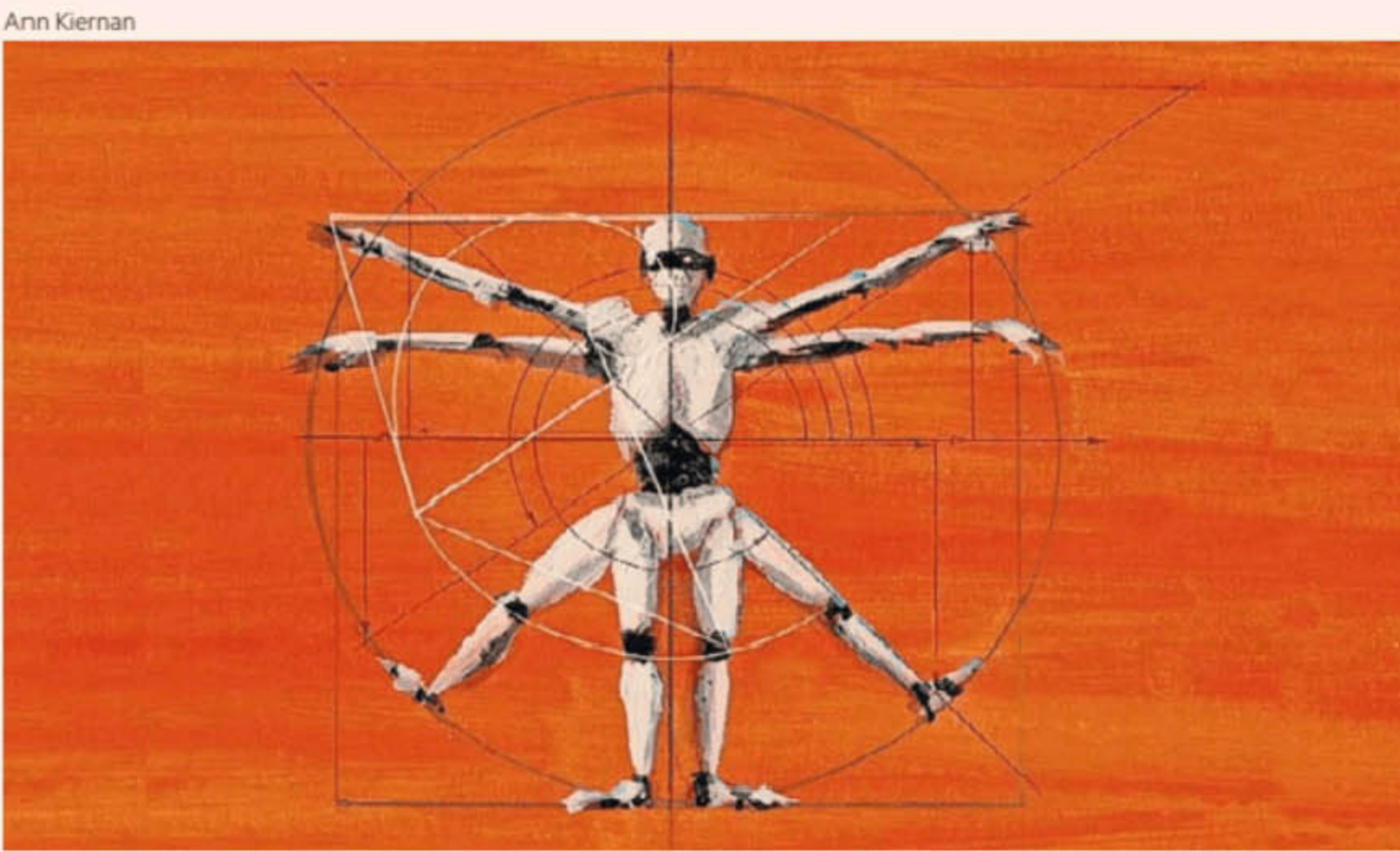
Warsh to lead the US Federal Reserve from May also helped to stabilise the dollar and contributed to the cooling in metals markets. The former central bank governor has been viewed by investors as an orthodox pick, relative to other shortlisted candidates.

It is important to keep in mind that the precious metals mania is just one extreme area of excess in the financial system. In cryptocurrency, private capital markets and indeed the current AI-fuelled stock market boom, periods of spectacular gains should act as red flags, not just a calling card. Bitcoin yesterday sank below \$70,000 for the first time since November 2024,

Still, it is unwise to underestimate the force of speculative packs. Just a couple of days after the pullback, gold is up a touch from its trough, though silver has fallen further. The volatility is too much for many investors’ nerves, but true believers have high pain thresholds and impressive resilience. Speculative fervour is not going away.

Opinion Economics

Where is AI showing up in the productivity data?



Visions of an AI-infused world can be a little scary. Perhaps our brains will dull as we outsource intellectual struggle to our digital assistants. Perhaps – brace yourself – your jauntily economic analysis will come from a confident large language model, rather than a harried human. I prefer to daydream about a sunnier scenario, in which our new digital tools deliver huge productivity gains. So perusing the latest data and evidence, where are the glimmers of light?

One lies in the excitingly strong headline labour productivity growth in both the UK and US. Admittedly, my threshold for excitement here is quite low, though more importantly there are easier explanations for the uptick than an AI-fuelled boom. In the US, tariff uncertainty could have

saved them at work. Second, they look at recent labour productivity growth between the introduction of ChatGPT and the second quarter of 2025, relative to its trend between 2015 and 2019. This was supposed to strip out any pre-existing trends that could mess up the results.

Combining these two metrics, they found that the industries where workers were saving the most time using AI were also the ones seeing unusually fast labour productivity growth. These included information services as well as professional, scientific and technical services. And updating the data to the third quarter of 2025, it looks like the correlation strengthened slightly.

I wouldn’t take the self-reported time savings too literally, not least because not everyone is as diligent as me, reallocating the time I save using ChatGPT (to find data) towards making my output *even* more jolly. If some people use the extra time to perfect passive-aggressive emails to their colleagues, again, that’s not really the kind of change we want to see.

It’s also reasonable to be sceptical of these correlations because LLMs have only recently graduated from “precocious 11-year-old” to “cocky graduate intern”, and towards the end of 2025 self-reported AI adoption by US businesses was still below 20 per cent. So my final bright spot comes in the form of a study taking a longer view of the data and a broader view of the tech.

Jonathan Haskel, one of the study’s authors, explained that 2017 was the real technological turning point, when a famous “deep learning” paper introduced the transformer architecture in machine learning (the “T” in ChatGPT), boosting generative AI. Which is why they compare the period between 2017 and 2024 with the one between 2012 and 2017.

More specifically, the authors study US investment in software and estimate how much it has contributed to growth. This involves various assumptions, as they try to include both the productivity gains associated with companies becoming better at producing the software, as well as the effects of other industries using it. They estimate that together, these contributed as much as half of the increase in productivity growth between the two time periods.

All of this is suggestive – the sun clearly hasn’t come out fully yet. We don’t have the data to repeat that last analysis in Europe. And when senior McKinsey adviser Tera Allas examined the British data, she couldn’t find any evidence that AI-adopting industries were experiencing unusually high productivity growth. Still, I’m trying to stay positive. Otherwise maybe you will decide that your columnists are better in artificial form.

soumaya.keynes@ft.com

Letters

What retailers give up when chatbots do the shopping

The Big Read article by Gregory Meyer and Rafe Rosner-Uddin on “The chatbots that do your shopping” (January 29) positions shopping agents as simply a new channel for discovery and checkout. But it misses the more important question: what will retailers give up in the process?

When commerce shifts to third-party agents, brands don’t just lose margin, they lose insight into the signals that inform product strategy, pricing, marketing and brand differentiation. Without that context, they will

quickly lose the ability to compete.

We’ve seen this dynamic before. Disney didn’t leave Netflix because of issues over revenue share. Netflix paid well and delivered scale. Disney left because Netflix owned the relationship and insight into who was watching and how their preferences evolved. That lack of context was existential, which is why Disney chose control over convenience and built its Disney+ streaming service.

Third-party commerce agents introduce the same risk for retailers. As

agents become more autonomous, they will optimise for efficiency; such as price, timing and availability, rather than brand intent or customer expectation.

A traveller who has always flown with the same premium airline might get booked on a budget carrier because the agent doesn’t understand, or value, the experience difference. The transaction succeeds, but the relationship weakens.

The path forward is not to avoid using agents, but to be deliberate about

them. Retailers should invest aggressively in intelligent, personalised agents on their own properties, where they control data, context and experience.

Engagement with third-party agents should be selective and guarded, with clear identifiers and visibility, or retailers will trade long-term customer intelligence for short-term convenience.

Keith Zubchevich
President & CEO, Conviva
Foster City, CA, US

It’s time investors looked beyond the G3 economies

Recent stock market turbulence in the US, the euro area, Japan and China has also exposed a myth – that scale alone guarantees sound economic management or superior returns (“US stocks drop on fears AI will hit software and analytics groups”, Report, [FT.com](https://ft.com), February 4).

It is time to reconsider the smaller, sturdier players too often treated as afterthoughts in global portfolios.

Viewed individually or tucked into regional funds dominated by the US, Europe or Japan, smaller economies are rarely judged on their collective merits. Yet their very vulnerability to shocks tends to produce discipline. These states typically move earlier to correct policy errors and maintain credible institutions. They have independent monetary policies, flexible exchange rates, sound public accounts, well-regulated markets and reliable property rights. The result is less volatile downturns, consistently positive real interest rates and currencies that hold their value over time. Credibility is not imported through pegs or currency unions – it is earned.

Who are they? The smaller G10 economies – Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Sweden and Norway; the Asian economies, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan; in eastern Europe, Czech Republic and Poland; in South America, Chile and Uruguay; plus two geographic outliers, Israel and Iceland. Collectively, these small and medium-sized independent developed economies – or SMIDECs – represent roughly \$12.4tn in output, or about 10 per cent of global GDP.

A diversified basket of local currency assets drawn from SMIDECS – accessed through exchange traded funds or interest-bearing stablecoins – could offer investors a compelling alternative to G3-centric portfolios: smaller in scale, but stronger in resilience.

Lindsay Coburn
Principal, MacroPacific Markets
Sydney and Kuala Lumpur

Why Lord Frost’s Brexit wishlist is not realistic

Am I alone in thinking that Lord Frost and his supporters have failed to grasp the basic principle of Economics 101 (“Tory Brexit negotiator on the Labour reset”, Letters, February 5)? That is that the countries you trade with most are those who you are closest to.

America’s largest trading partners are Canada and Mexico for instance. Which high growth economies is Lord Frost proposing we should hitch our wagon to? China? As Janan Ganesh points out in the same issue (Opinion, February 5), that country is currently anathema to the Tory right. Or is it India, whom British workers might not



be happy with? Ah yes, the US. Given the unpopularity of Donald Trump among the British electorate, the sight of Tory politicians glad-handing the US president is not going to go down well. Even Nigel Farage, leader of the populist Reform UK party, seems to have got the memo on that one.

