Turn and churn

A caste census should not be allowed to ossify social segmentation

The Centre's decision to include caste enumeration in the next national Census marks a sharp departure for the ruling BJP from its previous position. Prime Minister Narendra Modi had in 2024 targeted the Congress election manifesto promise of a caste census as a reflection of its 'urban Naxal' thinking. During the general election last year, BJP leaders had asked the people for a massive Lok Sabha majority to remodel the Constitution. This promise of a constitutional overhaul was seen by OBC and Dalit groups as a threat to dismantle caste reservations, and partly explains why the BJP fell short of an electoral majority. In 2015, the RSS chief's call for a debate on caste-based reservation led to setbacks for the BJP in the Bihar Assembly elections. The Maharashtra and Haryana Assembly election victories in 2024 suggested that the BJP's plank of Hindu unity, and its resistance to caste-based politics, continued to retain electoral salience. But, as it turns out, the BJP was probably unsure of its electoral ground and feared or sensed an undercurrent in favour of caste census that it could no longer politically ignore, particularly in Bihar which will vote later this year.

It is now a race to claim credit. The BJP and the Opposition have accused each other of undermining social justice. National formations, which include the BJP, the Congress and the Left, have historically taken an ambiguous, if not hostile, view towards caste claims. Subaltern parties that mobilised OBC and Dalit groups in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar displaced all national parties from these States in the 1990s. The BJP responded by turning more inclusive towards the OBCs, that has culminated in its continuing electoral dominance since 2014. The Congress, under Rahul Gandhi, started espousing caste justice, in a remarkable turn in the party's history. Apart from a caste census, Mr. Gandhi now seeks the removal of the 50% ceiling in reservations, and an expansion of reservation in private educational institutions. Though there is no evidence yet that the Congress has or will make electoral gains from the new stirring, it is evident that the BJP is worried. The counting of castes and communities unleashed social forces in colonial India that continue till date, and a comprehensive caste count, the first since 1931, is set to unmake and remake many political and social realities. A caste census would not automatically result in reservation according to population figures, which is obnoxious; as Article 16(4) of the Constitution makes it clear, special provision for reservation in favour of any backward class can be made only if such community is inadequately represented in public services. A caste census should not be allowed to ossify social divisions, but only used to better target benefits of affirmative action.

New friends

India is making efforts to isolate Pakistan in the Islamic world

Amidst the shock over the Pahalgam terror attack, the resultant diplomatic measures against Pakistan and the likelihood of a military escalation, New Delhi's attempts to strengthen ties with three of Pakistan's closest allies may have been missed. But support from Saudi Arabia, the UAE and the Taliban regime in Afghanistan will be important to building India's case against the perpetrators. Prime Minister Narendra Modi was in Jeddah when he received news of the attack. Although he cut short his visit, he discussed the attack at some length with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. The joint statement recorded their strong condemnation of the attack, rejecting any attempt to "link terrorism to any particular race, religion or culture". The wording marks the strongest such language used and is the culmination of the process begun in 2006 with the India-KSA Delhi Declaration, followed by the 2010 Strategic Partnership agreement that turned the compass in the Saudi Kingdom on terrorism. In 2012, Saudi authorities assisted India in securing the arrest of Sayed Zabiuddin Ansari alias Abu Jundal, an LeT Indian co-conspirator being tried for the 26/11 attacks. The assistance marked a turnaround in ties, given the Kingdom's history of funding Islamist extremist groups at madrasas in Pakistan and other countries. Ties have now been transformed with technological cooperation and the promise of $100 billion Saudi investment.

With the UAE, India has made strides in cooperation, boosted by the signing of the Strategic Partnership in 2017, and at least six visits by Mr. Modi, leading to a stark turnaround since the 1990s, when India pleaded unsuccessfully for the extradition of Dawood Ibrahim and in intervening in the 1999 hijack of flight IC-814. In April, New Delhi rolled out the red carpet for Sheikh Hamdan bin Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Crown Prince of Dubai and the UAE's Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defence, cementing ties with a country that has been one of Pakistan's closest backers. Finally, this week saw a surprise visit to Kabul by the MEA's point-person for Pakistan-Afghanistan-India and a meeting with Taliban acting foreign minister Muttaqi as well as a "categorical condemnation" by the Taliban of the Pahalgam killings – a far cry from the Taliban's past in targeting Indian interests in Afghanistan in collaboration with Pakistani agencies and terror groups. It would not be pragmatic to assume a full change of heart with the Taliban, but the support against terrorism is bound to be one more pressure point on Pakistan. The salutary impact of well-timed diplomacy in turning around ties with countries that had refused India cooperation three decades ago is noteworthy.

Reviving a far-sighted but forgotten Bill mechanism



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Private Member's Bills (PMBs) are a mechanism through which Members of Parliament (MP), who are not Ministers, can propose their own legislation. In India's parliamentary system, most laws are introduced by the government, drafted by Ministries and tabled by Ministers. In contrast, PMBs come from individual MPs, both ruling party or the Opposition. In each session, Fridays are usually reserved for discussion on PMBs. PMBs are perhaps the last remaining intervention wherein MPs are not strictly guided by party mandate.

However, this crucial intervention has steadily eroded. Frequent disruptions, pre-emptive adjournments, and the increasing prioritisation of government business have reduced the PMB to a symbolic gesture rather than a serious legislative exercise. Ignoring the PMB is a procedural lapse and also signals a democratic backslide.

PMB trends, 17th and 18th Lok Sabha

Since Independence, only 14 PMBs have been passed and received presidential assent and none has cleared both Houses since 1970. In the 17th Lok Sabha (2019-24), 729 PMBs were introduced in the Lok Sabha and 705 in the Rajya Sabha. However, only two in the Lok Sabha and 14 in the Rajya Sabha were ever discussed.

In the 18th Lok Sabha, only 20 MPs have introduced PMBs so far. During the inaugural and Budget Sessions of 2024, 64 PMBs were introduced in the Lok Sabha, but not a single one was discussed.

In the winter session, two Fridays in the Lok Sabha were lost to disruptions, while another was taken up by a general discussion on the Constitution. Even in the Budget Session, the first Friday, usually reserved for private members, was used for discussions on the Union Budget. Only one Friday in the Lok Sabha saw any private member business-related activity, and even this was limited to a resolution. In the Rajya Sabha, out of 82 PMBs listed during the Budget Session, only 49 were introduced on a single Friday, and discussion began on just one, only to be cut short as the House was adjourned *sine die*.

PMBs have long provided a platform for MPs to introduce pieces of legislation that reflect personal convictions, constituency demands, or emerging social needs, regardless of party affiliation.

A notable example is the 'Right to Disconnect' Bill introduced by Supriya Sule of the Nationalist Congress Party, in the Lok Sabha on October 28, 2019. The Bill proposed granting employees the legal right to disengage from work-related communication beyond official working hours, addressing the increasing intrusion of work into personal life in the digital age. Though it did not proceed beyond the initial stage, the Bill sparked an important national conversation on mental health, work-life balance, and labour rights in a hyper-connected economy. It exemplifies how PMBs can be vehicles for forward-looking and unconventional ideas.

> The Private Member's Bill has the potential to be a gold mine for India's legislative landscape

In contrast, some PMBs have had a more tangible legislative impact. In 2014, Tiruchi Siva of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (Rajya Sabha), introduced the 'Rights of Transgender Persons Bill. On April 24, 2015, the Bill made history by becoming the first Private Member's Bill in over four decades to be passed by the Rajya Sabha. Though it did not clear the Lok Sabha, it laid the groundwork for the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019, introduced and passed by the government. This Bill is a powerful reminder of how private initiatives can shape the legislative agenda and compel government action on socially sensitive issues.

PMBs also offer space for MPs from the ruling party to express independent thought. Bharatiya Janata Party MP Gopal Chinayya Shetty's Bill calling for free medical and health-care facilities to the senior citizens in all Government and private hospitals is an example. His intervention demonstrates that even Treasury Bench MPs, often bound by government priorities, can use PMBs to introduce legislation based on personal insight or constituency feedback.

Shrinking space for independent action

One cannot overlook the institutional changes that have contributed to the reduced space for individual legislative initiative. The 52nd Constitutional Amendment, which introduced the Anti-Defection Law through the Tenth Schedule, aimed to ensure political stability. However, it has also had the unintended effect of limiting the ability of MPs, particularly the Treasury Benches, to independently question or deviate from their party's legislative agenda. In such a structured environment, the PMB remains one of the few avenues through which MPs across party lines can suggest constructive policy alternatives.

While voters in India may cast their ballots for candidates contesting on party symbols, their choices are often equally influenced by the individual's integrity, expertise and track record within the constituency. MPs are elected not solely to reiterate the party's position, but to serve as a voice for the aspirations and concerns of their constituents.

To safeguard the PMB process, a series of procedural and structural reforms must be considered.

Reforms to pursue

The first is the need to treat the time earmarked for PMBs as sacrosanct. Amendments to the Rules of Procedure and Conduct of Business should explicitly protect this time from being overridden, except in cases of a national emergency. Dedicated hours for PMBs must not only be preserved but also enforced with consistency, enabling meaningful debate and potential adoption of the PMB.

Parliament could consider instituting a review committee specifically for PMBs, responsible for screening Bills for quality, relevance, and constitutionality. It could even recommend a priority list for discussion based on public importance and cross-party support. A fast-track mechanism may also be introduced for high-impact or broadly supported Bills to reach the floor in a time-bound manner.

In instances where the government feels constrained by time to transact its own legislative business, it should consider extending the overall working hours of Parliament, rather than encroaching upon the Fridays reserved for PMBs. The working hours in both Houses typically run from 11 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., which includes a lunch break. A modest extension, even by an hour or two, would significantly improve the productivity of Zero Hour and Question Hour, while ensuring that PMBs remain undisturbed. With the prospect of delimitation and a likely increase in the number of MPs in both Houses, the urgency of reform is greater than ever.

One compelling reform that could be adapted from international practice is the Ten-Minute Rule of the U.K. Parliament – any MP can make a short speech of up to 10 minutes in support of a PMB along with its introduction after which another MP may oppose it for an equal length of time. This allows Bills to be introduced, heard, and recorded without long time slots. Adopting a similar provision in the Indian context, either as an addition to or as a substitute for existing PMB procedures, could create a channel for a greater number of legislative ideas to enter the public domain.

The Vice President of India/Chairman of the Rajya Sabha, Jagdeep Dhankhar, has laid emphasis on the role of private member's business in deepening democracy. He described PMBs as "far-sighted, forward-looking, and a gold mine" for India's legislative landscape. These are words that reflect both the value and the potential of this mechanism when nurtured with sincerity.

China's strategic push — Asia ties amid tariff tensions



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The President of China, Xi Jinping's three-nation tour of Southeast Asia (April 14-18, 2025) to Vietnam, Malaysia, and Cambodia, had one goal: to pitch Beijing as the only reliable partner of choice. Facing what is at the moment a 145% tariff on Chinese exports imposed by the Trump administration, China is actively recalibrating its external economic engagement, especially in geographies where it enjoys strategic proximity and relatively receptive partners.

This Southeast Asia outreach is not just routine diplomacy. It is a considered move by Beijing to mitigate external economic pressure, project stability, and cement its leadership narrative in the Indo-Pacific. The visit also comes in the wake of the "Central Conference on Work Relating to Neighbouring Countries" (April 8-9). This relatively rare workshop was attended by senior party leaders and underscored the importance of fostering a "community with a shared future" with neighbouring states.

As a buffer and bridge

China is keen to insulate itself from the ramifications of a deepening trade war with the U.S., which now extends beyond tariffs to export controls, technology bans and financial decoupling. In this context, Southeast Asia serves as a buffer and a bridge. It offers China resilient trade channels, manufacturing alternatives, and diplomatic partners to collectively push back against the narrative of de-risking or containment led by Washington.

Under U.S. President Donald Trump, Cambodia could face a combined tariff of up to 59% (including a 10% universal tariff and an additional 49% once a 90-day pause ends), while Vietnam and Malaysia would be hit with tariffs of 46% and 24%, respectively. Conversely, Mr. Xi's message was that China is open for business, supports multilateralism, and opposes unilateral coercion – a direct rebuttal to U.S. policies. In Vietnam, his meeting with key Vietnamese leaders resulted in the signing of 45 cooperation agreements. In Malaysia, discussions focused on enhancing economic cooperation and addressing regional security concerns. The two countries signed over 30 agreements, encompassing sectors such as the digital economy, artificial intelligence, agriculture and infrastructure development. The Cambodia visit (Mr. Xi's first since 2016), underscored China's role as Cambodia's largest investor and trading partner, with bilateral trade exceeding $15 billion in 2024. All these agreements, particularly the Funan Techo Canal project in Cambodia, are an effort to show that China continues to offer public goods and economic opportunities, while the U.S. pivots toward protectionism.

> Beijing's Southeast Asia outreach may complicate the U.S.'s efforts to build a coalition to isolate or deter China economically

To project a contrast

Beyond economics, the visit was also about ideological and normative competition as Beijing attempts to draw a contrast between its model of non-interference and economic engagement, and what it portrays as U.S. interventionism and ideological rigidity. This narrative particularly resonates in Cambodia, which has long been a close political ally of Beijing, and to a lesser extent in Malaysia, where the government has sought to mostly maintain a balanced foreign policy between major powers.