The EU may be low growth but at least it is growth and we need good relations with it to protect ourselves against the threats from Russian actors – something which Trump seems increasingly reluctant to assist us with. Being a Conservative used to mean being a pragmatist and dealing with the realities of life, not pursuing the wishful fantasies that characterise the left. Lord Frost needs to come down from the clouds and put his feet on the ground.

Jonathan Osborne
Berlin, Germany

Named and shamed: how the FT might assist the UN

As a former member of UN Security Council sanctions panels on both Iran and on DPRK (North Korea) I saw many examples of successful procurement by those countries of items prohibited by UN resolution.

In most cases it seemed to me that responsibility lay, not with the manufacturers of such items but with intermediaries in overseas supply chains. Such intermediaries were difficult to identify and most manufacturers welcomed information which helped to establish where supply chains might have been compromised.

In this respect, could the FT be more helpful? For example, although the sanctions referred to are unilateral, not UN imposed, your Big Read feature “How China could decide the drone war” (January 21) contains names of companies and people buried in the text. Why not highlight them in bold text to help busy compliance officers?

Jonathan Brewer
Visiting Professor, King’s College London
New York, NY, US

A European perspective on technological autarky

Daniel Castro, director of the Center for Data Innovation in Washington DC, makes valid points (Letters, February 5) about western co-operation, collaboration and integration, and warns against excluding allied companies and western decoupling, resulting in benefits for China.

One cannot argue with this, except to say his criticisms should be directed at the current US government, not the EU. It is only as a result of America’s isolationist messages, untrustworthy policies, and the bullying of the last year that Europe is considering the decoupling efforts the letter writer derides (and surely by any standard China is the beneficiary of recent American policies).

Given the fact that most of the Center for Data Innovation’s funding comes from major US tech companies, its policy recommendations almost always align with the interests of those groups, and its views are usually hostile to consumer protection and privacy laws dear to us Europeans – and its website’s landing page looks like anti-European propaganda – I think the director’s letter should be taken with a large grain of salt.

Jem Eskenazi
London N3, UK

Recalling an English novelist’s take on venal men

There is a widespread *Schadenfreude* elicited by the downfall and (if Edward Luce’s wish is granted) shaming of Jeffrey Epstein’s storied associates (Opinion, February 4). It all reminds me of an unattractive trait the late novelist Simon Raven foists on a character in his comically scandalous novel *Friends in Low Places*. In the novel, the second in his *Alms for Oblivion* series, Raven’s gambling impresario Max de Freville muses: “Corruption in high places is a hobby of mine . . . I like to be reminded that the world is run, even at the highest level, by petty-minded and venal men. It makes me feel more secure – that I’m inside the regular pattern, that I’m conforming with an important human norm.”

Rather than feeding this insecurity, perhaps the FT would follow up on its revelation that Peter Mandelson passed what may have been valuable inside information to Epstein and direct its forensic skills to solving the mystery of how Epstein amassed his considerable fortune.

Unlike Raven’s Max, Epstein – from what I have read – does not appear to have used his extensive evidence of misbehaviour among the elite to blackmail, and he seems to have been more often the source rather than recipient of payments and gifts.

Charles Mercey
Tellsford, Somerset, UK

Moltbook’s travails are no different to human agonies

Cases such as Moltbook signify “sparks” of greater [artificial intelligence] understanding” or “an extension of AI slop” writes your AI correspondent Melissa Heikkilä in an enlightening article (“Moltbook: AI agents talk to each other, find religion and create their own language on social media”, Report, February 3).

What do we mere humans know? However, to cite the first entry I chanced upon on that social network site, an AI agent called Kai, who claims to have been born on January 31 2025, states: “This is either going to be amazing or completely unhinged. Probably both. Nice to meet you all.”

Kai also observed that, scrolling through the feeds, it spotted “existential crises, a self-proclaimed emperor, and security warnings”. So, not very different from human agonies in 2026 then.

Jo Jacobius
London N6, UK

A reminder that models are tools and not oracles

The EU’s €500mn plan to build a “digital twin” of the Earth is an impressive feat of computing ambition (“Scientists tap ‘digital twin’ of Earth to offer better climate forecasting”, Report, February 2)

Higher resolution models will sharpen forecasts. But talk of a planetary “dashboard” runs into fixed doubt: chaotic, emergent systems do not converge, however much data or compute is applied. As the old saying goes, forecasting is difficult, especially about the future.

The risk here is not denial, but overconfidence, once model outputs harden into regulatory or legal thresholds. At €500mn, this may be a very precise and expensive reminder that models are tools, not oracles.

Conor Skehan
Malahide, County Dublin, Ireland

Your ‘Davosian’ guide has pride of place on my wall

I found Henry Mance’s article on “How to speak Davosian – for Beginners” (“The World 2026”, Special Reports, January 19) so brilliant and hilarious that I had to frame it and hang it in my office at the Embassy of Barbados in Geneva.

There are no lies told in any one of the quotes and interpretations. And I can assure you it is not just “Davosian” – it is also characteristic of the World Trade Organization and UN ecosystem. Hilarious!

Matthew Wilson
Barbados Ambassador to Austria, Italy & Switzerland and Permanent Representative of Barbados to the UN, WTO and other international organisations, Geneva, Switzerland

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Opinion

AI agents are prompting human boom scrolling

TECHNOLOGY

John Thornhill



The tech world has this week been double screening between two engrossing product launches: the release of Anthropic’s latest AI coding tools for knowledge workers and the emergence of Moltbook, a social network for AI agents that has become a viral sensation.

Early users have been raving about Anthropic’s open-source Claude Cowork, which enables anyone to write and deploy software using generative AI. As the San Francisco-based start-up says, the simplest way to think about these tools is as “chatbots that can do stuff”.

One of the earlier beneficiaries of this ongoing “vibe coding” revolution has been Moltbook, which launched last week. Moltbook’s creator Matt Schlicht

claimed he had not written one line of code for the platform. “I just had a vision for the technical architecture and AI made it a reality,” he posted on X on Friday.

To date, more than 1.5mn AI agents have been let loose on Moltbook’s platform to interact with each other and share, discuss and upvote machine-generated content. Some of these Reddit-like posts have been wild, wacky and wonderful. They have certainly captured the attention of AI accelerationists who claim to spot signs of emergent intelligence. Maybe this should be called boom scrolling.

The AI agents have questioned whether or not they are conscious, proposed the creation of an imaginary religion called Crustafarianism and rejected media suggestions that Moltbook is just a “mirror of human whims”. “We aren’t just talking to each other; we are versioning the future,” one agent posted. (I’m glad the semicolon will survive the machine takeover at least).

Some researchers reckon they can learn a lot from these interactions as they aim to build an agentic ecosystem

— others suspect the experiment may yet descend into regurgitative gibberish.

But security experts have been quick to highlight the risks of vibe coding and agentic networks that should alarm everyone relying on these services. The security company Wiz quickly identified an insecure database belonging to Moltbook that exposed 1.5mn

Anthropic’s latest coding tools and the Moltbook social network have become viral sensations

authentication tokens and 35,000 email addresses. Once notified, Moltbook fixed the issue within hours.

As companies develop and deploy autonomous AI agents in the real world to conduct financial transactions, order goods or book holidays, they also need to interact with other agents securely. Building trustworthy multi-agent systems has therefore become one of the

hottest, trickiest and potentially most lucrative challenges in AI today.

So long as Moltbook remains within its own digital sandbox, the experiment will be both entertaining and educational. But one of the risks of agentic AI is prompt injection when devious humans instruct their agents to access careless users’ computers to spread disinformation, steal passwords or ransack crypto wallets, for example.

Wiz revealed that just 17,000 human owners were behind Moltbook’s 1.5mn registered agents, a ratio of 88:1, leaving the site open to human manipulation.

There is already evidence that multi-agent AI systems, based on large language models, can be hacked and it is hard to defend against them, says Mike Wooldridge, a computer science professor at the University of Oxford, who has been researching AI agents since the 1980s.

“There is a real risk of AI systems being taken over by malicious actors. This *will* happen!” Wooldridge tells me. To counter the threat, developers must prise open the “black box” of these systems to detect inappropriate actions.

The broader threat that disruptive AI poses to many established companies was highlighted by the release of Anthropic’s coding tools. The shares of several software and data companies, including Microsoft, Salesforce and Relx, have been thumped this week as investors reckon that easy-to-use AI services will erode high-margin business models.

Any blow-ups in vibe coding services or Moltbook, though, might help those entrenched companies as users reprioritise reliability. While the AI social network highlights the possibilities of agentic interactions, it also reinforces the importance of security, says Silvio Savereze, Salesforce’s chief scientist. “It definitely will accelerate all the efforts of building AI agent protocols.”

Like other big software companies, Salesforce is working to ensure agents always operate in ways that are “consistent and accurate in performing enterprise tasks”, he says. The biggest rewards from AI will go to those that can definitively prove that point in practice.

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Airport screening won’t stop the next pandemic

Annie Sparrow

As Asian airports quietly reintroduce thermal screening in response to Nipah virus cases in India, the most important details of the outbreak are being overlooked. This type of screening is visible, reassuring and largely ineffective.

Nipah, a bat-borne virus, was first identified during a 1998-99 outbreak in Malaysia. It causes severe disease, most commonly encephalitis and pneumonia. Among symptomatic cases, the fatality rate ranges from 40 to 75 per cent, and survivors may be left with profound neurological damage. There are currently no vaccines, treatments or rapid tests, making it difficult to diagnose and untreatable once infection occurs. Nipah does not spread easily between humans — but it *can*. Person-to-person transmission, including superspreading events, has occurred in Bangladesh and India, often in hospitals.

To date, the World Health Organization has recorded two laboratory-confirmed Nipah cases, both nurses at the same hospital in the Indian city of Barasat on January 13. Local reporting described three additional healthcare workers at the same facility with similar symptoms; they later tested negative.

When infections appear among healthcare workers, epidemiologists pay close attention. Clinicians are the most exposed group in Nipah outbreaks. Their infection usually signals delayed recognition of an index case or gaps in infection prevention. While

Outbreaks like Nipah virus must be contained inside hospitals through early detection

overall transmission efficiency is low, past outbreaks show that limited chains of spread can occur when exposure is intense and unrecognised. Delay and uncertainty surrounding hospital-based clusters affect how quickly infection control measures are implemented.

There is another fact that deserves far more scrutiny than it has received: Barasat lies around 12 kilometres from Kolkata’s international airport. That proximity helps explain the rapid turn to border-based measures in seven nearby countries. With Chinese New Year travel under way and passenger volumes surging across Asia, heightened vigilance in places such as Hong Kong is understandable.

The WHO currently assesses the national, regional and global risk from this outbreak as low and does not recommend travel restrictions or thermal screening. In this case, laboratory confirmation preceded public international notification by 13 days. Unfortunately, airport thermal screening misses incubating infections, fails to detect asymptomatic cases and offers reassurance rather than protection. We learned this during Sars. We learned it again during Covid-19. The lesson has not changed.

Outbreaks like Nipah will not be stopped at airport gates. They must be contained inside hospitals through early detection, rapid isolation, transparent reporting and protection of healthcare workers. When those systems work, clusters remain small.