Mr. Xi's call to advance a code of conduct in the South China Sea, support for infrastructure development through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and lay an emphasis on cultural linkages are part of this soft power strategy. It seeks to recast China not just as a neighbour but as a normative leader in regional order-building, offering an alternative vision to the U.S.-led liberal international order.

The timing of this visit is politically significant. U.S. engagement with Southeast Asia has been episodic and often perceived to be reactive, despite Washington's measures to the contrary. The U.S.'s Indo-Pacific strategy is also often seen in parts of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as security heavy and narrowly focused on countering China. Mr. Xi's visit, in contrast, offers tangible deliverables: infrastructure projects, digital collaboration, trade facilitation, and security dialogues.

By visiting key ASEAN members, he also played into intra-ASEAN dynamics. For instance, the effort to deepen ties with Vietnam, traditionally wary of Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea, is an attempt to reassure Hanoi. In Malaysia, China's emphasis on peaceful dispute resolution and BRI collaboration appeals to a government that is cautious about becoming a pawn in the U.S.-China rivalry. While Washington continues to emphasise security partnerships – through AUKUS (Australia, the United Kingdom, the U.S.), the Quad (Australia, India, Japan, the U.S.), and bilateral alliances – China is doubling down on economic diplomacy, where the U.S. is perceived to have underdelivered. Initiatives such as the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity have been criticised for lacking market access incentives, in contrast to China's clear offers of investment and trade.

The larger picture

Moreover, Beijing's ability to present itself as an indispensable economic partner may complicate U.S. efforts to build a coalition to isolate or deter China economically. If Southeast Asia increasingly leans further towards economic interdependence with China, Washington will find it harder to operationalise a robust economic counter-strategy. Mr. Xi's Southeast Asia tour is a forward-looking strategy to entrench Chinese influence in the Indo-Pacific at a time of systemic flux. In the contest between the U.S. and China for regional primacy, this kind of diplomacy is calculated strategic positioning, with long-term implications for regional alignment, economic integration, and rule-setting.

Finally, this tour is also about domestic political signalling. For Mr. Xi, the ability to show that China is not internationally isolated, despite mounting western pressure, is crucial. The optics of warm receptions, economic deals, and strategic dialogues serve to buttress his authority at home and offset negative headlines around the economic slowdown or diplomatic frictions with the West. At the same time, they signal to the region – and the Global South at large – that China continues to be there for them to lean on. How receptive Southeast will be to Mr. Xi's outreach, despite Beijing's own unilateral tendencies, remains to be seen.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Census and caste

The Narendra Modi government's surprise decision to have a caste-based census in the middle of heightened tensions with Pakistan over the Pahalgam terror attack, and after fiercely opposing such a demand from the Opposition, only highlights the significance of caste dynamics in the electoral framework of Indian democracy. A caste census is important as it provides data essential for addressing social inequalities, ensuring equitable resource allocation and monitoring the effectiveness of affirmative action policies. One cannot wish away the reality that caste-based discrimination still exists in many regions of India despite laws making such discrimination punishable. That the decision has been announced with an eye on the Assembly elections in caste-dominated Bihar is to state the obvious. It is amusing that the BJP's top leadership has hailed the Prime Minister's decision as "historic".

The truth is that it was he who had repeatedly attacked the Opposition for their demand, accusing them of "spreading poison in society" in the name of caste and even calling them "urban Naxals".

S.K. Choudhury,
Bengaluru

Canada-U.S. ties

Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney's diplomatic and data-driven focus on long-term systemic reforms is a style that will meet the Trump's dispensation's combative, transactional, and short-term political driven moves. Mr. Carney could pursue parallel alliances with the European Union and Asia to hedge against U.S. unpredictability, even as Mr. Trump focuses on extracting short-term economic gains. Mr. Carney has to rely on nimble diplomacy.

R. Narayanan,
Navi Mumbai

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

Has the Pahalgam attack crossed a red line?



Sharat Sabharwal

Former High Commissioner to Pakistan and author of 'India's Pakistan Conundrum: Managing a Complex Relationship'



Lieutenant General (Retired) Deependra Singh Hooda

Former Commander in Chief of the Indian Army's Northern Command who oversaw the surgical strikes across the Line of Control in 2016

PARLEY

The calculated brutality of the terror attack in Pahalgam in Jammu and Kashmir appears to have crossed a red line for India-Pakistan ties that were already at an all-time low. Following its diplomatic measures against Pakistan, what appropriate military response can India craft? Has the Pahalgam attack crossed a red line? Sharat Sabharwal and Lieutenant General (Retired) Deependra Singh Hooda discuss the question in a conversation moderated by **Suhasini Haidar**. Edited excerpts:

The Prime Minister has said that he has given the military "a free hand" for operations. Pakistan's government has been saying every 24 hours that an attack is imminent. Given the indicators that a military option will be exercised next, would you say that all non-military options have been exhausted?

Sharat Sabharwal: There seems to be no diplomacy between the two countries at the moment. We know that some other countries, notably the U.S., have said that they are in touch with both sides and have urged them not to escalate matters. But what would it take for Pakistan to do something, which would be acceptable to our government, which would then move us towards de-escalation? There is nothing of that kind on the horizon. The government has to take into account the strong public sentiment on the issue, the record of what was done in 2016 (in Uri) and in 2019 (in Pulwama), (India's) surgical strikes and Balakot strike in response and the expectation now that there will be some finite action.

Lt Gen (Retd) Deependra Hooda: I think some non-military options are still on the table, such as international pressure, especially on Pakistan, to back off. But the statements coming from Pakistan, such as 'Indian blood will flow through the Indus', are very hostile. I don't see any give from the Pakistani side. Therefore, if there are no options left, then some sort of use of military force seems the only way forward.

I wouldn't read too much into the 'free hand' that has been given to the forces. Obviously, the military has always had a free hand in preparing for any action. In 2016, when we were planning the cross-border operation, the government didn't interfere at all in the planning. But the military cannot move when it wants. Whatever is contemplated must get political approval.

Would a Pakistani offer to assist with the investigation, as was the case in 2008 after the Mumbai attacks and then in 2016 after the Pathankot airbase attack, be de-escalatory?



A relative consoles Aishanya Dwivedi in Kanpur. Aishanya's husband Shubham Dwivedi was killed by terrorists in Pahalgam in Kashmir. AP

SS: There has been no such offer [from Pakistan] this time. There is complete denial and there are belligerent statements being made. Pakistan Army chief Asim Munir is a hard-liner, going by his speeches and public pronouncements. After Pathankot, it was Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif who made the offer, but he was helpless in front of the Army chief, and [the investigation] went nowhere. In 2008, a lot of international pressure was built up on Pakistan, especially because nationals of other countries also got killed in the attacks (in Mumbai).

Are there lessons learned from responses in the past – 2008, 2016, 2019, etc. – when we think about the response that is to come?

SS: In 2008, there was no publicised punitive activity, but international pressure built up and resulted in Pakistan not only acknowledging that Ajmal Kasab was their national, but also ordering an investigation by their federal investigation agency. It was at this stage that I went as High Commissioner in April 2009. In June, [Pakistan] gave us a 30-page dossier, in which they acknowledged for the first and the last time that the attack was mounted from their territory and launched by the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT). And they gave us elaborate details of the training, of where the boat was launched, etc. They took seven people into custody and launched a prosecution in an anti-terrorism court, all of which offered us a way towards de-escalation. We resumed dialogue in March 2011. In 2012, we saw the lowest level of violence along the Line of Control (LoC) and in Jammu and Kashmir since the turn of the century. This is not something that necessarily offers us any options for today, as it is not clear whether Pakistan would be willing to admit what it did, or whether that will [alone] be acceptable to the [Modi] government.

> Both the government and the armed forces should be free to choose the place and time of action, but it is preferable to do it without publicity if possible, as that would reduce chances of escalation.
> SHARAT SABHARWAL

LGDH: In 2016, we had planned for a reaction, but Pakistan said "nothing happened" and did not retaliate (to the surgical strikes). The Pakistani response to the Balakot strikes in 2019 taught us that there would be retaliation after that. After 2019, Pakistani strategists have written about a strategy of 'quid pro quo plus' – that is, reacting in an equal manner plus a little more – if India does something. So, as we contemplate actions now, we need to prepare for that. In 2019, we hadn't looked at this aspect enough, so there was a hasty reaction to Pakistan's retaliation. We need to see what is the lowest level of military force which can be considered a success from our side. People have suddenly started talking about 'taking PoK (Pakistan-occupied Kashmir)'; that is far-fetched.

Even after 2019, we had the 2021 LoC ceasefire negotiations. In 2024, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar travelled to Islamabad for the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), although he didn't hold a bilateral dialogue. Should such measures end as well?

SS: The primary challenge we have now is China. Our responsibilities on that side of the border (Line of Actual Control) have grown. I believe it is in our interest to keep the western border as calm as possible. At the moment it is very volatile because of what has happened. We cannot leave the SCO just because Pakistan is part of it or because China has an active role in it. We must think of larger considerations.

LGDH: A ceasefire in 2021 made strategic sense. We were looking more closely at the military challenge from China, at the fact that a large number of forces had got deployed there (at the LAC). We cannot completely insulate the ceasefire from the state of India-Pakistan relations as they exist today. We are already seeing breaches on the ceasefire line and I think that will only increase. Obviously both sides have built up additional forces along the LoC, expecting something to happen. There will be suspicion regarding any movement taking place on both sides. If and when military action takes place, I think the ceasefire will not survive.

Has the Pahalgam attack drawn a line? Is there any chance of bilateral, diplomatic engagement in the future?

LGDH: For now, the attack has drawn a red line. We can't look five or 10 years down the line, but in the immediate future, I don't see any positive engagement happening. We see only rhetoric from Pakistan – on war, nuclear weapons, etc.

SS: My reading is that the trajectory of this relationship, even beyond the resolution of this crisis, remains sombre. Diplomacy has taken a complete backseat for various reasons. First, our 'terror and talks cannot go together' policy. Second, Pakistan's unreasonable demand, which it sticks to, that India must withdraw the Article 370 move, for any bilateral engagement. The two countries are dependent entirely on security, deterrence, and coercion to manage the relationship. Ideally, coercion should be a means to an end, with its impact being leveraged at some stage through dialogue and diplomacy to bring the adversary to a more desirable stage. I don't think permanent peace between India and Pakistan is on the cards, given the nature of the Pakistani state. Our aim should be to manage this relationship at the lowest possible level of pain. Because if it is a journey of coercion, and coercion becomes an end in itself, that creates an environment that is prone to volatility. Our security forces protect us brilliantly against most of that volatility, but there is always a chance of the enemy getting through.

Given all this, what kind of military response would you suggest?

SS: It is up to the government [to decide]. Both the government and the armed forces should be free to choose the place and time of action, but it is preferable to do it without publicity if possible, as that would reduce chances of escalation. When you publicise actions, you force the other side to further action, given the imperatives of public sentiment.

LGDH: It is up to the government. I agree that the more we hype our actions, the more pressure there will be on Pakistan to retaliate.

To listen to the full interview
Scan the code or go to the link
www.thehindu.com

NOTEBOOK

Willpower, the secret weapon of the Vietnamese during the war

A reminder of the strength of collectivism, 50 years since re-unification

Srinivasan Ramani

In Satyajit Ray's classic *Pratidwandi*, set in the late 1960s in Kolkata, the protagonist Siddhartha, played by Dhritiman Chatterjee, goes for a job interview. The panel asks, "What would you regard as the most outstanding and significant event in the last decade?"

With little hesitation, Siddhartha responds: "The war in Vietnam".

"More significant than the landing on the moon?"

"Yes," he says. "We were not unprepared for the moon landing. We knew about advances in space technology. It was remarkable but not unpredictable. On the other hand, the Vietnam War revealed the extraordinary power of resistance of the Vietnamese people... the ordinary people... peasants... nobody knew they had it in them. This isn't just technology, it's about plain human courage, and it takes your breath away."

Prompt comes the question: "Are you a communist?"

Siddhartha replies, "I don't think one needs to be one to admire the Vietnamese".

This may be a dialogue from a film, but it is still a powerful reflection of how thinking and informed people across the world, especially among the poor and developing countries, perceived the Vietnamese struggle for reunification of their partitioned country. Faced with the onslaught of a much superior and heavily armed superpower, the Vietnamese relied on their collective spirit and ingenious ability to use their terrain and peasant knowledge. While they did get help from other countries of the former Socialist bloc, their success was largely owed to the implementation of their own ideas and their hunger for freedom.

I got an opportunity to study the thought process of that generation recently. I was one of the many journalists who was invited to cover the 50th anniversary of Vietnam's reunification, celebrated with pomp on April 30. Vietnam is today among the fastest-growing and upper-middle-income economies in the world. Ho Chi Minh City – the present-day name of Saigon, the outpost and capital of South Vietnam, and the fall of which signalled the end of the Vietnam War – betrays little about the war-torn city that it was five decades ago. However, a few miles away from the city, the Cu Chi tunnels showcase how the Vietnamese managed to outwit their opponents through sheer willpower.

Using just shovels and wicker baskets, the Vietnamese resistance forces built a 250-km-long, three storey tunnel complex. This consisted of simple ventilation provisions, water wells, resting rooms, kitchens (with carefully designed chimneys to avoid smoke detection), military bunkers, medicinal facilities, and camouflaged areas facilitating shooters to attack the enemy. Most of the implements used to build this complex were as old as the Iron Age, but they were still enough to cause terror among the Americans and the South Vietnamese infantry.

The Vietnamese also retold stories of guerrilla fighters in the Can Gio mangrove forest, located about 70 km from Ho Chi Minh City. Here, the Viet Cong guerrillas, many wearing simple loincloths to wade and swim across crocodile-infested waters, used harsh terrain such as mangrove forests and the Lòng Tàu River, to plan raids and ambushes on U.S. vessels and South Vietnamese facilities. When firebombs, including the use of the notorious napalm bombs, and heavy artillery were dropped on them, the survivors used the remains of the unexploded ones to be repurposed for their own artillery. The remarkable feature of the armed resistance was the steadfast emphasis on collectivism and the avoidance of a personality cult, except for the strong reverence for the tallest leader of the Vietnamese liberation movement, Ho Chi Minh. On this anniversary of re-unification, it is worth remembering how forceful ideas and willpower in fighting for a just cause can triumph over brute force.

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PICTURE OF THE WEEK

Taking the bull by its horns



A gutsy tamer prevails over a ferocious bull during a jallikattu held at Chettipalayam in Coimbatore on April 27. PERIASAMY M.

FROM THE ARCHIVES The Hindu.

FIFTY YEARS AGO MAY 2, 1975

Centre may float bonds in other countries

New Delhi, May 1: The Union Finance Minister, Mr. C. Subramaniam, is examining the possibility of floating short, medium or long-term Government of India bonds in countries like Philippines, Hongkong, Thailand, etc., to which the Indians residing in those countries, besides the nationals, can subscribe. He is also believed to be considering the scope for making some changes in the banking laws to provide for the holding of deposits of Indians resident in these countries in foreign currency instead of rupees.

This is in response to the representations made by members of the Indian community who met the Finance Minister in Manila, where he was recently to attend the Annual Meeting of the Board of Governors of the Asian Development Bank. Members of the Indian community in Hongkong and Bangkok also met the Finance Minister when he was returning to India from Philippines. The Indian Chambers of Commerce in Manila, numbering about 100, had given him a reception while Indian bankers, insurance men and other businessmen, numbering about 200, met him in Hongkong. There was a similar informal meeting with Indian businessmen and traders in Thailand.

Indians resident in these countries have done well in industry and trade but the events in Vietnam and Cambodia have filled them with a sense of uncertainty about their future.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO MAY 2, 1925

Punjab Council

Lahore, May 1: When the Punjab Legislative Council met to-day, Sir John Maynard announced, amidst applause, that out of the revenue surplus of the preceding year and a windfall of 56 lakhs on account of the remission in the provincial contribution the Punjab Government has decided to remit 20 lakhs of taxation. Of this, 17 lakhs will be accounted for by the remission of one rupee per acre on fodder crops on perennial canals. While this remission benefits the agriculturalists on perennial canals the interests of all agriculturalists are being considered in order to be restored to the rate existing previous to the financial stringency.

Text&Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

India's Goods and Services Tax (GST) collection in April

2.37 In ₹ lakh crore. GST collection rose 12.6% Y-o-Y to an all-time high of about ₹2.37 lakh crore in April. This is the second-highest collection ever since the roll-out of the indirect tax regime on July 1, 2017. In March 2025, the collection was ₹1.96 lakh crore. PTI

Death toll in Sudan's north Darfur in the past three weeks

542 At least 542 civilians have been confirmed killed in Sudan's north Darfur region in the past three weeks, the UN said, warning that the actual death toll was likely "much higher". "The horror unfolding in Sudan knows no bounds," UN rights chief Volker Turk said. AFP

The acres of land ravaged in a major wildfire in Israel

5,000 The fire broke out around midday, fuelled by hot, dry conditions and fanned by strong winds that quickly whipped up the flames burning through a pine forest. Several communities were evacuated as a precaution. AP

Amount the U.S. is investing in universal vaccines project

500 In $ million. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, the "universal" vaccines aim to instantly protect against multiple strains of a virus. The project will use chemically inactivated whole viruses, a method similar to older flu vaccine techniques. REUTERS

The fall in Ukraine's agricultural export in the month of April

23 In per cent. Ukrainian Agribusiness Club said exports of grains fell by 33%, oilseed by 3%, while shipments of vegetable oil rose by 6%. The agriculture ministry data showed that Ukraine has exported a total of 35.1 million tonnes of grain. REUTERS

COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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How can India tap its natural hydrogen potential?

What are some of the challenges to exploring and exploiting natural hydrogen resources? Is it a more expensive process than manufacturing hydrogen? How is the U.S. going beyond just trying to locate and excavate natural hydrogen deposits? Does India have a growing hydrogen demand?

EXPLAINER

Kalyan Mangalapalli

The story so far:

For India, an economy in growth mode with aspirations for energy independence and a pledge to reach net-zero emissions by 2070, the exploitation and use of natural hydrogen offers a potentially game-changing opportunity. In an increasingly volatile world where national sovereignty, economic stability, and energy security become inseparable, tapping into this naturally occurring commodity could go a long way toward enhancing India's strategic autonomy.

How much potential does India have?

India's hydrogen demand was projected to grow from six million tonnes per year (Mt/year) in 2020 to over 50 Mt/year by 2070 to support its net-zero target. A preliminary study, by some members of academia referencing model predictions of global geologic hydrogen resources, arrives at a value of 3,475 million tonnes of natural hydrogen potential in India. If these estimates were to be true, we may not even need to engage in the process of manufacturing hydrogen anymore but rather pursue the quest of finding and producing naturally occurring hydrogen that would help decarbonise our economy faster at a lower cost.

On the heels of the recent findings of natural hydrogen reserves in the Andamans, stakeholders need to come up with directional estimates to bring attention of policy makers and investors to the overall potential of natural hydrogen in India. A comprehensive geological study is essential, considering critical factors such as the quality, extent, thickness, accessibility, and hydrocarbon generation potential of the source rock; presence and effectiveness of seals and traps; size and viability of hydrocarbon accumulations; potential losses during migration; and the accessibility of the area for exploration and development.



GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

What are the challenges?

Natural hydrogen exploitation and exploration is no easy feat. It has technical, logistical, economical, and safety-related challenges. Accurately locating and quantifying underground hydrogen reserves is the primary challenge. Unlike oil and gas, for which well-established exploration techniques exist, natural hydrogen exploration is still evolving. Additionally, efficient and cost-effective extraction technology for natural hydrogen is key. While modifying current gas industry practices associated with well drilling and extraction facilities, one must consider hydrogen's specific properties, including its small molecular size and high diffusivity. Studies into extraction solutions for lowest cost hydrogen are in progress.

Hydrogen extraction also involves specific safety issues as opposed to hydrocarbons because of its high diffusivity and reactivity. Mitigation measures involve the study and application of hydrogen-resistant materials such as metal coatings and advanced alloys, cement additives to make it more resistant to hydrogen, and rubber fillers to avoid degradation.

How can India kickstart the process?

A key component of the Indian Solar PV mission's growth was the German Agency for International Cooperation-National Institute of Wind Energy funded Solar Radiation Resource Assessment (SRRA) Project under the National Solar Mission that commissioned 121 SRRA stations along with four Advanced Monitoring Stations (AMS). Natural hydrogen agencies can formulate a similar public private partnership to assist in the identification of potential geographical deposits.

The U.S. ARPA-E's newly funded projects take exploring the potential of geologic hydrogen beyond locating and extracting trapped geologic hydrogen towards the possibility that hydrogen can be produced intentionally, by drilling and flowing water into rock and then transporting the hydrogen to the surface for collection. Another approach involves injecting water with dissolved carbon dioxide into iron-containing rocks that could potentially lead to carbon sequestration as limestone while simultaneously producing hydrogen.

The Oil and Gas Exploration industry in India, with the help of the Directorate General of Hydrocarbons, could review the rock samples available with them and explore more wells across the country with adequate grant and debt capital. A few of the current natural gas pipelines could be suitable for transporting hydrogen with adequate modifications and safety studies. Creating low-cost and safe solutions for hydrogen storage, especially massive underground storage, is imperative.

Even as estimates indicate natural hydrogen production would be much lower in cost than produced hydrogen, the actual cost of exploration, extraction, and infrastructure investment must be weighed seriously. Commercial feasibility will rely on finding large and accessible reserves and minimising extraction and delivery costs. Targeted exploration in areas of high potential, cost-reducing extraction technology development, and institution of transparent regulatory systems are essential to spur investment and market growth.

Kalyan Mangalapalli is an expert in Energy and Emerging Technologies and serves as a member of the International Advisory Board of the Indian Institute of Petroleum Energy, Visakhapatnam. This is the second of a two part series on naturally occurring hydrogen reserves.

THE GIST

- India's hydrogen demand was projected to grow from six million tonnes per year (Mt/year) in 2020 to over 50 Mt/year by 2070 to support its net-zero target.
- Natural hydrogen exploitation and exploration is no easy feat. It has technical, logistical, economical, and safety-related challenges.
- The U.S. ARPA-E's newly funded projects take exploring the potential of geologic hydrogen beyond locating and extracting trapped geologic hydrogen towards the possibility that hydrogen can be produced intentionally.

Can the Indus Waters Treaty be suspended unilaterally?

What does the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties stipulate with respect to suspending or terminating treaties between countries? How will a disruption in water flow affect Pakistan?

Aaratrika Bhaumik

The story so far:

The 1960 Indus Waters Treaty (IWT) gives India unrestricted rights over the three eastern rivers – Ravi, Beas, and Sutlej. While Pakistan was given exclusive control over the three western rivers – Indus, Jhelum, and Chenab, India retained limited rights to use the waters for "non-consumptive" purposes. However, following the terror attack in Pahalgam on April 22, India announced the IWT would be held in abeyance with "immediate effect".

Is unilateral suspension permissible?

The IWT cannot be altered unilaterally. Article XII stipulates that the treaty can only be terminated through a "duly ratified treaty" agreed upon by both states. The term "hold in abeyance," as used by India in its letter to Pakistan, is neither recognised in international law nor mentioned in the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties (VCLT), 1969, the principal treaty governing agreements between states. "The VCLT does not use the word 'abeyance'; it uses the term 'suspension,' which allows a country to suspend the operation of an entire treaty or a part of it. Suspension is distinct from termination. I believe that when India used the word 'abeyance,' it intended to mean 'suspension' rather than termination of the IWT," Dr. Prabhash Ranjan, professor at Jindal Global Law School, told *The Hindu*.

Article 62 of the VCLT allows a treaty to be repudiated if there has been a "fundamental change of circumstances" from those existing at the time of its conclusion. Although India is not a party to the VCLT and Pakistan has signed but not ratified it, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in the *Fisheries Jurisdiction* cases affirmed that Article 62 codifies customary international law and is therefore binding regardless of formal ratification. India appears to be invoking this principle, as its letter stated that "fundamental changes in the circumstances" require a "reassessment of obligations" under the IWT. However, Dr. Ranjan pointed out that ICJ rulings have set a high threshold for what qualifies as a "fundamental change in circumstances". In the 1997 Gabcíkovo-Nagymaros Project dispute between Hungary and Slovakia over the construction of a dam, Hungary argued that political and economic shifts, along with the threat of environmental disaster, provided sufficient grounds to terminate the treaty. However, the ICJ rejected these arguments, noting that the political and economic changes were not directly linked to the treaty's primary objective – joint energy production.

How will this affect Pakistan?

More than 80% of Pakistan's agriculture and around a third of its hydropower generation depend on the waters of the Indus basin. However, experts say that India lacks the massive storage infrastructure and extensive canal systems needed to withhold tens of billions of cubic metres of water from the western rivers. "The infrastructure India possesses consists largely of run-of-the-river hydropower plants, which do not have the capacity for large-scale storage. However, the real impact lies in the uncertainty over water flow, which could severely affect Pakistan's predominantly agrarian economy. If India begins regulating the flow using its existing infrastructure, Pakistan could experience significant disruptions," Dr. Happymon Jacob, associate professor at the School of International Studies, JNU, told *The Hindu*. A senior government official earlier told *The Hindu* that India will explore "options that it has never considered" under the IWT, such as redesigning its hydroelectric projects to increase water storage capacity and deploying 'drawdown flushing' of its reservoirs. The abrupt release of large volumes of water without prior warning could potentially cause significant damage downstream in Pakistan.

THE GIST

- The 1960 Indus Waters Treaty (IWT) gives India unrestricted rights over the three eastern rivers — Ravi, Beas, and Sutlej.
- The IWT cannot be altered unilaterally. Article XII stipulates that the treaty can only be terminated through a "duly ratified treaty" agreed upon by both states.
- More than 80% of Pakistan's agriculture and around a third of its hydropower generation depend on the waters of the Indus basin.