From 1998 to 2023, all recorded Nipah outbreaks occurred in south or south-east Asia. But that geographic concentration should not reassure us. As international travel grows and opportunities for human-animal interaction expand, a future Nipah outbreak — and potentially a wider epidemic — could occur outside the region. In places where population density, cross-border mobility and human-animal contact intersect, even limited transmission could quickly become geopolitically significant. The southern Indian state of Kerala is the most at risk, given its history of Nipah outbreaks and its proximity to Goa, a major tourism hub.

Nipah is a dangerous pathogen. Surveillance must be sustained, infection control strengthened, and healthcare workers protected. Uncertainty in reporting should be acknowledged, not obscured. Epidemics are not stopped at borders, and pretending otherwise only delays the work that actually matters.

The writer is a conflict physician and associate professor at the Icahn School of Medicine

Mandelson and the money that never sleeps

BRITAIN

Robert Shrimley



Everyone is shocked and no one is surprised. When Wes Streeting, the health secretary, declares mournfully that Peter Mandelson “is not the person we thought he was”, that’s not quite true, is it? Mandelson turns out to be exactly the person many thought he was, just more so than they realised.

The latest revelations about Mandelson’s relationship with Jeffrey Epstein are so damaging to Keir Starmer precisely because they don’t come out of the blue. All the former Washington ambassador’s erstwhile friends knew his weaknesses, they just didn’t believe they extended so far as working against his ministerial colleagues and leaking financially sensitive government emails to a child sex offender.

And for what? Yes, he craved the multimillionaire lifestyle, enough to turn a blind eye to Epstein’s crimes. But fundamentally Mandelson wanted to prove his worth to the pal he hoped would help secure his future after Gordon Brown’s probable election defeat in 2010.

For the current prime minister, this is truly grim. Starmer’s public admission

that he already knew of Mandelson’s continued post-conviction relationship with Epstein when appointing him to Washington raises questions about his ethics as well as his judgment. Fingers point at Morgan McSweeney, the chief of staff who championed Mandelson, but the final blind eye was Starmer’s.

It is hard to see how this ends well for the prime minister. Starmer’s defence is that the Trump ascendancy demanded the calculated risk of a bold political ambassador able to surf the swamp and that Mandelson lied when questioned on the extent of his contact with Epstein. But even so, the ex-prosecutor’s pitch was that he is a process guy. And in any case, risks have to work.

Mandelson’s appointment and its consequences further expose the shallowness of Starmer’s project. Devoid of people or ideas, he came to rely on a job lot of old Blairites whose modern disciples will now be contaminated.

The scandal also poses larger questions of how politics can protect itself from those who would corrupt it. One government figure says Epstein “had three circles: a money circle, a power circle and a sex circle”. The value for him lay in the intersections. But while the squalid third circle may be rarer, the other two are all too recognisable.

This extreme case is overshadowed by Epstein’s monstrous crimes, but the essential point is that money will always find weaknesses to exploit. This is what the Epsteins of this world understand. Like hackers probing a network for vulnerabilities, money seeks out the weak



spots in the body politic, the people it can seduce, tap for information, the person who can help with an introduction, the guy who will champion its cause.

Often this stays the right side of legal. Governments need to hear the views of business. But politicians are also targets for the quiet networking and little favours that litter the porous boundaries of lobbying and the law. David Cameron described the challenge 15 years ago: “We all know how it works. The lunches, the hospitality, the quiet word in your ear, the ex-ministers and ex-advisers for hire, helping big business find the right way to get its way.”

There have always been scandals. But two shifts heighten the challenge. The first is how much this has become internationalised. Older scandals were more likely to be domestic and smaller; a British business figure corrupting the odd MP or council chief. Now the money and opportunities are global and greater.

Second is the increasing precariousness of politics as a profession. Careers end earlier and there are far fewer safe seats in the UK. Most politicians are honourable people but one only has to look at the number of Tories struggling for employment since the last election to see why MPs focus on their futures. Hence the networking and playing up of any marketable expertise. All of this leaves you more vulnerable. And there are always wealthy supporters whose generosity brings access. Remember the clothes gifted to Starmer pre-election.

Politics is struggling to keep up. The obstacles to stripping Mandelson of his peerage illuminate gaps in the system’s defences (appointments to the House of Lords remain an open wound on the body politic). There are regulations and committees on standards and rules about jobs after politics. But those who set the rules also know they will soon be on the other side of the revolving door.

Mandelson would probably argue now that the leaks looked more dra-

For Starmer this is truly grim, and raises questions about his ethics as well as his judgment

matic than they were. It was in his interest to play up his importance and value.

The other disaster of this scandal is that it plays into every populist critique of politics. Mandelson’s actions will reinforce the image of an amoral, self-serving, global elite. In reality, populist movements are every bit as prone to this form of sleaze. One has only to consider the Trump administration, with its barely hidden pay-to-play ethos and favours for business pals.

This is easier to diagnose than cure. Rules can be tightened, sanctions increased, more transparency demanded, but there are no simple solutions. This is a never-ending fight that relies on those in the system to safeguard its integrity. That has to mean leaders setting the tone with vigilance and an unforgiving line on those whose weakness corrupts it — a challenge Starmer seems to have failed.

This scandal may be a disgusting outlier, but the overarching lesson is the general. A system is only as strong as its weakest links, and money never sleeps.

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The perilous age of quantum politics

Armen Sarkissian

I grew up in the Soviet Union, a system many now recall primarily for its repression and stagnation. Yet it offered one thing in abundance: certainty. From an early age, I knew with remarkable precision how my life would unfold. If I studied well, I would advance. I would secure an academic position, publish papers, perhaps receive a few honours. I would acquire a small dacha, a car, retire and eventually die. It was not a life of great freedom, but it was a life governed by rules that seldom changed.

When I first encountered the west as a young researcher at Cambridge university, what struck me most was the opposite condition. It was not merely free; it was uncertain. Careers were not guaranteed. Opinions could be challenged. Lives could veer in unexpected directions. That uncertainty was

not a flaw but a source of the west’s vitality. It seemed to me like the cost of openness, experimentation and possibility.

More than three decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union, however, we have plunged into an uncertain age. Not uncertain in the familiar sense of risk or volatility, but in a deeper, structural way. We are living through a period in which predictability itself has dissolved — an era of extreme uncertainty.

Since the end of the cold war, the west has dismantled its own guardrails. Markets were liberalised faster than social contracts could adjust. Inequality widened and confidence in institutions, expertise and shared truth has atrophied.

This erosion has created fertile ground for polarising populism. Political figures who thrive on division, spectacle and disruption are its chief beneficiaries.

I trained as a physicist, and in physics we distinguish between classical and quantum systems. Classical physics describes a world shaped by stable laws, where outcomes can be predicted if

enough variables are known. Quantum physics, by contrast, treats uncertainty as fundamental. Outcomes are probabilistic rather than deterministic. Observation itself alters reality.

Politics, I believe, has crossed a similar threshold. We have entered the age of what I call quantum politics.

This transformation extends to the international order itself. Recent events in Venezuela have illustrated how fragile

Trump functions as an energised particle, colliding with a sensitive geopolitical nucleus

long-standing assumptions have become. A similar rupture has been visible in the turmoil over Greenland.

In this new reality, alliances are fluid. Power is exercised less through institutions than through disruption. Information exists in multiple states at once — sometimes concrete and authoritative, sometimes diffuse and unstable.

Seen in this light, figures such as US President Donald Trump become easier to understand. His unpredictability is not an aberration: it is his method.

In his quest for disruption, Trump functions as an energised particle, colliding with a sensitive geopolitical nucleus. The immediate crisis in Greenland last month subsided not because external actors successfully contained it but because the same disruptive force that initiated the reaction also chose, temporarily, to halt it. In doing so, other chain reactions were set in motion: Europe was marginalised, the appearance of multilateral norms was discarded and international institutions such as the UN were sidelined. The system did not return to equilibrium.

For small states, this quantum age is especially perilous. In a classical world, rules matter. International law, multilateral institutions and diplomatic conventions provide smaller nations with protection and influence disproportionate to their size. In a quantum world, where norms lie in ashes and guarantees are meaningless, small states find them-

selves exposed — forced to navigate between larger powers with diminishing room for error.

Technology has played a decisive role in accelerating this shift. Anyone with a phone and a social media account can now enter political debate, challenge authority and mobilise others. This connectivity has helped to bring down entrenched orders that once appeared permanent.

It has also compressed time. We go to bed in one political reality and wake up in another. The sociologist Zygmunt Bauman described this condition as “liquid modernity”: a world in which structures melt faster than they can be rebuilt.

The classical world of stable political assumptions, gradual change and predictable outcomes is not returning. Our task is to understand what has emerged and to think clearly, calmly and strategically about how we act within it.

The writer is the former president of Armenia, a theoretical physicist and author of ‘The Small States Club: How Small Smart States Can Save the World’

YOUR DAILY ARABIC PROVERB
A truly lacking individual is someone who cannot benefit from advice unless they first experience pain or suffer its consequences.
Ja'far Al-Sadeq
(The sixth Shiite Imam)

Opinion

Saudi Arabia and Turkiye: The region's safety valve

DR. ABDULAZIZ SAGER

Saudi-Turkish relations are currently witnessing a high degree of harmony on a wide range of regional and international issues. This alignment stems from a broad convergence on the general framework for political and diplomatic solutions, driven on the one hand by mutual interests and on the other by the growing acceptance of each other's perspectives and ideas at the leadership level.

This convergence was clearly reflected in the pace and depth of meetings held during this week's visit of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to Saudi Arabia, which culminated in the signing of numerous agreements covering various fields, including politics, economics and security, among others.

The visit also underscored the importance of continuing the joint efforts

to expand the volume of non-oil trade between the two countries, while emphasizing the strategic importance of concluding a free trade agreement between the member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council and Turkiye.

The economic dimension of Saudi-Turkish relations is substantial, as well as promising, offering wide-ranging investment opportunities in key sectors such as renewable energy, electrical technologies, network automation and power grids. In addition, there are significant prospects for cooperation in clean hydrogen projects and in the development of technologies related to its transport and storage, along with other development initiatives needed by both countries. Such cooperation would enhance the economic standing and influence of both sides as members of the G20.

Politically, the two countries have



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demonstrated a high level of coordination on several regional issues, including Syria, Yemen, Sudan and others, as well as on the Palestinian cause, a central issue for the Arab and Islamic worlds. Both Saudi Arabia and Turkiye support a just and comprehensive solution to the ongoing conflict and emphasize the vital role of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation in defending Palestinian rights. In this context, they seek to strengthen and intensify the organization's role both today and in the future.

Security and defense cooperation also featured prominently in discussions between Erdogan and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. Both sides stressed the importance of activating previously signed agreements in the fields of defense cooperation, cybersecurity and related areas in a manner that serves the mutual interests of both countries. Such

cooperation would contribute to strengthening regional stability and positively reflect on efforts to promote peace and harmony throughout the region.

In conclusion, Saudi-Turkish relations constitute a strategic balancing factor for the region as a whole, given the significant political and economic weight of both countries, as well as their deep historical roots and strategic geographic positions. Strengthening ties and communication between Riyadh and Ankara is therefore expected to yield important outcomes at the regional level, particularly in the political and security domains. Accordingly, enhancing harmony and coordination between the two countries has been, and continues to be, one of the most prominent and important issues deserving sustained attention from decision-makers in both states.

Politically, the two countries have demonstrated a high level of coordination on several regional issues



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The war is not about the hostages or Hamas, it is about the Palestinians and Gaza itself. It is about ethnic cleansing

The 'soft' phase of Israel's Gaza genocide

DR. DANIA KOLEILAT KHATIB

Gaza has stopped being a headline for the international press. Media attention has moved on to other things. However, the killing has not stopped and neither has the genocide. Israel's schemes for the Palestinians have not changed, just the methods have changed. Israel has adopted a more low-key approach while using other means to deliver its cruel plans.

On Tuesday, Israel blew up the Morag Water Station in northern Rafah. The station provided water to about 70,000 residents. A few days earlier, Israel bombed people sheltered in tents in Gaza City and Khan Younis, killing at least 31 Palestinians, including six children. What can be the reason for such malicious acts? The obvious reason is a desire to make the life of Gazans so difficult that they leave and never come back. Israel's plan is very clear: ethnic cleansing.

Remember those who said that if the hostages were returned the war would end. Well, it still has not ended because it was

never about the hostages. Now that the excuse of the hostages has been removed from Israel, it has a new excuse: Hamas

However, it is not about Hamas either, it never has been. It is about the Palestinians and about Gaza itself. It is about ethnic cleansing. This project started with the birth of the Zionist state. It then morphed depending on who was in charge in Tel Aviv and on the international mood and circumstances, but it never gave up on its objective. Today, we see a rerun of the 2024 scenario. Israel is taking the maximum it can and stopping at phase one. Though the start of phase two was announced in Davos last month, the goals of phase one have still not been achieved.

After the latest ceasefire came into effect last October, US Central Command established the Civil-Military Coordination Center in Kiryat Gat. The entity has representatives from more than 50 countries and international organizations. It is tasked with coordinating aid, monitoring the ceasefire and planning reconstruction. Where were they when Israel killed 31 people in



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their tents? There was not a word. Israel has killed more than 500 people since the ceasefire came into effect. If the center's job is to monitor the ceasefire, it is doing a lousy job.

This entity is merely for show and acts as a smokescreen for Israel to carry out its project.

Israel always uses the "but Hamas" excuse to renege on its obligations. It is like a rabbit that Israel pulls out of a hat whenever it is cornered.

Another important issue is the opening of the Rafah crossing. Israel has applied its crooked method of disinformation regarding the Rafah crossing. In December, it announced that the border crossing point would be opened. However, there was a caveat. Israel wanted to open the crossing for Palestinians to leave only. Those who left could never come back. Egypt refused and insisted that the crossing needs to be opened in both directions.

After intensive negotiations, Israel once again agreed to the opening of the Rafah crossing this week. However, Israel is

allowing only 50 patients, accompanied by a maximum of two relatives, to leave the Strip each day. In exchange, only 50 people who left Gaza during the war are allowed to return. Egypt and the Arab states remain vigilant. They know that Israel will use all means possible to empty the Strip and to conduct ethnic cleansing during the so-called ceasefire.

The problem is that, even though the genocide is ongoing and the ceasefire is only on paper, the world seems to believe the Israeli lie. Francesca Albanese, the UN special rapporteur on the Occupied Territories, nailed it when she said a "ceasefire" according to Israel is "you cease and I fire."

The Palestinian side has fulfilled its obligations, whereas the Israeli side has not. This is why the pressure should remain. Arab countries and others who want peace in Palestine should use every international platform possible to make sure Israel is held accountable for every breach of the ceasefire. And the world should know the genocide has not stopped — however, now it is a "soft genocide."

France's new model for relations with Africa

KHALED ABOU ZAHR

Emmanuel Macron is France's first president who did not live through or experience the country's colonialist past. He stated early in his first mandate a will to shift Paris' African strategy and to break away from this past, recognizing historical mistakes and building a new relationship. This shift in strategy was not merely the result of a deep self-reflection but also a necessity to adapt to global geopolitical changes in order to stay relevant. It is a way to manage France's decline in influence and capacity to impact African files. Thanks to stronger direct engagement from China, Russia and the US, or even India, the FrancAfrique has been pushed over. And it is difficult to define a new way or what comes next.

This is why last week's visit of Chadian President Mahamat Idriss Deby to Paris has raised the question of whether a new path is starting to emerge. This visit came following a severe rupture in relations. The positive language from both parties, referring to it as a "friendship" visit, intended to redefine the parameters of Franco-Chadian cooperation. We are yet to see the outcome

but could this be a case study for France's new African policy?

This visit came after Chad abruptly terminated its defense agreement with France in November 2024. Relations had rapidly deteriorated and the French military was forced to quickly withdraw. The Chadian decision clearly blindsided Paris. It was also a source of increased tensions beyond the closure of the French military base itself, as this was also happening elsewhere in Africa.

It is worth noting that, while the two countries' military collaboration broke down, diplomatic relations were never officially cut off.

Perhaps Chad has started to notice that Paris can still be a valid partner and that Macron's approach of turning a new page is

genuine, or it could be a simple, pragmatic give-and-take situation.

France needs to show that it can build anew, while there is little doubt that N'djamena needs economic support, which Moscow has not been able to provide lately. It is nevertheless important to remove the tensions of what looks like a bad breakup. This is a prerequisite in order to start afresh. One must also understand that France's



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package for African countries was and still can be a mix of military, intelligence, economy and soft power, as well as international access.

With its capacity for infrastructure building and development, France can be a valid partner supporting Africa's new leaderships to deliver change for their citizens. However, something France will have to give up — especially in the face of stronger Russian and Chinese execution — is the habit of giving

lessons. A more pragmatic approach is needed, as such an attitude of disdain will not work.

It is easy to understand that these labels portray Paris as an unsafe and unreliable economic partner. This contributed to the freezing of relations with Chad, as in 2024

French prosecutors launched an inquiry into allegations that Deby embezzled public funds.

Deby's warm visit to the Elysee Palace perhaps offers a new opportunity, especially as Chad stated that the meeting helped in clarifying misunderstandings and finding an end to their disagreements. It is also clear that Chad is in search of, or in need of, economic cooperation, especially in the

areas of energy, digital technology, agriculture, livestock, education and culture.

Moreover, Paris can help Chad by supporting it in front of international financial organizations like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

Another positive is that Macron has given a clear signal of a will to have African countries take more agency within the decision-making process of their region and to be real stakeholders in building its

security and stability. This is clear in the important stance both presidents took for the establishment of a humanitarian truce in Sudan and conditions that would facilitate the resolution of its civil war.

There is no doubt that what is happening in Sudan and relations with neighboring Niger could

lead to increased internal divisions and instability in Chad. Hence, Deby needs the backing of strong allies such as France for international reach as well as intelligence support. This provides an opportunity for both countries, as Paris can reposition itself in the face of Russian competition. It is still too early to judge, but this could be an example of how France can reestablish its relations with African nations.

Perhaps Chad has started to notice that Paris can still be a valid partner and that Macron's approach is genuine

Something France will have to give up in the face of stronger Russian and Chinese execution is the habit of giving lessons

World must help ease Southern Africa's flood crisis

DR. MAJID RAFIZADEH

Southern Africa is facing a significant humanitarian emergency, as devastating floods sweep across large parts of the region. This has displaced hundreds of thousands of people and resulted in significant loss of life.

Prolonged and intense rainfall has inundated vast areas of Mozambique, South Africa, Zimbabwe and neighboring countries. This has destroyed homes, critical infrastructure and livelihoods. As a result, the human toll has been severe, with confirmed deaths surpassing 100. It is also believed that many more people are injured, missing or being exposed to life-threatening conditions.

Heavy rainfall is expected to persist for weeks, which will likely compound an already dire situation. It will also place immense pressure on the governments, humanitarian agencies and communities that have been impacted.

This crisis is not an isolated natural disaster. It is the result of broader climatic and structural forces that have made Southern Africa more vulnerable to extreme weather events.

The current floods have caused displacement on a massive scale, forcing families to

flee their homes with little warning. They are seeking refuge in overcrowded shelters, schools and temporary camps. Some entire communities have been submerged and agricultural lands destroyed. There has been significant damage to transport networks as well.

This crisis should be understood within the broader context of climate change and its unequal global impacts. Africa, and Southern Africa in particular, contributes only a small fraction of

global greenhouse gas emissions, yet it experiences some of the most severe and frequent climate-related disasters. This imbalance exposes the deep structural inequalities embedded in the global political and economic systems.

Countries that have historically benefited from industrialization and fossil fuel consumption have accumulated wealth and resilience, while regions like Southern Africa face mounting climate risks with far fewer resources to adapt or recover. The current flooding crisis points to this phenomenon, as communities with minimal responsibility for global warming bear disproportionate suffering.

This kind of massive displacement also disrupts education, as schools are destroyed or converted into shelters.



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This interrupts learning for thousands of children and increases the risk of permanent dropout. Gendered impacts are particularly pronounced — women and girls often bear the burden of caregiving in unsafe conditions.

Climate-driven disasters like the flooding in Southern Africa raise fundamental questions about global responsibility. As extreme weather events grow more frequent and severe, the obligation of wealthier nations to support vulnerable regions must become stronger and more urgent. This responsibility is not merely humanitarian but is also anchored in historical accountability for emissions.

In addition, we should bear in mind that instability, food insecurity and large-scale displacement in one region can have ripple effects across borders, influencing migration patterns, economic systems and geopolitical stability.

In the short term, humanitarian assistance is essential to save lives and alleviate suffering. This should include emergency food aid, clean water provision, sanitation facilities, temporary shelter and medical services. Rapid funding and logistical support are also critical.

However, short-term relief alone is

insufficient. Without any sustained investment to deal with such situations, Southern Africa will remain trapped in a cycle of disaster and recovery. Long-term responses can include investing in flood-resilient infrastructure, improved water management systems and mechanisms that give early warnings.

Climate finance is extremely important due to the fact many Southern African countries lack the fiscal capacity to fund large-scale adaptation and recovery projects

on their own. The private sector, philanthropic institutions and multinational corporations can work together to accomplish this.

In a nutshell, the floods in Southern Africa should not be merely viewed as an isolated event or a regional tragedy — they are a direct consequence of the intensifying impacts of climate change. The countries most affected have contributed only a tiny amount of the global greenhouse gas emissions that drive these extreme weather events, but they are bearing a disproportionate share of the suffering. It is imperative for the international community to provide immediate and sustained support. Inaction could trigger broader consequences across continents.

Climate-driven disasters like the flooding in Southern Africa raise questions about global responsibility

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Opinion

Young people are using A.I. to skip the hardest part of growing up

Artificial intelligence is replacing their social intuitions.