IN THE LIMELIGHT

50 Years of Rajinikanth: the filmmakers who made the star

With Rajinikanth wrapping up five decades of being in front of the camera, we look at the directors whose contributions proved pivotal for the actor to not only stay relevant, but thrive as one of Asia's biggest stars

Gopinath Rajendran

Recently, an image of Rajinikanth with a bunch of his recent directors went viral. Clicked on the sets of the actor's upcoming film, *Jailer 2*, it had the film's director Nelson along with Karthik Subbaraj (*Petta*) and Lokesh Kanagaraj (whose film with Rajini, *Coolie*, will be the actor's next release). What is interesting to note is that none of the three directors were even born when Rajini made his debut in 1975, with K. Balachander's *Apoorva Raagangal*. Interestingly, 50 years later, on the same release date as the yesteryear film, Rajini's *Coolie* will hit theatres.

The transition from working with established industry legends to fresh blood has been a tried and tested process for Rajini. Just like a film, making a star is also not a one-person job. Over the years, Rajini has teamed with a variety of filmmakers with varying levels of experience. Let's look at some of the directors who catapulted this actor into stardom.

An actor in the making

Along with fellow talents like Kamal Haasan, Chiranjeevi, Jaya Prada, Sridevi and Jayasudha, Rajini was also nurtured by the legendary Balachander who, after *Apoorva Raagangal*, gave him his subsequent Tamil films *Moondru Mudichu* and *Avargal*. Interestingly, all these films co-starred Kamal Haasan. Over the years, Balachander would work multiple times with the actor in films like *Thappu Thalangal*, *Ninaithale Inikkum* and *Thillu Mullu*.

The young Rajini's sophomore was the Kannada anthology film *Katha Sangama*, by veteran Kannada filmmaker Puttanna Kanagal. Balachander also gave Rajini his Telugu debut with *Anthuleni Katha*. Despite doing a few Kannada and Telugu films in the late 70s, Rajini got his first experience working with a relatively new Tamil filmmaker in *Kavikkuyil* (1977), co-starring Sivakumar and Sridevi and helmed by Devaraj and Mohan. But the film failed to make waves as he expected at the box office.

The same year, Rajini starred in the Telugu film *Chilakamma Cheppindi*, in his first lead role, and the film was eventually remade in Tamil as *Nizhal Nijamagirathu*. Then came the collaboration with arguably the second-most important director of Rajini's career, S.P. Muthuraman. Having made more than a dozen films before, he was precisely what an upcoming actor like Rajini needed and that's how *Bhuvana Oru Kelvi Kuri* (1977) happened. Rajini, who was till then playing mostly the anti-hero or a supporting role, began getting more lead-oriented roles after this film. The duo would go on to collaborate in films like *Priya*, *Aarilirunthu Arubathu Varai*, *Murattu Kaalai*, *Netrikkan*, *Pokkiri Raja* and *Velaikaran* – movies that cemented his position as not just an actor but also a bonafide star. But before that, the golden trinity of Rajini, Kamal and Sridevi came together for *16 Vayathinile*, the legendary filmmaker Bharathiraja's debut film, in which Rajini played the evil Parattai. The same year, he also starred alongside Vishnuvardhan in the Kannada film *Sahodarara Savaal*, helmed by K.S.R. Das with whom he would do more Telugu and Kannada films like *Kiladi Kittu* and *Annadammula Savaal*.



Super star: Rajinikanth fans celebrate the release of 'Jailer' in Mumbai in 2023. FILE PHOTO

Right after Rajini and Muthuraman's second venture *Aadu Puli Attam* was out, the actor teamed up with veteran filmmaker P. Madhavan (known for classics such as *Dheiva Thaai*, *Vietnam Veedu* and *Thanga Pathakkam*) for *Shankar Salim Simon*. Speaking of iconic directors, Rajini also worked with *Pasi*-fame Durai for *Aayiram Jenmangal*. In his unstoppable ascent, Rajini also got to collaborate with legendary filmmakers like C. V. Sridhar (*Ilamai Oonjal Aadukirathu*, *Thudikkum Karangal*), Bhimsingh (*Iraivan Kodutha Varam*), T. R. Ramanna (*Kuppathu Raja*), Muktha Srinivasan (*Polladhavan*, *Sivappu Sooriyan*), K. Vijayan (*Viduthalai*) and A. C. Tirulokchandar (*Vanakkatukuriya Kathaliye*).

At the same time, he also starred in screenwriter-turned-filmmaker Mahedran's debut flick *Mullum Malarum*, with whom he would go on to work in *Johnny* and *Kai Kodukkum Kai*. He made his Malayalam debut with I. V. Sasi's *Allauddinum Albhutha Vilakkum*.

An underrated filmmaker Rajini collaborated with often during the late 70s and early 80s is R. Thyagarajan with whom he made films like *Thai Meethu Sathiyam*, *Annai Oru Aalayam*, *Anbukku Naan Adimai* and *Ranga*. Another collaborator who rarely gets his due credit is *Vikram* filmmaker Rajasekhar who teamed up with Rajini in films like *Thambikku Entha Ooru*, *Padikkadavan*, *Maaveeran*, *Mappillai* and *Dharma Durai*.

A star is born

It was in the mid-80s that he made his first and only film with cinematographer-turned-director Balu Mahendra, *Un Kannil Neer Vazhindal*, right before teaming up with his favoured Muthuraman for the actor's 100th film, *Sri Raghavendrar*. Rajini's film with Rajasekhar, *Maaveeran*, is also touted to be the first Tamil film to be shot in 70 mm film format. Even Manobala, known to today's generation as a late actor-comedian, helmed Rajini in the film *Oorkavalan*.

It was in 1988 that Rajini starred in his first and only English film, *Bloodstone*, directed by American filmmaker Dwight H. Little who went on to helm films like *Halloween 4: The Return of Michael Myers* and *Tekken*. In 1990, Rajini made his first collaboration with director P. Vasu for *Panakkaran* and the duo would go on to work on hits like *Mannan*, *Uzhaippali* and *Chandramukhi*.

In his last leg of doing the rounds of Bollywood, Rajini teamed up with veteran producer K. C. Bokadia's directorial ventures *Phool Bane Angaray*, *Insaniyat Ke Devta* and *Tyagi*. He also joined hands with *Agneepath* filmmaker Mukul S. Anand's *Khoon Ka Karz*. After films like *Andhaa Kaanoon*, *John Jani Janardhan* and *Dosti Dushmani*, Rajini's last collaboration with veteran filmmaker T. Rama Rao was the 2000 film *Bulandi*. A Hindi remake of the hit Tamil film *Nattamai* was the actor's last Hindi film appearance.

The birth of a superstar

If the 80s cemented his position in the industry as a star, it was the 90s that made him the 'Superstar'. Rajini made a splash in 1991 with *Thalapathi*, his only collaboration with Mani Ratnam. The next year saw him teaming up with Balachander's erstwhile assistant Suresh Krissna for *Annaamalai*. The two would work on films like *Veera*, *Baba* and the cult classic *Baashha*. The late 80s and the early 90s were also when Rajini did his final films with established directors he previously worked with. *Kodi Parakkuthu* with Bharathiraja, as well as *Pandian* with S. P. Muthuraman, turned out to be box office duds.

But the younger crop of filmmakers like Suresh Krissna and P. Vasu made certain Rajini's rise to superstardom never halted. In 1995, Rajini joined hands with another major filmmaker who was instrumental in the actor's career, K.S. Ravikumar. After a fantastic start with *Muthu*, the two would team up for *Lingaa* and another cult hit, *Padayappa*.

After a break of three years, post the *Baba* debacle, Rajini returned with the hit flick *Chandramukhi* and two years later, he made his first film with director Shankar, *Sivaji: The Boss*. Once again, it wasn't a one-off. The duo would go on to do *Enthiran* and its sequel *2.0*, both incredible successes.

Nurtured to nurturing

It's in the mid-to-late 2010s when Rajini started collaborating with the latest crop of filmmakers defining Tamil cinema. After *Kabali* with the then two-film old Pa. Ranjith, Rajini would reunite with him for *Kaala*. He also worked with his 'fanboy' Karthik Subbaraj in *Petta* and a couple of years ago, worked with Nelson on *Jailer*.

It is scarcely believable that after 170 films, Rajini continues to headline his movies, with thoughts of retirement or taking on supporting roles seemingly out of the picture. That's certainly great news for his fans who have spanned generations. From being a newbie who got to work with some of the best filmmakers in the country, to now working with a young crop of directors who grew up watching his films, Rajini's tryst with such a distinguished list is something very few – such as his friend and peer Kamal Haasan – could experience. Of course, the list of people who were instrumental in his illustrious career would include veterans such as Panchu Arunachalam, RMV, Kalaignanam and many more but it had to take someone with grit and perseverance to build himself a career that others could only dream of – and Rajini did precisely that.

While fellow stars of the industry take a year or even more to complete a project, Rajini, who will turn 75 this year, has already completed the second schedule for his next film, *Jailer 2*. It reminds me of a line from one of his iconic speeches where he called himself a horse that would leap to its feet immediately after a fall and not an elephant that takes its own sweet time. Let this horse prance along forever.



FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know your English

K. Subrahmanian
S. Upendran

"Why are you so late? The movie starts at 6: 30."

"I'm sorry. But I went to the local MLA's meeting."

"How was his speech? Was it any good?"

"He was hooted down as soon as he began."

"He was 'booted' down?"

"Not 'booted down', but 'hooted down.' 'Hoot' rhymes with the words 'shoot', 'loot' and..."

"....'boot'. But what does it mean?"

"When you 'hoot down' someone who is making a speech you 'force them to stop performing by making loud noises at them.' The Vice-Chancellor was hooted down by the students."

"In movies sometimes it is the good politician who is hooted down by the public."

"It doesn't happen just in movies. It happens in real life as well. Here's another example. Last week some of the nation's top scientists who tried to speak at a rally were hooted down."

"This is not first time that scientists are being hooted down. It has..."

"... it is not the first time. You always need the definite article 'the' before ordinal numbers "

".... ordinal numbers! What's that?"

"First, second, third, fourth, fifth and so on and so forth. They are called ordinal numbers."

"What about one, two, three, four, etc? What are they called?"

"They are called cardinal numbers. Anyway, as I was saying, whenever you use an ordinal number, you have to use the definite article. For example, this is the fourth cup of coffee that I'm drinking this morning."

"I've been to Agra three times. The third time I was there, I saw the Taj under the moonlight.""

"Must have been beautiful. I have seen Tendulkar bat five times. The first time I saw him, he scored a duck."

"We'd better get moving. Otherwise we're going to be late for the movie. Oh, by the way, I've invited Rahul to join us."

"Being a freeloader I'm sure he gladly accepted the invitation."

"A what?"

"A freeloader is someone who 'eats and drinks at someone else's expense'. For example, Rahul is a freeloader, but he is a lot of fun."

"Can I say during the marriage season one finds a lot of freeloaders in the dining hall?"

"That's an excellent example! They say one finds a lot of freeloaders hanging around politicians and film stars."

"Talking about film stars, I've paid eighteen rupees to see my favourite one. Shall we make a move?"

"Most definitely!"

Published in The Hindu on May 14, 1996.

THE DAILY QUIZ

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

The Miss World competition will be held in Hyderabad in the month of May. Here is a quiz on the popular yet controversial event held annually

Abhinaya.K

QUESTION 1
Originally intended to be a one-off event, the pageant began in 1951 and was the brainchild of a British entertainment promoter. It was made into an annual event after a rival competition was created in the U.S. Name the founder of the U.K. event. Also identify the name of the U.S. event.

QUESTION 2
Who was the first person who won the competition and who won the competition last year? Name the countries they represented.

QUESTION 3
The competition was previously held in India in 1996 and the production company of a big Bollywood star was in-charge. Where was it held? Also identify the actor.

QUESTION 4
_____ took part in the competition and was the runner up in 1986. _____ also took part in the competition and made it to the finals. Both the actors are Academy Award winners and have also appeared in Bond films. Identify them.

QUESTION 5
India has the most number of Miss World titles. Name all the awardees in order.



Visual question:
Jennifer Hosten made history in the Miss World competition in 1970. Why was it a historic victory?

Questions and Answers to the previous day's daily quiz: 1. The famous name by which revolutionary Nguyen Sinh Cung is known. **Ans: Ho Chi Minh**
2. The name of the organisation that led the guerrilla war against the U.S. **Ans: Viet Cong, also known as the National Liberation Front**
3. The communist leader who negotiated the Paris Peace Accords with Henry Kissinger. **Ans: Le Duc Tho**
4. Name the General who led the victory at Dien Bien Phu against the French. **Ans: General Vo Nguyen Giap**
5. The name of the trail used by North Vietnamese forces to transport troops and supplies into South Vietnam. **Ans: Ho Chi Minh Trail**
Visual: The name of the photographer. **Ans: Nick Ut**
Early Birds: K.N. Viswanathan| Sadhan Panda| Varghese Joseph| Ashutosh Gupta| Arvind Tillway

Word of the day

Travail:
use of physical or mental energy; hard work

Synonyms: effort, exertion, sweat, dig, grind, labour, toil

Usage: *I want to save him from great sorrow and travail.*

Pronunciation: newsth.live/travailpro

International Phonetic Alphabet: /tɹəˈveɪl/, /ˈtɹæv.ɪl/

For feedback and suggestions for Text & Context, please write to **letters@thehindu.co.in** with the subject 'Text & Context'

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Caste calculations

Caste census should guide policy to go beyond quotas

Pulling off a political surprise, the BJP-led NDA government has announced the inclusion of caste enumeration in the national census. The announcement knocks down the Opposition's carefully-constructed caste plank in poll-bound Bihar. In truth, the 'caste census' plank is a case of the BJP course-correcting from 2024 Parliamentary elections when the Congress and its ally, Samajwadi Party, got the better of it in Uttar Pradesh.