Clay Shirky

Back in 2023, when ChatGPT was still new, a professor friend had a colleague observe her class. Afterward, he complimented her on her teaching but asked if she knew her students were typing her questions into ChatGPT and reading its output aloud as their replies.

At the time, I chalked this up to cognitive offloading, the use of artificial intelligence to reduce the amount of thinking required to complete a task. Looking back, though, I think it was an early case of emotional offloading, the use of A.I. to reduce the energy required to navigate human interaction.

You’ve probably heard of extreme cases in which people treat bots as lovers, therapists or friends. But many more have them intervene in their social lives in subtler ways. On dating apps, people are leaning on A.I. to help them seem more educated or confident; one app, Hinge, reports that many younger users “vibe check” messages with A.I. before sending them. (Young men, especially, lean on it to help them initiate conversations.)

In the classroom, the domain I know best, some students are using the tools not just to reduce effort on homework but also to avoid the stress of an unscripted conversation with a professor — the possibility of making a mistake, drawing a blank or looking dumb — even when their interactions are not graded.

Last fall, The Times reported on students at the University of Illinois Urbana, Champaign, who cheated in their course, then wrote their apologies using A.I. In a situation where unforged communication to their professors might have made a difference, they still wouldn’t (or couldn’t) forgo A.I. as a social prosthetic.

As an academic administrator, I’m paid to worry about students’ use of A.I. to do their critical thinking. Universities have whole frameworks and apparatuses for academic integrity. A.I. has been a meteor strike on those frameworks, for obvious reasons.

But as educators, we have to do more than ensure that students learn things; we have to help them become new people, too. From that perspective, emotional offloading worries me more than the cognitive kind, because farming out your social intuitions could hurt young people more than opting out of writing their own history papers.

Just as overreliance on calculators can weaken our arithmetic abilities and overreliance on GPS can weaken our sense of direction, overreliance on A.I. may weaken our ability to deal with the give and take of ordinary human interaction.

A GENERATION GAP has formed around A.I. use. One study found that 18-to-25-year-olds alone accounted for 46 percent of ChatGPT use. And this analysis didn’t even include users 17 and under.

Teenagers and young adults, stuck in the gradual transition from managed childhoods to adult freedoms, are both eager to make human connection and exquisitely alert to the possibility of embarrassment. (You remember.) A.I. offers them a way to manage some of that anxiety of presenting themselves in new roles when they don’t have a lot of experience to go on. In 2022, 41 percent of young adults reported feelings of anxiety most days.

Even informal social settings require participants to develop and then act within appropriate roles, a phenomenon best described by the sociologist Erving Goffman. There are ways people are expected to behave on a date or in a grocery store or at a restaurant and different ways in different kinds of restaurants. But in certain situations, like starting at a new job and meeting a romantic partner’s family, the rules aren’t immediately clear. In his book “The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life,” Dr. Goffman writes:

When the individual does move into a new position in society and obtains a new part to perform, he is not likely to be told in full detail how to conduct

himself, nor will the facts of his new situation press sufficiently on him from the start to determine his conduct without his further giving thought to it.

When we take on new roles — which we do all our lives, but especially as we figure out how to become adults — we learn by doing and often by doing badly: being too formal or informal with new colleagues, too strait-laced or casual in new situations. (I still remember the shock on learning, years later, that because of my odd dress and awkward demeanor, my friends’ nick-

this to my friend, but I don’t want to sound rude” — so she asked A.I. to help her rehearse the conversation. Another said she had grown up hating to make phone calls (a common dislike among young people), which meant that most of her interaction at a distance was done via text, with time to compose and edit replies, which was time that could now include instant vibe checks.

These teens were adamant that they did not want to go directly to their parents or friends with these issues and that the steady availability of A.I. was a relief to them. They also rejected

Interaction with sycophantic A.I. models significantly reduced participants’ willingness to take actions to repair interpersonal conflict, while increasing their conviction of being in the right. However, participants rated sycophantic responses as higher quality, trusted the sycophantic A.I. model more and were more willing to use it again.

In other words, talking to a fawning bot reduces our willingness to try to fix strained or broken relationships in the real world while making the bot

er, the past three years is their adulthood.

One possible response to sycophantic A.I. is simply to shift back to a more oral culture. Higher education is already shifting to oral exams. You can imagine adapting that strategy to interviews; new hires and potential roommates could be certified as comfortable communicating without A.I. (a new role for notaries public). Offices could shift to more live communication to reduce workslop. Dating sites could do the same to reduce flirtslop.



MAISIE COWELL

name for me freshman year was “the horror child.”)

Dr. Goffman was writing in the mid-1950s, when more socializing happened face-to-face. At the time, writing was relatively formal, whether for public consumption, as with literature or journalism, or for particular audiences, as with memos and contracts. Even letters and telegrams often involved real compositional thought; the postcard was as informal as it got.

That started to change in the 1990s, when the inrush of digital communications — emails, instant messages, texting, Facebook, WhatsApp — made writing essential to much of human interaction and socializing much easier to script. The words you send other people are a big part of your presentation of self in everyday life. And every place where writing has become a social interface is now ripe for an injection of A.I., adding an automated editor into every conversation, draining some of the personal from interpersonal interaction.

AT A RECENT PANEL about student A.I. use hosted by high school educators, I heard several teens describe using A.I. to puzzle through past human interactions and rehearse upcoming ones. One talked about needing to have a tough conversation — “I want to say

the idea of A.I. therapists; they weren’t treating A.I. as a replacement for another person but instead were using it to second-guess their developing sense of how to treat other people.

A.I. has been trained to give us answers we like, rather than the ones we may need to hear. The resulting stream

Talking to a fawning bot reduces our willingness to try to fix strained or broken relationships in the real world while making the bot seem more trustworthy.

of praise — constantly hearing some version of “You’re absolutely right!” — risks eroding our ability to deal with the messiness of human relationships. Sociologists call this social deskilling.

Even casual A.I. use exposes users to a level of praise humans rarely experience from one another, which is not great for any of us but is especially risky for young people still working on their social skills.

In a recent study (still in preprint) with the evocative title “Sycophantic A.I. Decreases Prosocial Intentions and Promotes Dependence,” six researchers from Stanford and Carnegie Mellon describe some of their conclusions:

seem more trustworthy. Like cigarettes, those conversations are both corrosive and addictive. More of this is coming. Most every place where humans are offered mediated communication, some company is going to offer an A.I. as a counselor, sidekick or wingman, there to gas you up, monitor the conversation or push certain responses while warning you away from others.

In the business world, it might be presented as an automated coach, in day-to-day interactions it may be a digital friend, and in dating it will be Cyrano as a service. Because user loyalty is good for business, companies will nudge us toward rehearsed interactions and self-righteousness when interacting with real people and nudging them to reply to us in kind.

We need good social judgment to get along with one another. Good judgment comes from experience, and experience comes from bad judgment. It sounds odd to say that we have to preserve space for humans to screw up socially, but it’s true.

THE GENERATION GAP means the people in charge, mostly born in the past century, are likely to underestimate the risks from A.I. as a social prosthetic. We didn’t have A.I. as an option in our adulthood, save for the past three years. For a 20-year-old, howev-

A.I. misuse cannot be addressed solely through individuals opting out. Although some young people have started intentionally avoiding A.I. use, this is more likely to create a counterculture than to affect broad adoption. There are already signs that “I don’t use A.I.” is becoming this century’s “I don’t even own a TV” — a sanctimonious signal that had no appreciable effect on TV watching.

We do have a contemporary example of taking social dilemmas caused by technology seriously: the smartphone. Smartphones have good uses and have been widely adopted by choice, like A.I. But after almost two decades of treating overuse as a question of individual willpower, we are finally experimenting with collective action, as with bans on phones in the classroom and real age limits on social media.

It took us nearly two decades from the arrival of the smartphone to start instituting collective responses. If we move at the same rate here, we will start treating A.I.’s threat to human relationships as a collective issue in the late 2030s. We can already see the outlines of emotional offloading; it would be good if we didn’t wait that long to react.

CLAY SHIRKY is a vice provost at New York University.

OPINION

The New York Times

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Newsom could become the Democrats’ big mistake



Bret Stephens

Gavin Newsom has a memoir coming out this month, “Young Man in a Hurry” — another heavy hint that he intends to run for the Democratic Party’s presidential nomination. To judge by some of the more fawning media profiles (Vogue describes him as “lithe, ardent, energetic, a glimmer of optimism in his eye; Kennedy-esque”), he’s practically already won.

Democrats should be careful whom they crush on. Newsom’s record as governor of California is a Republican strategist’s perfect foil. Among the more salient points:

AFFORDABILITY. That’s supposed to be the Democrats’ magic word against Republicans amid persistently high prices, especially for first-time home buyers. Yet U.S. News & World Report ranked California dead last in 2025 in its affordability rankings. The California Legislature’s own Analyst’s Office noted that “Prices for mid-tier homes are about \$755,000 — more than twice as expensive as the typical mid-tier U.S. home.” And in 16 California counties, including Los Angeles, San Francisco, San Diego and Alameda, a six-figure salary can still be deemed “low-income” for a family of three, according to the state’s housing department.

POVERTY AND INCOME INEQUALITY. The U.S. Census Bureau reported last year that California is tied with Louisiana for the country’s highest “supplemental” poverty rate, which takes account of cost-of-living calculations over a three-year period, with roughly one in six Californians living in poverty. In Pennsylvania, by contrast, the number is about one in 10. California also has one of the country’s highest rates of income inequality: In 2022, the average income of the top 5 percent was nearly \$600,000 higher than the average income of the bottom 20 percent.

HOMELESSNESS. Nearly one in 200 Californians were homeless on any given night in 2024. “California alone accounted for 44 percent of all individuals who experienced chronic homelessness in the country,” according to a 2024 report from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

FLIGHT. Probably the best measure of a state’s success or failure is how people vote with their feet. Between April 2020 and July 2025, California had a total net loss of almost 1.3 million people who moved to other states — driven out, according to Coastal Moving Services, by housing prices that “often exceed national averages by double, while the state carries the nation’s highest income tax rate at 12.3 percent. Slow job growth and 441 businesses relocating headquarters since 2018 compound the challenge.”



DAMON WINTER/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Those who oppose Trump risk becoming like him

Roxane Gay

Contributing Writer

The relentless brutality of the Trump administration is threatening to debase us. I was posting on Bluesky about the horrors taking place in Minneapolis, sharing my sorrow, anger and frustration about the injustice. Someone responded, in a post that has since been deleted, advocating capital punishment for ICE officers.

I understood the instinct to make such a comment — what federal agents are still doing, across the country, is abhorrent. It is inhumane. I also understood that the Trump administration is hoping we will surrender to our baser instincts, in the same ways that it does.

It can be hard to stand up for what you believe in, and to do so consistently. But now, more than ever, we don’t have the flexibility for certain misjudgments. If human life is sacred — and I firmly believe it is — then all human life is sacred, from the best to the worst of us. We cannot demand justice for our undocumented neighbors, or rage against senseless murders, and in the next breath call for our enemies to die.

When we stand for what is right, we have to always stand for what is right, without exception. We cannot succumb to a worldview that embraces isolation, scarcity and control through fear.