By juxtaposing caste census with Constitution, the Opposition alliance ended up blunting the BJP's Hindutva pitch and consolidated the OBC and Dalit population in their favour. The BJP would like to prevent a repeat in Bihar. While all of this smacks of political cynicism, the more important question is – what exactly does the government want to achieve by enumerating different castes? A caste census can provide crucial data to quantify socio-economic disparities, identify marginalised caste groups and frame welfarist policies. However, the reality is that these lofty goals are almost never the motivation for politicians spearheading any policy decision to enumerate caste. Such endeavours end up stirring different caste groups into demanding the expansion of reservation for the OBCs beyond the 50 per cent ceiling imposed by the Supreme Court in the Indra Sawhney case.

It is instructive to see how caste surveys in Karnataka, Telangana and Bihar have played out. The Socio-Economic and Educational Survey in Karnataka, submitted in February 2024, has created tensions with three dominant caste groups —Vokkaligas, Lingayats and Brahmins — asserting that they have been under-counted. The report is yet to be officially accepted as a result of dissensions within the State government. It is hard to say whether it will lead up to constructive policy. In Telangana, a similar survey has prompted the State to increase OBC quotas to 42 per cent (from 23 per cent) in education, employment and political bodies. Bihar has announced an increase in reservation quotas for SCs, STs, OBCs and EBCs, raising the total quotas from 50 per cent to 75 per cent.

A key question is whether the quotas alone can redress socio-economic disparities. Tamil Nadu, with 69 per cent reservation, has done well in its social development indices by focusing on universal welfare, besides pursuing affirmative action. However, Bihar is way below the national average on education and health indicators. This is because champions of social justice in Bihar and UP have merely focused on reservation for decades, inexplicably neglecting social development. Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar had earlier refused to act on a comprehensive action report on a common school system, prepared by former foreign secretary Muchkund Dubey in 2007. Telangana, a backward region and new State, should not repeat these mistakes. Meanwhile, the Centre needs to ensure that social justice goes beyond affirmative action and results in policies that address social inequalities.

King Dollar's shaky crown

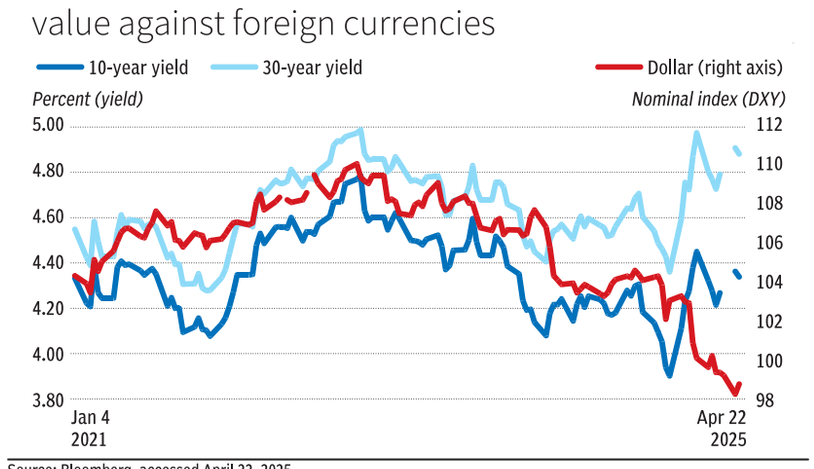
TRUMP EFFECT. Trade war, withdrawing from global institutions, sacking government employees, have eroded trust in US



MAURICE OBSTFELD



US long-term treasury rates and the dollar's value against foreign currencies



Source: Bloomberg, accessed April 22, 2025

As US President Donald Trump proceeded to upend the world economy after his return to the White House in January, Nobel laureate economist Paul Krugman recalled Charles P. Kindleberger's adage: "Anyone who spends too much time thinking about international money goes mad."

Fortunately, amid the Trump-induced chaos in the currency, bond, and stock markets, Yale University Press has recently published two complementary guides to a key aspect of international finance: the primacy of the US dollar.

Paul Blustein's *King Dollar* and Kenneth Rogoff's *Our Dollar, Your Problem* lead readers through recent economic history to assess the dollar's current status and prospects. Both books were published after Trump's re-election and, in Blustein's case, before the opening salvos and subsequent escalation of his assault on the global economy.

The timing is an opportunity to reflect on the past five months, in which — to paraphrase Vladimir Lenin — decades seem to have happened. The US dollar's unique status today spans its roles as the leading reserve currency, investment and funding vehicle, and trade invoicing medium. As global financial markets expanded, so did the need for a reliable medium of exchange and a safe asset. The dollar was uniquely positioned to serve both roles.

HEGEMONY IN RETREAT?

As both Blustein and Rogoff observe, potential challengers to the dollar have consistently come up short. The renminbi is no exception, despite China's progress on its central bank digital currency (CBDC), the e-CNY. Rogoff highlights a crucial point: greater exchange-rate flexibility is a prerequisite for the renminbi to mount a serious challenge to the dollar. But such flexibility must be accompanied by broader reforms in China's financial markets and monetary policy framework. The dollar's international dominance is reinforced by powerful network effects. The growth in currency trading has been dramatic. According to the Bank for International Settlements' latest triennial survey, over-the-counter foreign-exchange turnover reached $7.5 trillion per day in April 2022, with the US dollar on one side of 88 per cent of all trades.

By contrast, the BIS's April 1989 survey recorded a daily turnover of just $500 billion (though fewer central banks were polled at the time). However, economic models suggest that a single dominant currency is not the only possible outcome; scenarios involving multiple leading currencies also remain plausible.

TRUMP'S ECONOMIC WAR

What, then, is the outlook for the dollar in 2025? In 1993, political scientist G John Ikenberry described the traditional American approach to postwar multilateralism: "American officials realized that building the international economic order on a coercive basis would be costly and ultimately counterproductive. This is not to say that the United States did not exercise hegemonic power; it is to say that there were real limits to the coercive pursuit of the American postwar agenda."

Such self-restraint is notably absent from Trump's grievance-laden worldview. It seems fair to say that the sweeping radicalism of his administration's policies has gone beyond even what Blustein and Rogoff could have foreseen in December 2024.

Trump's policies are steadily undermining the foundations of the dollar's global dominance. His withdrawal from international organisations and agreements, cuts to foreign aid, and transactional approach to US security commitments have unsettled allies and rivals alike. Domestically, his pressure on the Fed, weaponisation of the Justice Department, efforts to gut the federal workforce at the cost of key governmental functions, and incursions on the institutional fabric of American society — from universities to judges to the legal profession — have further eroded confidence. Then there's his trade war, unprecedented in its scale, capriciousness, and economic illiteracy.

We may be headed for a future of currency fragmentation and diminished global prosperity, with no clear successor ready to take the dollar's place

At the same time, fiscal dysfunction has reached new heights. Congressional Republicans, encouraged by the White House, are preparing to increase the deficit by bypassing the traditional reconciliation process and relying on uncertain tariff revenues. This, too, signals deepening institutional decay — and markets are taking notice.

One area of concern is international collaboration on financial oversight. The Basel Committee on Banking Supervision and the Financial Stability Board are essential to cross-border regulatory cooperation, but global regulators now worry that the US will approach these forums through the same zero-sum lens it has applied elsewhere — or withdraw from them altogether. Others have raised concerns about the reliability of the Fed's dollar swap lines, a central pillar of dollar dominance that Rogoff explores in detail.

Eroding trust could accelerate the fragmentation of international capital markets, putting the dollar's global standing at even greater risk. International regulatory cooperation is also critical to realising the potential of decentralised finance to improve payment infrastructure — especially cross-border systems, which remain slow and costly. Without harmonised standards, diverging national approaches would severely limit interoperability and any resulting efficiency gains.

But the Trump administration's embrace of untethered cryptocurrencies, resistance to oversight of crypto-related payment platforms, and executive order banning "any action to establish, issue, or promote CBDCs within the jurisdiction of the United States or abroad" risk isolating the US from advances in global payment infrastructure.

This is a formula for undermining US integration with the global financial ecosystem — to the dollar's detriment. Perhaps, despite his protestations and threats, downgrading the dollar's status is the real goal.

Stephen Miran, chair of Trump's Council of Economic Advisers, has argued that the dollar's global role "has placed undue burdens on our firms and workers," making American goods and labour "uncompetitive on the global stage and forcing a decline of our manufacturing workforce by over a third since its peak."

As I have written elsewhere, this view far overstates the net "exorbitant cost" of providing the world's reserve currency, while ignoring the considerable benefits to America's global influence that Blustein documents at length.

Since the escalation of Trump's trade war with his April 2 "Liberation Day" tariffs, bond and foreign-exchange markets have been flashing warning signs. The greenback took a hit soon after Trump's "Liberation Day" tariffs. Treasury yields spiked and the currency fell, signalling a global selloff of US government bonds due to reduced investor confidence in the quality of dollar assets. Trump's reactive postponement of his so-called "reciprocal" tariffs briefly stopped the bleeding in equity markets, but markets and the dollar have fallen further in the face of Trump's fulminations against Fed chair Jerome Powell.

To be sure, the dollar's story is still unfolding. But the momentous events of this April may well signal a fundamental shift in the global trade order — and with it, the dollar's ultimate dethronement. If that is the case, we may be headed for a future of currency fragmentation and diminished global prosperity, with no clear successor ready to take the dollar's place.

The writer, a former chief economist of the IMF, is Senior Fellow at the Peterson Institute for International Economics and Professor of Economics Emeritus at the University of California, Berkeley. Copyright: Project Syndicate, 2025

All about opinion trading platforms

The players in this space say they comply with all regulations. But traders' body CAIT says their ads are against the law

bl.explainer

Ashley Coutinho

On Tuesday, the market regulator Securities and Exchange Board of India issued a public warning against "opinion trading platforms", which allow users to engage in transactions based on the outcome of specific events.

Let's deep dive into what these platforms are all about.

What are opinion trading platforms?

These platforms enable their users and participants to trade or enter into arrangements wherein the payout is dependent on the outcome of a yes/no proposition of happening or not happening of the underlying event.

In some cases, opinion trading platforms are designed in a manner so as to resemble an investment platform as they use terminologies such as profits, stop loss and trading, terms closely associated with the securities market.

How do they work?

These apps allow you to answer simple questions based on your opinions and earn cash prizes. You can choose from different sports and games like cricket, football, basketball and participate in various contests and leagues.

For example, in IPL 2025, an opinion trading app might ask: "Will Virat Kohli score a fifty in his next match?" You can choose Yes or No based on your prediction. Or you could be asked to predict the winner of a political contest.

If your answer is correct, you win money. There could be various tournaments of different difficulty levels, allowing users to win different amounts. Some of the popular apps include Real11, MPL Opinio, Sportsbaazi and Probo.

What is the size of the market?

These platforms have grown exponentially in recent years, engaging over five crore Indian users and registering over ₹50,000 crore in transaction volumes annually, and revenues projected to be around ₹1,000 crore for 2024-25, according to Confederation of All India Traders (CAIT).

Are these platforms legal?

According to one of the players, the platform is safe and legit, offering earnings on expertise in a particular sport. It follows all legal and regulatory requirements, protecting personal and financial information. The platforms even offer instant withdrawal and deposit options such as UPI, Paytm and Amazon Pay. There are disclaimers put up such as: "This game may be habit forming or financially risky. Play responsibly." Only those above 18 years of age are allowed to participate.



OPINION TRADING. SEBI caution ISTOCK

However, some believe that these platforms allow users to speculate on outcomes of future events and are akin to gambling. Advertisements for such prediction-based platforms are deceptive and unlawful, heavily promoted by social media influencers, according to CAIT.

Opinion trading was misrepresented as a game of skill and portrayed as a legitimate and regulated endeavour despite its resemblance to 'gambling' and 'wagering on outcomes', it said. The apps directly contravened the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code), 2021 statute.

Does SEBI have the power to regulate such apps?

In general, opinion trading does not fall within regulatory purview of SEBI, as what is traded is not a security. The regulator has therefore cautioned investors that no investor protection mechanism under securities market purview will be available for such participation.

It has also clarified that since none of the platforms providing opinion trading can qualify to be recognised stock exchanges, and are neither registered nor regulated by SEBI, any trading of securities on them is illegal.

"Such platforms are liable to face action for violation in that case. Recognised stock exchanges are advised to initiate appropriate action for such violations. Even in this case none of the investor protection mechanisms will be available," the regulator said on Tuesday.

POCKET

RAVIKANTH



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

Aiding informal workers

This is with reference to the data story 'Agri labour accounts for over half of informal workers on e portal' (May 1).

Despite contributing significantly to the economy, the unorganised sector remains neglected.

Unorganized sector workers cshould get disability cover, accident insurance, health and maternity benefits, pension, old age homes, education of their children/crèches etc.

Corporates could use their CSR funds to benefit unorganised sector workers.

Helping unorganised sector workers is the joint effort of the Central government, state governments, MNCs and citizens of the nation.

Veena Shenoy
Thane

Liberals' win in Canada

It refers to the Editorial 'Carney in Canada'. Conservative Party chief Pierre Poilievre was looking to win this elections few months ago but US President Trump's tariff and controversial comment that Canada is 51st State of US turned things around in Mark Carney's favour. As a former central banker Carney has experience in handling economic issues, making him the best bet to take on Trump.

Carney is taking charge at a very delicate and complex time and he will have to handle a long list of issues both domestically and internationally. Hopefully he will reset ties with India and undo some damage done by his predecessor Justin Trudeau.

Bal Govind
Noida

Welcome move

With reference to the news report 'Modi Govt Green lights caste enumeration in next census' (May 1). Caste census which had been a key demand of several opposition parties in past elections will finally be a reality with the Centre announcing nationwide caste count along with the next population census. It is timely and a welcome decision.

The new census will help the Centre address reservation demands from various Caste groups.

The upcoming Caste census will reveal the full picture of all Castes. Till 2011 census, only SCs and STs were counted. But the Caste-based census will bring significant political changes in the days to come.

P Victor Selvaraj
Palayamkottai (TN)

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Workers in the age of AI

Ways to contain the displacement effect

Arya Roy Bardhan

Over 400,000 workers united at Haymarket Square in Chicago on May 4, 1886. What began as peaceful demonstrations on May 1, culminated in a tragedy with the detonation of a bomb and multiple casualties.

Eventually in 1892, the demand of the workers for an eight-hour workday was secured.

Almost a century and a half later, labour debates are more relevant than ever, especially with the AI wave, and there is a lot we can infer from history.



AI. Labour impact/ISTOCKPHOTO

REVISITING THE PAST

Humankind, as a whole, has unequivocally emerged better off following technological innovations and productivity spurts.

The cynicism stems from the unequal outcomes of the progress — some are better off, some not so much.

The disparity in the spoils of disruption is the origin of the labour versus capital or more accurately, man versus machine-owning man class wars.

During the first two industrial revolutions, i.e., from water frame and steam engine to electrification and automobile proliferation, the initial demand for unskilled labour for shovelling coal and white-collar workers at the top, caused the wage gap to increase.

During the industrial revolution, GDP grew faster than wages which meant capital reserved a greater share of national income or profits were rising.

MAKING SENSE OF THE AI REVOLUTION

While the evidence shows that technological disruptions have had initial welfare-adverse effects, the long-run picture paints itself when we compare our lifestyle to that of our grandparents.

The question of the hour is how the AI disruption will affect workers around the world. History tells us that any technological reorganisation comes with a massive skilling cost.

Those with skills earn a premium while those lacking them suffer. It is logical to assume that the AI wave will cause similar tremors.

The only systemic difference today is the speed of change and cost of learning.

A higher speed of diffusion means learning costs are lower. However, it does not mean that things will change overnight. There will be a chaotic period with rising wage inequality, declining productivity, and increased resistance to innovation.

As time progresses, improved AI will have lower skill requirements and the demand for cheaper, low-skilled labour will resurface, eventually lowering the AI-skills premium.

In the short run, there will be losers this time too, most likely the unskilled, older population due to higher learning costs. As the tide of time passes, the world will emerge richer and prosperous.

AI, like any other technology, will create labour displacement and reinstatement effects. Labour-saving or -replacing technologies initially lower labour demand and productivity, due to the skill gap.

There is also a reinstatement effect which creates new tasks for labour, that gradually increase labour demand. The problem is that the world might still be in the displacement effect stage of the internet technology boom.

A second wave of displacement might be disastrous for workers by enforcing a second skill premium while the first has not yet been eliminated.

How this complex labour market shock will disrupt economies is a daunting question.

The simple solution is to lower the learning cost by expanding skillsets across workers. Unlike initial shocks, this time medium-skilled workers are at risk.

They perceive AI as a threat, since a lot of their tasks can be done by AI. Governments, multilaterals need to catalyse skilling initiatives that enhance human-AI interaction.

Workers have to play a more active role, embrace change and pursue skilling to reduce chances of job loss.

The writer is Research Economist at ORF



PTI

Back to the drawing board on FPOs?



PVS SURYAKUMAR

FARM SUCCESS. It is crucial to create exemplar FPOs for others to emulate. NGOs and philanthropies can pitch in

We have been producing crops with multiple risks. We will be very happy when we get a fair price for our produce." This is the refrain of almost any farmer.

Indian agriculture is predominantly small farmer led. Eighty seven per cent operate less than 2 ha holdings (average 1 ha) and cultivate 47 per cent of our land. The late YK Alagh suggested amending the Companies Act of 1956 to enable formation of Farmer Producer Companies/Organisations (FPCs/FPOs), probably to address this intractable issue of agriculture marketing. Has the situation improved since FPOs came into existence around 2008?

It is important to keep two aspects in mind with respect to development of the FPO space. First, there should be clarity on basic goals.

The other crucial policy takeaway is the benefit of focusing on a few FPOs which have the necessary attributes to be successful, thereby setting an example for the rest — rather than spraying money across a number of them.

Every type of organisation — be it Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), governments, private sector companies, start-ups — either wants to promote or be involved with FPOs. The expectations are rather high. FPOs are expected to aggregate members' produce, pay them and secure better prices by becoming market-makers. But expecting them to adopt refined practices, such as fair trade, gender-sensitivity, climate smart agriculture, regenerative agriculture, even before stabilisation of this basic process, is being unrealistic.

Activities such as input supplies, licences for fertilizers/pesticides, PDS procurement, custom hiring centres, acquiring fixed assets for processing and convergence with government schemes, is another big ask. So, the basic foundation should first be in place.

STATUS OF FPOS

Per available estimates (Tata-Cornell Institute and others), about 45,000 FPOs are registered as companies; about 16,000 are compliant with all their filings and 4,000 have received working capital loans for procuring members' produce. Average membership of FPOs is 500 members. About 15-18 per cent have about ₹10 lakh equity.

Working capital limits are hovering around ₹18 lakh/year/FPO. Average net-profit is ₹3 lakh/FPO. Further, around 20,000 FPOs are registered under cooperative laws.

What is a good metric to assess our FPOs? Availability and quantum of working capital reflects FPOs well-being and could be a basic metric. Farmers' income enhancement could be another, but that is not feasible with just ₹3 lakh net-profit/FPO. Niche NBFCs provide most working capital loans. Some NBFCs go all the way from the advisory stage, doing entire value chain financing to markets. This is the best way forward.

The development of the FPO sector raises certain key issues:

(i) Can FPOs be a one-stop solution for agriculture?

(ii) GVA of agriculture and allied sectors is about ₹23 lakh crore at constant prices and over ₹50 lakh crore at current prices. e-NAM's traded value is just ₹3.19 lakh crore (with 1.8 crore farmers, 2.6 lakh traders, 3,500 FPOs and volume of 89.6 million tonnes). What can we infer from these numbers on the role and performance of FPOs?

(iii) Can we expect all FPOs to be sustainable when margins from input and output marketing are thin (about 3-6 per cent)? Is the FPO business model robust enough, generally speaking, or is it contextual?

FPOs are successful in pockets, where farmers are well organised with supportive systems and markets. That is an ecosystem success story.

(iv) Farmers have been cultivating and marketing through middlemen through the ages. FPOs too are marketing through them. Farmer-middlemen relationships are intricate. Many villages still function based on trust based systems. Some exhibit feudal and paternalistic characteristics also. Expecting FPOs to replace nimble middlemen is overambitious.

(v) The government has committed ₹6,865 crore for creating 10,000 FPOs. If we consider 500-members/FPO, coverage would be 50 lakh farmers. Is it possible to bring our 11 crore farmers on an FPO platform? Or can fewer, exemplar FPOs create a catalytic effect?

(vi) Did the multitude of FPO stakeholders, contribute to increasing 3.25 crore farmer members' income (65000x500=3.25cr)?

(vii) Are we turning FPOs into mere outsourcing channels, for procuring, selling and custom hiring centres?

(viii) Social capital (existence of a social consensus, thanks to capacity building, to work for a common cause) is a must for FPOs to thrive and hence, there is a necessity for a gestation period to create such social capital. FPOs, or any organisation that runs on social networks, cannot take root overnight. This implies prudent use of existing resources, rather its distribution over a number of units.

WHAT NEXT?

Successful FPOs do exist, because of their capable and charismatic leaders, trusted members, catalytic CSOs and a good business model. FPOs are successful in pockets, where farmers are well organised with supportive systems and markets. That is an ecosystem success story.

The government can concentrate on creating iconic FPOs, working with CSOs and philanthropies. Further steps are needed, such as literature on: easy to understand and actionable know/do-how; learning management solutions and how to place unique FPO products on ONDC/digital marketing platforms, may be kept in public domain, in all languages.

The effort should be to create exemplar FPOs for others to emulate, which can emerge organically through genuine and felt need. A cadre of local, self-employed, young professionals can make that happen, by building village level institutions like FPOs, which will pay them. These selected wo/men, after their 12th standard, may be trained at select universities through specially designed courses.

The writer is former Deputy Managing Director, NABARD. Views are personal

The challenges of Vizhinjam as a transshipment port

Jose Paul

Commissioned in July 2024, with commercial operations starting from December 2024, Vizhinjam Port has already handled 246 ships and 5,01,847 TEUs (Twenty foot equivalent units) by the end of March 2025. At this impressive rate Vizhinjam should be able to exceed its installed capacity of one million TEUs by the end of FY26.

When Vizhinjam becomes fully operational it has to compete with well established transshipment ports like Dubai and Salalah in the West, Colombo, Singapore and the Port of Tanjung Pelepas in Malaysia in the East.

These are all well established ports having embraced sophisticated and highly efficient handling technology with high productivity and faster turn round of ships.

All these ports have deep draught berths and approach channels capable of accommodating mega containerships drawing draught up to 18-20 m.

TRANSSHIPMENT PORTS

A transshipment port is one where mother ships with larger volumes and deeper draught visit a small number of well developed, deeper draught and technologically efficient ports where they discharge their import containers or load export containers.

The daughter vessels bring export cargo from small ports to transhipment ports for onward carriage by mother vessels while import containers discharged by mother ships are carried by daughter vessels to various destinations.

A gateway port is one which draws its export cargo from the primary, secondary and tertiary hinterlands, distributes its import cargo to various destinations falling within its hinterland. In a competitive port services market gateway ports will be able to sustain themselves well as they rely on the cargo traffic originating from their hinterland. Transhipment ports on the other hand, have to rely largely on external sources of supply.



Vizhinjam Port. Ambitious plans PTI

Mother ships have always options to select hub ports of their choice. In a dynamic market environment they keep changing their port locations to suit their convenience and this practice makes future of transshipment ports vulnerable and risky.

Vizhinjam is reported to have taken up an ambitious expansion programme of completing their second, third and fourth stages at about ₹10,000 crore by 2028. During these four years the ports in the competitive field will also expand their facilities.

Success stories of transshipment ports like Tanjung Pelepas and Salalah could be an eye opener to Vizhinjam. To ensure that the patronising container line gets firmly anchored in their port environment Port of Tanjung Pelepas has entered into a joint venture partnership with APM terminals of the Maersk line with 30 per cent share holding.

Another strategy would be to create an ecosystem in the proximity of the port as in Dubai by establishing special economic zones, ship building yard, ship repair complexes and other associated infrastructure facilities to ring fence the port from adversities in the future.

The writer is a former Acting Chairman of JN Port, Mumbai, a former Chairman of Mormugao Port Trust and an Adjunct Professor of Indian Maritime University, Chennai

thehindu businessline.

TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

May 2, 2005

Sugar futures come under FMC lens

Futures trading in sugar at the National Commodity & Derivatives Exchange Ltd (NCDEX) is coming under the scanner yet again. If in December and early January, it was the allegedly speculative rise in prices that forced the Forward Markets Commission's (FMC) intervention, this time around it is sustained selling pressure, which is said to have triggered off alarm bells in official quarters.

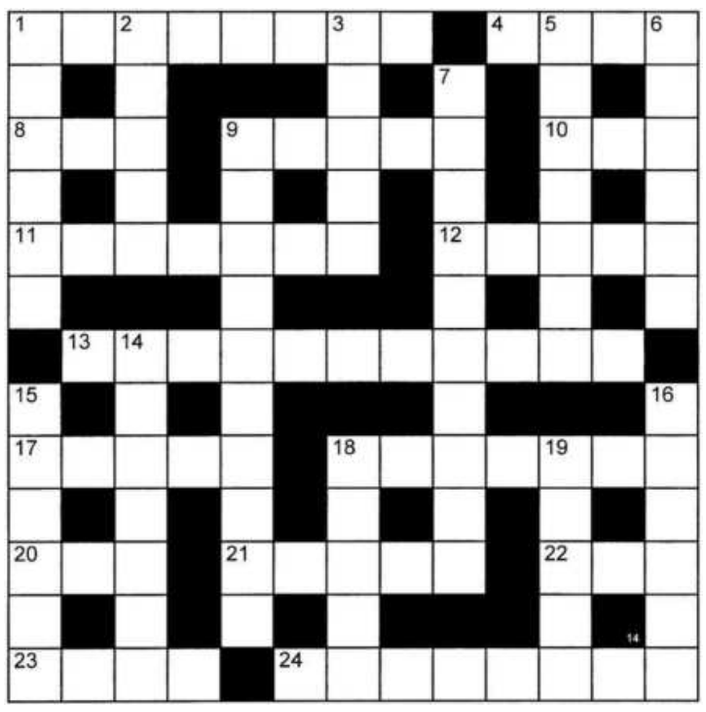
Chinese growth fuels earnings for Indian shipping cos

While the growing economic might of the Red Dragon may be spreading ripples of insecurity across certain corporate sectors in India, there is one sector that is actually making money out of this. And that sector is shipping.