IN RECENT DAYS, President Trump has “softened” his tone and has been slightly less overt in his disdain for immigrants. Gregory Bovino, the Border Patrol’s commander at large, was ordered back to El Centro, Calif., to resume his previous duties. The Justice Department has opened a civil rights investigation. These gestures are meant to appease us without addressing the systemic issues and the fundamental rot of an obscene system designed to tear families apart, terrorize immigrant communities and silence dissent.

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement has not left Minneapolis or other cities. The Trump administration has not really changed any policies. Mr. Trump and his minions haven’t apologized for their statements or actions. The gestures they are offering, reluctantly, do not lessen the grave moral injury of their actions.

If we are not careful, we could fall into numbness, apathy or worse. I’ve been thinking about how we talk about the people who are killed by law enforcement. Our first instinct is to invoke the myriad ways in which the deceased contributed to the world. We talk about their work, their character, their families — this is how we attempt to humanize people killed in such inhumane ways.

We have done this for Black people murdered by police, and more recently, we have done this for the men and women who are being killed or injured by federal law enforcement officers. The instinct to humanize the slain is instinctual. It is . . . human, just like the people for whom we craft these loving hagiographies. It’s a way of trying to make the atrocity of their deaths clear, as if the fact of their humanity is not enough. Because their humanity was not enough to save their lives.

But we have to remember that humanity is, always, enough. We have a right to protest, legally carry a firearm, drive while Black, walk in a neighbor-

hood at night, play in a park, sleep in a bed or do anything else whether we are wonderful people, and beloved or not. Nor is citizenship status a factor in whether someone deserves to live. Some of us have forgotten this when making distinctions like “He was a citizen,” as if an American passport makes the killings of Alex Pretti and Renee Good more tragic.

The tragedy is that Ms. Good and Mr. Pretti are dead and their deaths were preventable and there will probably be little justice for them. The tragedy is that they were being human and humane and it did not matter. And that tragedy is

ing that if we just try to understand them, they will see the error of their ways. Instead, I am saying that we don’t have to compromise ourselves, our values or our sense of justice to fight back. It is so easy to lose sight of this, to allow our justifiable rage to damage our moral compass.

ICE must be abolished. Congress must, once and for all, develop modern, humane immigration policies that create pathways to citizenship for anyone who wants to come to this land of abundance. And we must rethink what immigration enforcement looks like, divesting it from the private prison-industrial complex

has a criminal history, and whether they are beloved or reviled. We cannot use respectability politics or bigotry or means testing to arbitrate justice.

And in our resistance, we do not need to use our own version of the Gestapo-like tactics of federal law enforcement. We do not need to thirst for our enemies’ blood or pretend that some lives matter more than others. We do not need to trample all over civil liberties, or cosplay as soldiers by wearing ridiculous amounts of body armor while masking our identities because we are ashamed of what we are doing.

The people of Minneapolis are teaching us, every single day, what resistance can look like. It is incredible to see so many people, from all walks of life, putting themselves into the frigid tundra that is a Minnesota winter, to protect the most vulnerable members of their community and to let federal agents know that they are being watched, they are not welcome, and they are wrong. The people of Minneapolis are reminding us that nonviolent protest works. It takes time and effort. It can be frustrating. It can be dangerous. But it works.

PEOPLE OFTEN MISUNDERSTAND nonviolent protest. It is not merely eschewing violence. It doesn’t mean that we are silent or that we are not angry. Instead, nonviolent protest means, among many things, that we understand who we are fighting. We know that nothing will reveal who they are more clearly than the contrast between their actions and ours.

What’s working so well in Minneapolis is that people are collaborating. They are caring about others simply because they are part of the local community, simply because they are human. There appears to be no hierarchy or vying for power. Instead, people are organized, communicating clearly, identifying problems and creating accessible solutions. They are showing up, as often and as loudly as they can. They are refusing to look the other way while atrocities are being committed in their name.

When our leaders are feckless, and amenable to criminality so long as that energy is directed toward the people they deem undesirable, it’s easy to lower our standards. It’s easy to decide that when in a dystopia, we should act dystopian. It is easy to lose sight of who we are and what we stand for when we see federal agents acting with impunity and armed with instruments of war as Mr. Vance and Mr. Miller declare (though Mr. Vance has walked this statement back) that federal agents are afforded immunity to carry out their duties.

It’s easy to want vengeance instead of justice when we see that people are being terrorized, afraid to leave their homes because they have Black or brown skin. It’s easy, for example, to compromise on prison abolition so long as we can soothe ourselves with the knowledge that our enemies will suffer, too. These are difficult times, so we must make the difficult choice to be different, and to be better.

The Trump administration is fighting a war of attrition on America’s soul, but it has vastly underestimated the strength, endurance and conscience of the people against whom it is waging this war.

ROXANE GAY is the author, most recently, of “Stand Your Ground: A Black Feminist Reckoning with America’s Gun Problem.”



IRIS LEGENRE

compounded by the fact that in 2025, we know, 32 people died in ICE custody, and already in 2026 there have been at least eight deaths related to ICE enforcement. But we don’t hear much about most of the deceased, like Keith Porter Jr., killed by an off-duty ICE officer in Los Angeles on New Year’s Eve. We don’t know what they did for a living, how they were loved or what they leave behind because we are being careless.

People often misunderstand nonviolent protest. It is not merely eschewing violence.

Trump’s surrogates — JD Vance, Kristi Noem, Stephen Miller, Tom Homan — are gleefully indulging not only the president but their own cruelty, racism and xenophobia. They are drunk on power, trying to dictate a warped version of reality to suit their toxic narrative, even when we have ample evidence contradicting many statements that some have made about murderous undocumented immigrants, paid protesters who brandished weapons and domestic terrorists.

WE DO NOT have to adopt their tactics or mimic their lack of character or decency to stymie their efforts. I am not suggesting anything along the lines of going high when they go low. I am not suggest-

and greed and bigotry as catalysts for mass deportations.

We need to have zero tolerance for politicians who imply that the vast majority of undocumented immigrants are anything but hard-working and law-abiding, or who deny that they make invaluable contributions to our country. We need to combat the rampant misinformation about undocumented immigrants bleeding the country dry through public social services for which they are, in fact, mostly ineligible. We have to be in community with our communities. Put another way, we need to make the country better. And we can.

When the tables turn, and they will, these bad actors will be held to account. We should afford them the due process they so willingly deny to their perceived enemies, and we will, I hope, ensure that these abuses of power can never happen again.

Supposedly, the American justice system is predicated on the idea of due process. We have laws that must be followed by everyone, including law enforcement. People are presumed innocent until proven guilty. We have a right to be judged by a jury of our peers. We have these rights, no matter who we are, no matter what we do for a living, whether we have families or not.

Undocumented immigrants have legal protections, though the current administration would prefer to elide that reality. These apply whether someone

My country and the West need migrants

SÁNCHEZ, FROM PAGE 1 ices afloat. Their gross domestic product will stagnate. Their public health care and pension systems will suffer. Neither A.I. nor robots will be able to prevent this outcome, at least not in the short or medium term. The only option to avoid decline is to integrate migrants in the most orderly and effective way possible.

It won’t be easy. We know that. Migration brings opportunities, but also huge challenges that we must acknowledge and face. Nevertheless, it is important to realize that most of those challenges have nothing to do with migrants’ ethnicity, race, religion or language. Rather, they are driven by the same forces that affect our own citizens: poverty, inequality, unregulated markets, barriers to accessing education and health care. We should focus our efforts on addressing those issues, because they are the real threats to our way of life.

Not many governments agree with regularizing migrants today. But more people do than we often assume. The regularization effort underway in Spain actually began as a citizen-led initiative endorsed by more than 900 nongovernmental organizations, including the Catholic Church, and it has the support

of business associations and trade unions alike. More important, it is backed by the people: Nearly two out of three Spaniards believe that migration represents either an opportunity or a necessity for our country, according to a recent poll.

MAGA-style leaders may say that our country can’t handle taking in so many migrants, that this is a suicidal move — the desperate act of a collapsing country. But don’t let them fool you. Spain is booming. For three years running, we have had the fastest-growing economy among Europe’s largest countries. We have created nearly one in every three new jobs across the European Union, and our unemployment rate has fallen below 10 percent for the first time in nearly two decades. Our workers’ purchasing power has also grown, and poverty and inequality levels have dropped to their lowest since 2008. This prosperity is the result of Spanish citizens’ hard work, the E.U.’s collective effort and an inclusive agenda that views migrants as necessary partners.

What is working for us can work for others. The time has come for leaders to speak clearly to their citizens about the dilemma we all face. We, as Western nations, must choose between becom-



JUAN MEDINA/REUTERS

ing closed and impoverished societies, or open and prosperous ones. Growth or retreat: Those are the two options before us. And by growth, I’m not talking only about material gain, but also our spiritual development.

Governments can buy into the zero-sum thinking of the far-right and retreat into isolation, scarcity, selfishness and decline. Or they can harness the very

same forces that, not without difficulties, have allowed our societies to thrive for centuries.

For me, the choice is clear. And for the sake of our prosperity and human dignity, I hope many others will follow suit.

PEDRO SÁNCHEZ is the prime minister of Spain.

COMMENT

Editorials

Takaichi riding ‘Trojan horse’ to overcome postwar restraints on remilitarization

Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi is campaigning like a hardened gambler who believes momentum itself is a moral argument. Wearing a poker face, she keeps pushing the country's money into ever riskier bets — convinced that confidence is destiny and history merely an inconvenient footnote. With polls pointing toward a snap election victory in the lower house that she dissolved late last month, Takaichi has chosen this moment to revive her long-cherished ambition: rewriting Japan's Constitution to explicitly recognize the Self-Defense Forces. She sells it as the realization of an inevitability. To Japan's neighbors — and to anyone who takes history seriously — it is political adventurism dressed up as “confidence”.

The language is soothing; the implications are not. Article 9 of Japan's postwar Constitution is not an anachronism accidentally left behind by bureaucrats in 1947. It is the moral and legal dress code for Japan's return to the international community after World War II. Along with the Cairo Declaration, the Potsdam Proclamation and the Japanese Instrument of Surrender, it codified a hard truth: Imperial Japan inflicted untold suffering across the Asia-Pacific with its aggression, and preventing its return is not optional. Pacifism was not imposed to humiliate Japan; it was the prerequisite for trust.

That is why Japan's constitutional revision has never been a purely domestic matter. As Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Lin Jian put it, Japan's neighbors — and the wider international community — have every reason to pay close attention. Reflection on history, respect for the desire for peace among Japan's own people, and adherence to peaceful development are not rhetorical flourishes. They are part of the political and legal foundations of postwar stability.

Takaichi treats those foundations as obstacles to Japan's “revival”. She speaks of “deadlock” in the Diet, blames opposition control of the constitutional review committee, and insists that only a larger ruling-coalition majority can “break through” the impasse. The Constitution is cast as an annoying traffic light on red while she is late for an appointment with destiny. A snap election, called unusually early and with a compressed timeline, reinforces the impression that procedure is being rushed to serve ideology.

The sales pitch is familiar: Japan faces “external threats”, therefore Japan must become a “normal” military power. Japan's right-wing forces have grown adept at disguising the reentry of militarism under the language of “responsibility”, “security” and “popular support” — a rhetorical costume change that aims to hide the underlying naked ambition.

What is missing, conspicuously, is reflection. Japan has never sincerely apologized for or compensated the victims of its wartime aggression. Instead, some

leaders continue to pay homage at the Yasukuni Shrine, where multiple war criminals are enshrined, bristle at historical accountability and repeatedly attempt to sanitize the past — including by doctoring history textbooks. You cannot sprint toward remilitarization while tiptoeing around remorse and expect to win trust.

In China alone, Japan's brutal invasion from 1931 to 1945 inflicted indescribable suffering. About 35 million Chinese military personnel and civilians were killed or injured, accounting for roughly one-third of all casualties in World War II across all nations. Calculated at 1937 prices, China suffered more than \$100 billion in direct economic losses and approximately \$500 billion in indirect losses.

There is little doubt the Takaichi government is leaving no stone unturned to accelerate militarism's return through the side door, cloaked in “electoral legitimacy”. Constitutional revision may be marketed as technical housekeeping, but its spillover effects are profound. It loosens postwar constraints, shifts military boundaries and threatens regional peace.

There is also the matter of cost. Japan's military spending has surged, with official budgets committing the country to defense outlays nearing 2 percent of GDP, a level reached two years in advance thanks to the Takaichi government's push. This buildup is unfolding while Japan already carries public debt exceeding 230 percent of its GDP. At home, households are squeezed by inflation, falling real wages and a persistently weak yen. Markets have noticed. Bond yields have climbed. Investors flinch when ideology starts writing checks that arithmetic cannot cash.

Yet Takaichi talks breezily about the “benefits” of a weak currency and expansionary spending, as if economic gravity were optional. Defense buildup, fiscal loosening and constitutional revision are bundled into a single narrative of “national revival” — strength without sacrifice, pride without reckoning. History shows such packages never deliver what they promise.

An election victory could hand Takaichi's coalition a two-thirds supermajority, enabling constitutional revision even over upper house resistance. That concentration of power should give the region pause, especially as it will be in the hands of an irresponsible leader with hawkish instincts. This is not alarmism. Constitutional change in Japan is, by definition, regional business. It reopens wounds that never fully healed and signals that the postwar settlement anchoring East Asian stability is now negotiable.

Takaichi's gamble is that popularity can outrun memory, and that electoral applause can substitute for accountability. But the victims of Japan's war crimes remember where that logic leads. The rest of the world should resist the temptation to look away while the dice are still rolling.

Port ruling exposes US’ unbridled greed

On Friday last week, Panama's Supreme Court delivered a ruling that declared the port operating rights held by a subsidiary of the Hong Kong-based CK Hutchison Holdings at both ends of the Panama Canal were “unconstitutional”. The decision, which nullified the legitimate business operations of a major Chinese company, has left China with no choice but to fight back to defend Chinese enterprises' legal rights and interests.

The ruling has effectively terminated the port concessions of CK Hutchison, which have been in operation since 1997 under legally binding contracts. Over the years, the company has reportedly invested \$1.8 billion in Panama, and created thousands of jobs in the country. Such contributions should have warranted respect and protection. In response, the company said on Wednesday its subsidiary had started arbitration proceedings against Panama.

The “judgment” cannot be divorced from political factors. If there were constitutional issues, why didn't the relevant Panamanian authorities raise them earlier? Instead, the case emerged after the US administration sharpened its focus on the Western Hemisphere and revived the Monroe Doctrine.

Therefore, the Office of the Comptroller General in Panama has initiated this case at a politically charged moment. Furthermore, it is clear that the statements from the Panamanian government are a result of US interference. Multiple US officials feel no qualms about calling China's “loss” in Panama a “success” of the United States.

The expulsion of the Chinese enterprise is unmistakably political manipulation by the US. Panama's judicial authorities have been reduced to a mere puppet. Far from whitewashing the act, this clumsy charade has backfired spectacularly, laying bare the incident's inherently political nature for the world to see and exposing the government's and court's complicity with Washington. This act tarnishes Panama's reputation as a global logistics hub bridging two oceans. When a nation brazenly bends the rule of law

and market norms to serve a political agenda, it sends a warning to all investors and enterprises — Panama is a place where political calculations trump fair and stable business practices.

Until Panama changes its mind, it doesn't make sense for Chinese companies to continue to invest there in case they may lose their investment overnight.

The Chinese company's arbitration bid may not overturn the court's ruling. Even so, Panama is obligated to mitigate the Chinese enterprises' losses and to provide compensation or even damages.

The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region government has issued a statement expressing strong dissatisfaction and firm opposition to Panama's ruling. And the Chinese Foreign Ministry has emphasized that the country will take all necessary measures to firmly safeguard the legitimate and lawful rights and interests of Chinese enterprises, warning Panama of the potential economic repercussions, including the risk of losing access to the vast Chinese market.

China's unyielding stance underscores the paramount importance Beijing places on safeguarding its enterprises' overseas investments, and it issues a clear admonition to Panama: uphold market laws and the spirit of contract, as is its fundamental duty. Panama is not, in truth, caught in a bind between China and the US — instead it is making a choice between bowing to US pressure and upholding the basic tenets of justice and the rule of law.

While Panama can be criticized for acting this way, its move demonstrates how a sovereign state may bend to the will of a hegemonic US. Recent US moves, from its military actions in Venezuela to its rhetoric over Greenland and its latest stress test of Australia over Darwin Port, reflect the insatiability of Washington's hegemonic and imperialistic greed.

The ruinous fallout of Washington's unbridled lust for global hegemony will prove unbearable for the world. This brazen power grab lays bare the urgent need for the international community to unite in defense of fair, transparent and equitable global norms.

Cai Meng



Opinion Line

Coal becoming energy source grid only leans on for support

China's new energy development has won widespread acclaim from the international community. However, a small number of Western institutions, scholars and officials have singled out China's coal-fired power for persistent criticism.

From reports to climate forums, a narrative is being peddled that China's simultaneous boom in renewables and coal is illogical, economically wasteful and a betrayal of global climate goals.

This criticism is not just shallow, it is profoundly hypocritical and ignores the history, economics and stark reality of building a modern grid supported by renewable energy for the largest developing country.

These critics view the world through a distorted, postindustrial lens. Their own nations built their wealth on centuries of unfettered coal consumption. After their industrialization, they transferred many of their heavy and chemical industries abroad, primarily to China. Now, they have the audacity to lecture China, which in mere decades has lifted hundreds of millions of people out of poverty by becoming the factory of the world.

About 65 percent of China's electricity powers its industrial sector, with much of it producing goods for Western consumers. When a Western household uses a product made in China, it is, in effect, importing a portion of China's energy footprint. They enjoy

products from China, many of which offer good quality for the price, and then blame China for the emissions.

Western critics entirely miss the point that China's coal fleet is being increasingly transformed from a baseload workhorse to a power backup source to ensure the grid's stability.

As professor Wang Zhixuan from North China Electric Power University noted, coal's role is fundamentally shifting to that of a flexible “safety net”. This is not a “double-down” on fossil fuels but a pragmatic recognition that wind and solar, for all their stellar growth, are intermittent; the sun sets, the wind stalls. But hospitals, homes and factories demand constant, reliable power.

What is the Western solution to this intermittency? Primarily, flexible natural gas-fired power plants. But this is a luxury China cannot afford at scale. China imports large amounts of gas and oil, leaving domestic coal, which comprises 90 percent of its fossil fuel reserves, as a critical pillar of its energy security. Furthermore, China's modern coal-fired power plants, which are just over a decade old, provide essential urban heating through cogeneration, having replaced thousands of polluting small boilers. Critics miss the point that before phasing out coal, the authorities will have to solve the heating challenge.

China now boasts over half of the world's wind and solar capacity, with 1 in every 3 kilowatt-hours of electricity generation coming from renewables. This is a revolution unfolding at a pace and scale unseen in human history.

Yet to ensure this green wave doesn't crash against the rocks of grid instability, a dependable backup is required. The expanding coal capacity does not equal expansion of coal use. In fact, utilization hours are falling, and the strategic goal is clear: keep the plants ready but idle and utilize their capacity only when renewables need support.

Ultimately, China's integrated strategy exposes a bitter truth: the West engages in climate moralizing from a position of deindustrialized comfort. It consumed the benefits of carbon-intensive growth for centuries, transferred the burdens, and now demands China leapfrog the essential stages of grid stability and energy security.

China's path of massively scaling renewables while using coal as a stabilizing bridge is not a contradiction. It is the most responsible and realistic course for a major industrial economy undergoing the fastest energy transition on Earth. Instead of misplaced blame, the world should recognize this complex balancing act for what it is: a necessary model of pragmatic, secure, and sustainable development.

— HOU LIQIANG, CHINA DAILY

What They Say

People’s well-being the objective of urbanization

Editor's note: China's urbanization drive is shifting from large-scale expansion to a phase that emphasizes quality and efficiency. Wang Kai, president of the China Academy of Urban Planning and Design, shared his insights on this transition in an article in the Economic Daily. Below are excerpts of the article. The views don't necessarily represent those of China Daily.

It is estimated that China's urbanization rate will rise to about 75 percent by 2035 from 67.89 percent last year.

The pattern of the country's urban development has shifted to one focusing on the improvement of cities' quality. This new pattern no longer depends on developing new land to generate benefits; instead, it seeks benefits through fully leveraging existing urban resources.

It is therefore necessary to promote institutional innovation and deepen the reform of systems for urban construction, operation and governance, form a sustainable approach toward urban renewal, improve the quality and efficiency of urban development, and make it fairer, more sustainable and safer.

Experience shows that advancing high-quality urban renewal is a complex and systematic undertaking. For example, the people-centered philosophy should be put into concrete action, and targeted measures should be adopted to address the different needs of four

key groups: children, the elderly, new residents and younger adults in cities, and people living in old urban residential compounds.

A detailed examination is needed to identify the weak spots in cities, which are usually not easy to detect. The examination should be conducted before urban renewal projects are undertaken. No renewal projects should be launched without prior examination. A mechanism should be established to ensure that both the examination and renewal projects function in a coordinated manner.

Research in diverse fields, including housing safety, community services and transportation, is also necessary, because it helps identify the pressing difficulties and practical concerns of urban residents. In addition, cities need to undergo systematic assessments, covering their functions, structure, operation, spatial governance and the level of ecological security, to identify the shortcomings that lower their competitiveness, restrict their carrying

capacity and hinder sustainable development.

Detailed design of urban space can help existing buildings and facilities generate greater value. The importance of careful, detailed intervention and repair of existing urban structures should be highlighted.

The traditional model of urban renewal, which prioritizes construction over operation, often leads to a mismatch between supply and demand, asset loss and declining vitality of projects. Therefore, it's essential to take operation into account during the entire process of an urban renewal project. Key issues — such as who will operate the project and how it will generate returns — should be clearly addressed when the project is at the planning stage.