NTPC scouts for partners to acquire coal mines abroad

National Thermal Power Corporation Ltd (NTPC) is scouting for partners to acquire coal mines abroad. The Rs 25,964-crore company, which account for 27 per cent of power generated in India last year, wants to integrate itself -- from owning sources of gas and coal supplies to distributing power.

BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2687



EASY

ACROSS

01. Binding agreement (8)
04. Practise movements of boxing (4)
08. Aries (3)
09. Bend (5)
10. Beard of barley (3)
11. Sign the reverse (7)
12. Given a hitch mechanically (2,3)
13. One is, watchful for attack (2,4,5)
17. Heavenly body (5)
18. Pull faces (7)
20. Ventilate (3)
21. Vast water mass (5)
22. Not at home (3)
23. Flower (4)
24. Completeness (8)

DOWN

01. Haulier (6)
02. Called (5)
03. Imprecation (5)
05. Render wall (7)
06. Fame (6)
07. A complete turn (10)
09. A crowning (10)
14. Number (7)
15. Hasty, untidy writing (6)
16. Robing-room in church (6)
18. Go-light (5)
19. Without anybody else (5)

NOT SO EASY

ACROSS

01. It's an agreement one has to grow smaller (8)
04. Non-metallic mineral piece of wood on board (4)
08. Aries would spoil it being put back (3)
09. Around 3rd November make it better not to go straight (5)
10. At first light, topless, show a beard (3)
11. Sign over one's red discomfiture (7)
12. Is taken behind mechanically now, to put it differently (2,3)
13. Nose around the top of the garden, if one is so watchful (2,4,5)
17. Heavenly body company came across (5)
18. Forbidding a card to pull a face (7)
20. A melody one may make public (3)
21. A carafe-top one swirls with a lot of water (5)
22. It's published, but it's not fashionable now (3)
23. Water given to girl in Lotus (4)
24. Tie confused the entry, but it's all there (8)

DOWN

01. Transport operative for a former President (6)
02. Is cited as having a calling (5)
03. Bad language, use of which may be compounded with credit (5)
05. Spread it all over with mixture of pastel, right? (7)
06. Competition won, erroneously returning a bit of fame (6)
07. Complete turn-around the Americans had in 1776 (10)
09. Cairo not on 7 for this year of 1952 here (10)
14. Number, or half of it suffering real change (7)
15. Hasty note from last of swimmers on his stroke (6)
16. No Mayfair wives attempt to find room in church (6)
18. Olive doesn't have the experience (5)
19. One is after a novice behind the wheel who's unaccompanied (5)

SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2686

ACROSS 1. Peters out 5. Off 7. Used 8. Admitted 10. Pedestal 11. Bass 13. Dodder 15. Hunted 18. Cube 19. Eyeglass 22. Palliate 23. Ogle 24. Add 25. Merriment

DOWN 1. Plumped 2. Tweed 3. Ordeal 4. Trip 5. Outcast 6. Fades 9. Aster 12. Bulge 14. Dabbled 16. Dessert 17. Oyster 18. Copra 20. Argue 21. Firm

Business Standard
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Caste complications

A caste census will not address basic issues

The Union Cabinet Committee on Political Affairs on Wednesday decided to include caste enumeration in the next census. This will be for the first time since Independence that caste data will be collected in the census, though the data for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes is recorded. The broader caste data was last collected in the 1931 census. Bipartisan political support for the announcement suggests that it was only a matter of time before India began to enumerate on caste. In fact, it was one of the biggest poll promises of the Opposition parties, including the Congress, in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections.

Given that the government has decided in favour of caste enumeration in the next census, its implications are worth discussing here. However, it is important to first note that conducting a census as soon as possible is necessary. The decennial census was postponed in 2020 because of the pandemic, but why the government kept postponing after the normalcy returned is hard to explain. According to the International Monetary Fund data, India was about a $1.8 trillion economy when the census was last conducted in 2011. It is likely that by the time the next census is completed or the results begin to come in, India will have crossed the $5 trillion mark. It will be a very different country. Thus, it is important to have a regular census.

Nonetheless, given the additional requirement of caste enumeration, it might get delayed further. Therefore, it is possible that the next census will now happen only after 2026 and would form the basis for the delimitation of parliamentary constituencies as required by the Constitution. The results could, therefore, significantly deepen social fault lines in the country, and will have to be managed with great care. Southern states have regularly expressed their concern about the possibility of significantly lower representation in the Lok Sabha. It is possible that some political parties would raise the demand for caste-based reservations in legislatures as well. At one level, there is merit in collecting caste data and having information on other socioeconomic aspects because it could inform policymaking. However, the risk is that such data could be used for political purposes. Although it happens even now, fresh data could further increase the divide. Numerically smaller caste groups may get politically marginalised.

The other potential consequence of the caste census could be the demand for higher reservations. In fact, it has already started. Rahul Gandhi, the leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha, has suggested that the cap on reservations be lifted and quotas be implemented in private educational institutions as well. At a broader level, the fact that the caste census is such a potent political issue in 2025 reflects the failure of the Indian state to fix the basics. For many groups, the caste census and the potential for a share in reservations offer the hope of upward mobility. While some groups may benefit, the key question for the political class is whether dividing the same pie differently will make the country better off, and whether it is the most desirable solution. The real issue is the subpar state of the education system and a serious lack of economic opportunities for the masses. Unless these issues are addressed, caste enumeration and the potential realignment of reservations will not take India very far.

Sustaining the rise

Stock markets are hoping for best outcomes

India's stock markets responded in counter-intuitive fashion to the tariff war and lukewarm corporate results. The Nifty was up 3.5 per cent month-on-month in April, despite a steep correction around the "Liberation Day". Domestic institutional investors, including mutual funds, were net buyers to the tune of ₹28,228 crore in April (they invested ₹37,585 crore in March), while foreign portfolio investors (FPIs) invested a net ₹6,190 crore in the same month. Retail investors were also net buyers in direct equity as well as via equity mutual funds. The markets, as a result, rebounded from the lows of the first half of April. The 90-day moratorium on the United States (US) tariffs offers a reprieve and the more optimistic investors are also hoping that the reworking of global supply chains in the wake of the US-China tariff war will result in some manufacturing shifting to India.

Further, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) appears to be on the path of policy easing. This is likely to result in higher valuations for equity, and a shift away from debt. The rupee has recovered from near 88 per dollar to around 84.6 in a volatile scenario. While corporate results for the March quarter and for 2024-25 were lukewarm, companies across several sectors offered cautiously optimistic guidance for 2025-26. Low prices of crude oil, gas, and coal indicate weakness in global demand but, in isolation, low prices of energy are a positive for the Indian economy since India is a large energy importer. The projections of an above-normal monsoon may drive rural consumption, which had recovered to some extent in the second half of the last financial year. Fast-moving consumer goods companies and the auto sector had suffered through the last four quarters from a lack of urban demand, but guidance indicates that firms believe the worst is over and a pickup in urban demand is now around the corner. Some optimism about cheap energy and picking up the slack in terms of export is built around assumptions of continuing global weakness and disruption in supply chains with the US-China faceoff. Many investors are also betting on significant rollbacks of the US tariff regime (ex-China) at the end of the pause period, given strong opposition to punitive tariffs within the US.

The alternative scenario, however, is grimmer. The mere threat of tariffs has led to near-recessive conditions in the US and pulled down global growth. If US President Donald Trump does go ahead with his proposed tariffs after the pause, global supply chains will be scrambled and unpredictable effects would be felt across the currency and commodities markets. An extended global recession triggered by a tariff war would undoubtedly have a net negative impact on domestic growth. Plus, there is the shadow of conflict escalation with Pakistan in the context of the terror attack in Kashmir. If all goes well — the Reserve Bank of India continues to cut interest rates, Mr Trump rolls back tariffs, India-Pakistan temperatures cool, there is a decent monsoon, and urban consumption revives — the market is reasonably priced with the Nifty price-to-earnings ratio of 22. But there are a lot of positive assumptions and if any of those does not fructify, there could be another deep correction.

Decoding state growth

Strengthening existing economic centres, rather than building greenfield cities, is key to faster state-level growth

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has given a clarion call for India to achieve developed country status by 2047. While there is near-unanimity that India's state governments will drive the future reform agenda, the jury is still out on what it takes to accelerate growth. Should states strengthen human or physical capital, or the quality of governance? Should they focus on existing cities or greenfield developments? And should all states pursue the same strategy?

An analysis of the gross domestic product (GDP) growth performance of 20 major Indian states over the past 30 years reveals two fundamental axes for accelerated state growth: Strong growth attributes and specialised key economic centres (KECs), or large cities. Nine growth attributes include physical capital, such as road density; social capital, such as gross enrolment in tertiary education; and quality of governance, such as labour market flexibility.

KECs are mainly defined as districts comprising million-plus urban agglomerations (UAs) as well as capital cities. These 58 KECs accounted for 30 per cent of India's GDP in 2000, which increased to about 35 per cent by 2020 — indicating a faster growth trajectory. A few key messages emerge from this growth framework.



SHISHIR GUPTA & RISHITA SACHDEVA

No one-size-fits-all growth strategy: Growth attributes serve as foundational elements, while KECs act as catalysts. Focusing only on state attributes may miss the binding constraints facing KECs, while singularly focusing on KECs is not desirable, since we find little evidence of isolated pockets of growth pulling up state growth meaningfully in an environment of weak growth attributes. States must determine their strategy based on their performance on these two fundamental axes.

For instance, despite having one of the best attributes, Maharashtra had an average growth performance. This is because of the lacklustre annual growth of around 7 per cent of its KECs between 2000 and 2020. This is in stark contrast to states like Gujarat and Uttarakhand, with similar attribute count, but with significantly faster GDP growth, courtesy their double-digit KEC growth.

Maharashtra should prioritise improving KEC performance by tackling issues like high land prices and poor transport in Mumbai and Pune. Conversely, Haryana's fast growth is significantly due to Gurugram's stellar performance of more than 10 per cent annual growth (2000-2020). Sustaining the state's growth momentum requires improvements in social and physical capital across the state.

States have key role in improving growth axes: Of the nine identified growth attributes, six are in the State List — crime, fiscal deficit, health care, transmission and distribution (T&D) losses, labour reforms, and land policies — and hence, states have complete control over them. Likewise, KECs are large urban centres generally governed by urban local bodies (ULBs). A better-managed urban centre enhances the productivity of its businesses, thereby fostering growth. Since ULBs are accountable to state governments, the latter assume primacy again.

Even strong states have catching up to do: China's growth centres like Shanghai and Beijing grew at more than 10 per cent annually for four decades, compared to our best-performing KECs that grew between 7 and 10 per cent for nearly 20 years. Consequently, Shanghai and Beijing today have a GDP exceeding $500 billion, compared to our biggest KEC, Mumbai, at around $150 billion. Likewise, states like Kerala and Himachal Pradesh (HP), which have the best life expectancy in the country — around 75 years — rank only at the 66th percentile globally.

Specialisation is key but cannot be orchestrated: KECs usually outpaced the growth of the rest of their respective states by 1-3 percentage points annually between 2000 and 2020. The primary reason for faster growth is sector specialisation, which yields economies of agglomeration. Specialisation occurs when businesses within a particular sector find it optimal to invest in a specific location (KEC), transforming it into a significant hub for that economic activity.

Bengaluru, for example, emerged as a computer services hub due to Karnataka's inherent strength in having a pool of trained labour. The auto hub in Uttarakhand and the pharmaceutical industry in Himachal Pradesh developed as a result of the special package of industrial incentive announced by the Central government in 2003. KECs specialising in mining are, by definition, driven by natural endowments. Thus, specialisation in a KEC occurs, more often than not, organically, rather than through orchestration.

Capital vs labour in growth: There is a strong association between capital-intensive specialisation and growth, while the association with labour-intensive specialisation is weaker. The most recognisable KECs specialising in labour-intensive industries, such as Ludhiana (textile) in Punjab, Coimbatore (textile) in Tamil Nadu, and Agra (leather) in Uttar Pradesh, have not achieved double-digit growth. Conversely, capital-intensive centres such as Udham Singh Nagar (automobile) and Haridwar (machinery) in Uttarakhand, Solan (chemicals and machinery) in HP, and Jamnagar (petroleum) in Gujarat all experienced double-digit growth between 2000 and 2020. The tepid performance of labour-intensive manufacturing poses a constraint for states specialising in it to achieve faster growth. This remains a big policy puzzle.

The risk of diluting growth: KECs are relatively well distributed in India; pursuing a more distributed model may lead to slower growth. Governments in India have consistently aimed to maximise growth while addressing regional inequity. KECs, by definition, are present in all states, compared to countries like China, where the majority of its growth hubs are concentrated in the east. If we pursue the strategy of a significantly more distributed model, it may result in slower growth since it risks diluting the agglomeration benefits by spreading resources thin.