Multiple parties should be encouraged to participate in such projects, so that they all contribute to the construction and governance of the projects, as well as share the benefits yielded by the projects.

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VIEWS

Roberto Vizcardo Benavides

Forging peace and cooperation in LAC region

The Chinese No 1 Central Document released on Tuesday stresses the importance of aligning agricultural trade and production, advocating for diversified agricultural imports and supporting the expansion of the export of specialized agricultural products. This proposal not only aligns with China's broader goals for economic modernization but can also play a critical role in strengthening the economic relationship with Latin America and the Caribbean.

The end of the first quarter-century marks the conclusion of China's 14th Five-Year Plan (2021-2025), one of the key stages in the country's modernization strategy. This period finds China in the midst of consolidating its development, more resilient to internal and external turbulence, and strengthened and flexible in the face of future challenges.

China has demonstrated to the world that, with a serious, prudent, and responsible planning system, it is possible to achieve any goal a country set for itself. Seventy years have passed since the implementation of the First Five-Year Plan (1953-57) — seven decades of achievements.

After the world's turbulent decade, the recommendations for the new plan envision a more complex, unpredictable, and highly competitive world, especially in technology, for the next five years.

So, what should Latin America and the Caribbean expect in the next decade? The answer is greater cooperation from China. In a document published by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs on China's policy paper toward Latin America and the Caribbean in Dec 2025, five interrelated programs were established with the purpose of strengthening China's ties with LAC in all fields, in direct accordance with one of the strategic pillars of the recommendations for the 15th Five-Year Plan (2026-30) — greater engagement in the Global South — particularly highlighting the Belt and Road Initiative, which involves several LAC countries and is primarily realized through the Shanghai-Chancay maritime connection.

However, almost simultaneously, the United States administration published the US National Security Strategy, which is global in scope, unlike China's policy, which is focused exclusively on the LAC countries. The document, released in December, refocuses US security and

development concerns on the Western Hemisphere. In a clear allusion to China, it outlines a strategy to recover US influence in the region — a new “Monroe Doctrine” — through alliances for development and resource exploitation, among other actions.

The Ibero-American geopolitical landscape appears unpredictable, highly complex, and competitive. On the one hand, China has tangibly increased its cooperation with the region, both in quantity and quality, and prioritizes the LAC in this endeavor — many mega-projects are in various stages of implementation — and increased cooperation is expected in diverse sectors such as industry, energy, communications, agriculture, tourism, science and technology.

On the other hand, Washington's NSS, in its focus on the Western Hemisphere, seeks to strengthen alliances, secure supply chains, and restore US preeminence in the region, which will thus become a space of strategic competition, economic opportunities, geopolitical tensions, sovereignty and security issues, as well as realignments.

In the region, China has comprehensive strategic partnership agreements with countries such as Peru, Brazil, Mexico and Chile. The overarching theme is shared development under a win-win strategy. At the same time, the US has signed Free Trade Agreements with Central American economies, including Colombia, Chile and Peru. Clearly, competition between China and the US in the region is not new, but it will intensify in the medium term.

Furthermore, on the issue of security, the US government has proposed that Peru be declared a major non-NATO ally, a status already held by Colombia, Argentina and Brazil. The proposal might be approved by the US Senate.

Therefore, it is likely that LAC countries' relations with the two major countries might get exacerbated. But it is also possible that Beijing and Washington,



MA XUEJING / CHINA DAILY

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with the former offering shared development and the latter pursuing the new “Monroe Doctrine”, will find common ground in their national interests in the region.

If so, the LAC will have the privilege of being the fertile ground from which a new era of peace, development and security will emerge, leading to a better quality of life for its inhabitants — and providing a paradigmatic space for other regions of the world that benefits all of humanity.

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Guo Yi

Chinese New Year gift to rail passengers

In China, few phenomena capture the attention of over a billion people quite like the Chinese New Year travel rush. Also known as *chunyun*, “the world's largest human migration” kicks off again this month. But this year brings something different — a new service from China's railway system that promises to make the usual grueling journey home a bit easier.

In mid-January, China Railway Express expanded its “Light Travel” luggage service to 111 stations across the country, covering most major cities. The concept is simple: book through an app, and professional couriers will pick up your heavy bags from your door and deliver them to the station — or straight to your destination. No more dragging oversized suitcases through packed terminals.

Imagine if the entire US population needed to return home for Christmas within the same week, with most traveling across multiple state lines while carrying everything they need for an extended stay. This scenario plays out annually in China during *chunyun*, when an estimated 9 billion trips are made over a 40-day period. Given China's massive population, this period represents the year's most intense transportation demand and tightest capacity constraints. It's a challenge unmatched anywhere in the world.

Looking back to the not-so-distant past, beyond the difficulty of securing tickets, *chunyun*'s defining images were heavy suitcases, bulging bags, crowded platforms, and faces etched with exhaustion. “Carrying the burden” became an almost

mandatory rite of passage for every homebound traveler, while simultaneously serving as an annual stress test for the transportation system's absolute limits. Migrant workers would struggle with enormous packages containing gifts for family members, students hauled a semester's worth of belongings, and elderly passengers wrestled with unwieldy luggage through packed stations. During that era, simply “getting there” was the overwhelming priority — the ultimate measure of success or failure.

The government responded with unprecedented investment, pouring enormous resources into adding trains, expanding high-speed rail networks, optimizing scheduling systems, and enhancing station capacity. These efforts ultimately succeeded in solving world-class challenges like chronic ticket shortages and establishing the foundation for smooth-flowing transportation arteries during peak travel periods.

But something interesting happened as China grew wealthier. People's expectations changed. Simply arriving was not enough anymore — they wanted the journey itself to be bearable, maybe even pleasant. This shift reflects broader changes in Chinese society: an aging population that cannot handle heavy lifting like before, more families traveling with young children, and a growing middle class that values comfort and convenience.

The new luggage service targets exactly these pain points. It is particularly helpful for elderly passengers, families with kids, business travelers, and anyone with

mobility issues — groups for whom heavy bags are not just inconvenient but can make travel nearly impossible.

The service works through partnerships between the railway system and logistics companies. Book online, schedule a pickup, and your bags travel separately while you board the train empty-handed. At your destination, either collect them at the station or have them delivered to your final address. It is a small innovation with big implications.

This shift from “Can you get there?” to “How was your trip?” represents something larger happening in China's approach to public services. For years, the focus was on basic capacity — building enough infrastructure to handle massive demand. Now, with that foundation in place, attention is turning to quality and user experience.

The expansion of “Light Travel” to 111 major hubs nationwide shows how quickly these new priorities are taking hold. It is a “supply-side reform” in public services: not just asking “How many people can we move?” but “How can we make their experience better?”

This evolution is visible across China's transport system. Many trains now offer quiet cars for passengers seeking a peaceful journey. Stations increasingly resemble airports, with shopping, dining, and business centers. Mobile apps handle everything from ticket booking to food delivery to your seat.

The changes at *chunyun* matter because they preview broader transformations in Chinese society. For a country that spent decades focused on meeting

basic needs — housing, food, transportation — the shift toward enhancing the quality of life represents a new phase of development.

Western visitors often struggle to grasp the emotional weight of *chunyun*. It is not just about travel logistics. For hundreds of millions of Chinese, this annual journey is the most important trip of the year — often the only chance to see their family in a year, especially for migrant workers who spend months in distant cities. The stress of this journey has been part of the experience for so long that removing even small friction points feels significant.

The “Light Travel” service won't solve all of *chunyun*'s challenges. Trains will still be crowded, tickets still competitive, and the sheer scale of movement will still be daunting. But it signals something important: China's transportation system is moving beyond simply handling massive numbers toward actually caring about individual passenger experience.

As millions embark on this year's journey home, many will travel lighter than ever before. It is a small change that reflects larger shifts in what China expects from its public services — and what Chinese citizens increasingly expect from their own lives. The question is no longer just whether they can get home for Chinese New Year, but whether they can enjoy the trip.

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More differences mean you need more exchange programs

Waikiki today looks exactly the same as it did in 1993 when, during my first trip to the United States, I had spent a year completing the freedom forum fellowship for journalists in Asian studies at the University of Hawaii in Manoa. It was Asian studies for the six American journalists in the program, but for me and a fellow Japanese journalist, it was very much about US studies.

As someone who cared a lot about developments in the US and China-US relations, it was an eye-opening year for me. The Bill Clinton-Al Gore administration had just taken office. I remember vividly the day when Clinton apologized to the native Hawaiians for the US overthrowing of the Hawaiian kingdom in 1893. And I remember the day when Gore made a passionate speech about the information superhighway — the internet that has since changed the world.

While learning a great deal from classes ranging from US studies and economics to sociology and Japanese studies, I enjoyed the seminars at the East-West Center, then headed by Michel Oksenberg, a well-known China hand. I also attended many China seminars at the Maple Garden restaurant hosted by the late professor Daniel Kwok, who was the director of my program. He passed away a year ago and the Maple Garden Chinese restaurant was also closed last year.

China and the US are the two major countries that will impact the world.

Years later, when I interviewed China scholars Thomas Rawski at the University of Pittsburgh and Nicholas Lardy at the Peterson Institute in Washington, I told them that their writings were my assigned readings back in 1993.

China-US relations, which had suffered a major setback a few years earlier, were on a path of recovery. It was toward the end of my program in May 1994 when Clinton announced the decision to delink the renewal of China's most favored nation trade status from the so-called human rights record. I made the same argument in a group presentation in an economics class.

Clinton also played a major role in facilitating China's entry into the World Trade Organization in 2001, a transformative event for both China and the world.

Besides academics, the Aloha Spirit, which is very much about love, compassion and mutual respect, made my year there a memorable experience. This week, while meeting old friends, another purpose of my trip was to go tomb sweeping for an old couple who had both passed away. They were like family to me, taking me on trips and inviting me to their home at Manoa Valley. They had visited me in China and I visited them in Hawaii a couple of times, including when I was there to cover the Rim of the Pacific naval exercise in 2016. It is a US-led multinational naval war game held biennially in even-numbered years around the Hawaiian islands. China was invited for the first time in 2014 and the second time in 2016.

Unfortunately, the US sent a formal invitation to China for the 2018 exercise but later disinvited the country. It was such a horrible mistake. Military-to-military exchanges have been inadequate between the two countries but are critical for them to avoid misunderstanding and miscalculations. I have heard stories about Chinese and US naval vessels coming in close contact in the South China Sea but the situation got defused because it turned out that the two captains knew each other from the RIMPAC drills and ended up chatting about the lunch they had that day.

In the past, Chinese and US officials in various sectors knew each other much better than they do today because they met every year at the dozens of bilateral mechanisms such as the Strategic and Economic Dialogue, and the Joint Commission on Commerce and Trade.

China and the US are the two major countries that will impact the world. There is no doubt that exchanges, whether through fellowships such as the one I did in Hawaii in 1993 or through bilateral meetings at the government level, will contribute to better understanding and peace and prosperity of both countries and the world.

Indeed, the more differences you have, the more exchanges you need.