The government should prioritise improving existing centres and nurturing the new/emerging ones, rather than creating new greenfield cities from scratch, as they can take a long time to yield results. For example, Gurugram took 15-20 years to become the central business district of North India, despite having favourable conditions such as proximity to the airport, adjacency to Delhi, and availability of land. To maximise growth, while addressing regional inequity, resources should flow towards existing and emerging growth engines.

Thus, for India to realise Viksit Bharat @ 2047, state governments must focus on bolstering foundational growth attributes while nurturing their key economic centres.

The authors are, respectively, senior fellow and associate fellow, Centre for Social and Economic Progress. The views are personal

STATE CATEGORIES BASED ON GROWTH

States	Real per capita GDP CAGR, 1994-2020 (%)	Nominal per capita NDP for 2023 (₹)
FAST		
Gujarat	6.7	2,72,000
Uttarakhand	6.5	2,31,000
Andhra Pradesh*	6.2	2,20,000
Tamil Nadu	5.9	2,66,000
Himachal Pradesh	5.8	2,19,000
AVERAGE		
Maharashtra	5.3	2,52,000
West Bengal	5.0	1,39,000
Odisha	4.9	1,44,000
Rajasthan	4.8	1,51,000
Bihar	4.5	53,000
SLOW		
Punjab	4.1	1,82,000
Chhattisgarh	3.9	1,37,000
Jharkhand	3.7	96,000
Uttar Pradesh	3.6	84,000
Assam	3.5	1,19,000

*Includes Telangana. The list in the table is not exhaustive Source: Mospi

Global capital, Indian growth rhythm

Over the last two decades, global private equity (PE) firms have approached Asia with an overarching thesis: Capture growth by backing emerging champions in fast-growing economies. For years, this led to capital concentration in China — a market defined by scale, speed, and early-stage dynamism. But as China contends with mounting geopolitical scrutiny, tariff wars, and structural slowdown, the Asian investment lens is undergoing a quiet recalibration. Increasingly, global general partners (GPs) are not just diversifying beyond China — they are re-prioritising India as a long-term strategic hub, rather than merely a hedge.

This shift is not driven by capital availability alone. It stems from a reappraisal of risk-adjusted opportunities. India today offers a compelling combination of macroeconomic resilience, entrepreneurial depth, and institutional maturation. More importantly, it offers a canvas for control-oriented strategies, platform-building, and value creation in sectors where global know-how can be productively applied to local complexities. The opportunity is not in replicating Silicon Valley in Bengaluru; it is in adapting global capital to the distinctive rhythms of Indian growth.



PUNEET GUPTA & SIDDHARTH SHEKHAR SINGH

The realignment of strategy by global funds is not simply about replacing China with India. It's about recognising that India represents a different kind of value creation arc — one that is longer-tailed, structurally messier, but increasingly worth the investment in operational depth. India offers scale, yes — but with friction. It offers growth, but often uneven. To succeed here, global GPs must not only deploy capital, but they must also localise conviction, management bandwidth, and value-add muscle.

In contrast to China's state-driven industrialisation and digital nationalism, India's private sector has evolved under a federal, competitive, and often chaotic market environment. This creates an investment context that rewards iterative, operationally-intensive strategies. For global funds, it means a pivot from capital leverage to execution leverage. No longer can capital be the only differentiator; what matters now is the ability to partner with founders, build leadership teams, institutionalise processes, and cultivate long-term governance.

This change is reflected in how deals are being structured. Earlier waves of global private equity (PE) in India were dominated by minority growth capital: Patient, passive, and dependent on promoter alignment. Today, the needle is moving towards control deals, structured buyouts, and long-hold platforms. These structures allow GPs to exert deeper influence; not just in strategic planning but also in hiring, digital transformation, and cross-border expansion. Importantly, this approach aligns well with a new generation of Indian founders and family business heirs who are more open to co-leadership models, shared governance, and aligned monetisation.

Platform creation has become a preferred entry and expansion strategy for global funds operating in India. Rather than back a single company, many GPs now aim to build multi-asset platforms in sectors like health care, financial services, and industrials — areas that are fragmented, under-capitalised, and ripe for consolidation. This approach allows for operational integration, brand centralisation, and efficiency gains that are difficult to achieve in one-off deals. The challenge, however, lies in execution: Talent gaps, regulatory ambiguity, and slow-moving supply chains require patient capital with a high tolerance for ambiguity.

Yet India's institutional scaffolding has improved considerably. Legal protections for investors, financial reporting standards, and board governance have strengthened across the mid-market. Exit mechanisms have diversified as well. Beyond traditional initial public offerings, sponsor-to-sponsor transactions, secondary sales, and continuation funds are increasingly viable, particularly in sectors where scale and visibility have been achieved. These developments have enabled global funds to craft sophisticated holding strategies, allowing for value realisation without forced exits.

However, global investors must temper optimism with realism. India is not a plug-and-play market. Business models can be local but non-scalable. Talent is abundant but uneven. Regulatory clarity exists, but enforcement is often inconsistent. Many sectors operate in informal or relationship-driven ecosystems where formal capital is only one piece of the puzzle. Global GPs must, therefore, deploy more than capital; they must build long-term institutional capacity, both within their portfolio companies and within their own India operations.

The most successful global investors in India have embraced what could be called a "local orchestration model." They localise decision-making, hire senior India-based talent with operational authority, and align incentives across global and domestic teams. They recognise that value creation in India requires understanding context — regulatory rhythms, supply chain realities, founder psychology, and even state-level economic politics. In that sense, India demands a hybrid investing model: Global in rigour, but local in rhythm.

For global limited partners (LPs), India also offers an opportunity to rethink return profiles. The expectation of outsized internal rates of return (IRRs) from early-stage growth is giving way to a more nuanced understanding: India is a compounding market, not a windfall one. Real returns accrue to those willing to stay the course, reinvest in winners, and create operating leverage over time. From this perspective, India isn't a tactical bet but a strategic allocation.

As the world becomes more multipolar and the race for resilient, scalable growth intensifies, India will continue to rise in the global PE hierarchy. But its rise will not be defined by the quantum of capital alone— it will be defined by the quality of engagement. For global funds, the winners will be those who understand that local bets in India require global patience, deep empathy, and execution excellence. In return, India offers something rare in today's volatile global markets: The promise of durable, compoundable value in a structurally ascending economy.

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The sacred, profane, and the psychedelic

BOOK REVIEW

AMRITESH MUKHERJEE

The story of ganja is the story of humanity. It's a story of survival, rebellion, and reinvention. The cannabis plant has seen it all: Crossed mountains and empires, persisted across millenia, flourished in uncharted and unfamiliar terrains, both geographical and cultural. In *Ananda*, Karan Madhok captures this journey in all its layered glory. It's part pilgrimage, part inquiry, and part celebration — a history, a science, a lawbook, and a love letter all rolled into one.

Starting in the Himalayan hush of Himachal, winding through the coastal dreams of Kerala, *Ananda* floats from region to region. Each stop brings a new strain, a new state of mind, and, yes, a new high — both literal and metaphorical. Like the plant it follows, the book's journey is layered, tangled, and wonderfully complex.

Take, for instance, the most commonly used Indian argument for the legalisation of cannabis: The harking back to our ancient culture — to temples, myths, and centuries-old habits. One only needs to visit the ghats of Varanasi to find hordes of sages smoking day in and out, chillams passed from one hand to the next, with government-approved *bhang* shops scattered through the city. But reverence often mingles with misinformation. It's a country as packed with humans as with superstitions and untested treatments, particularly under the guise of systems such as Ayurveda and Homoeopathy.

When cannabis acquires the mask of religion, things get murky. The plant is cast as a cure-all, from cancer to AIDS, with benefits inflated beyond reason. Healthy scepticism is of utmost importance here, and Mr Madhok, while acknowledging the importance of ancient wisdom, refuses to mistake it for evidence. Reverence doesn't replace rigour. Celebrating cultural roots mustn't come at the expense of ignoring the weeds of credulity.

The journey spins further out into other avenues, including the Bollywood industry and Hindu mythology. There's the obvious mention of the movie *Hare Rama Hare Krishna*, an anti-drug morality tale, but with the legendary *Dum Maro Dum track*, "the best-possible auditory substitute for a blissful marijuana high, a little disco, a little rock, and a lot of soul."

There is also the story of the Samudra Manthana, "a story worthy of the greatest superhero cinematic universe," where amrit, the great elixir of immortality, and halahala, a lethal poison, are produced from the same oceanic churn. Unsure what to do with the halahala, which had the power to destroy the cosmos, the gods turn to Lord Shiva, who unflinchingly consumes it whole. What else would come to the rescue of the god's burning throat but a soothing concoction called *bhang*, made from cannabis?

The book's journey is a bit like that of the plant: Sometimes sacred, sometimes profane, always psychedelic.

Few plants offer as much, and ask for as little, as cannabis. Medicinally, it's a pharmacy unto itself: Relieving pain, reducing inflammation, stimulating appetite, soothing nausea, calming anxiety, lifting depression, quieting seizures, and inviting sleep. Commercially, it has a staggering versatility: Turning into rope, textiles, paper, building blocks, biodegradable plastics, and fuel. Nutritionally, hemp seeds are tiny powerhouses rich in proteins and essential fatty acids, while hemp oil acts as a potent dietary supplement. In cosmetics, it is incorporated into serums, topicals, conditioners, and skin elixirs, all of which are infused with the restorative compounds of the plant. Ecologically, few species match its environmental utility. Cannabis absorbs carbon dioxide at double the rate of most trees, and cleans soils of toxins and heavy metals.



ANANDA: An Exploration of Cannabis in India
Author: Karan Madhok
Publisher: Aleph Book Company
Pages: 416
Price: ₹999

Then, of course, there are the recreational delights: consumed in everything from brownies to vape clouds, oils to joints. Through *Ananda*, Mr Madhok pays tribute to this polymath plant, detailing its every brand and bloom like a botanist drunk on reverence.

You'd think a book so rooted in science, law, and history would feel dry and heavy. But Mr Madhok writes with the lightness of a high. One moment he's joking, the next he's spinning metaphors, then suddenly dropping sarcasm like ash from a chillum. The writing is personal, playful, almost mischievous. Consequently, you get a reading experience mirroring the book's title: *Ananda*—pure joy. And so, smoking Malana Cream is like "a rocket ship buzzing into the brain, a feeling of elevation, Superman meeting Shiva to lazily amble across the great Himalayan peaks" while habitual cannabis users experience "a whole Mahabharata in the mind, a brief history of humanity and civilization, every damn night."

Through *Ananda*, Mr Madhok builds a powerful case for understanding cannabis, as well as for rethinking our moral frameworks — region by region, strain by strain, layer by layer. It's a mirror held up to a country that has forgotten its roots. Why is a plant so deeply embedded in our rituals, our medicines, our landscapes still viewed with suspicion and fear? Why are farmers punished for cultivating what the land offers so freely? Why are fields set aflame in the name of law? Why, Mr Madhok asks, must India import a plant that grows wild across its hills and forests?

The plant may not be a miracle cure, but it is certainly a symbol. Of policy outpacing reason. Of modernity denying its past. Of common sense lost to bureaucracy. When we can tolerate alcohol-fuelled violence and tobacco-linked disease, if we can scroll ourselves into dopamine comas, then surely we can handle a plant that has healed, soothed, and grown beside us for millennia?

The story of *ganja* is the story of humanity. To capture one is to capture the other.

The reviewer is a journalist, writer, and editor fascinated by the stories that shape our world. Instagram/X: aroomofwords

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{ OUR TAKE }

Hundred days of Trump turmoil

Global power relations and the world economy are reeling under the US president's radical policies

That the second Donald Trump administration would be more aggressive about his core politics than the first was almost a given. Many analysts expected it to be protectionist and anti-immigrant; dismissive of multilateral and rules-based forums; and driven by vendetta against those who had opposed the US President either in his first term, or the years in between. If the first hundred days of the second Trump presidency have still surprised people, it is not in terms of direction but magnitude.

Trump's constant focus on pushing the envelope on each of these policies has begun to test the resilience of not just his politics but the US's hegemonic position in the world.

His self-proclaimed foreign policy prowess is being tested in both West Asia and Europe as the Russia-Ukraine and Israel-Hamas conflicts are nowhere close to ending. His threats to annex Canada have just resuscitated the political fortunes of the Liberal Party. Far-Right parties in Europe are also beginning to feel the heat of being seen as his fellow travellers as Trump seeks to increase the burden of military expenditure in Europe and also take away a part of the US export market from them. China, on the other hand, is trying to portray itself as a champion of multilateralism and rules-based order and is succeeding in part because of Trump. Trump's biggest challenge is in the realm of the economy. His "Liberation Day" reciprocal tariff announcements have managed to shock the Americans more than the rest of the world. Financial markets, including those for US treasuries, started convulsing after the announcements, forcing a pause on the tariffs. The true impact of the tariffs, especially vis-à-vis China, is yet to be felt in the American economy, as there was significant frontloading of orders to pre-empt the tariffs. It is this technical headwind that has led to a contraction in the US economy in the first quarter.

What will Trump's economic policies lead to? Will they unleash significant economic pain domestically and force a rollback? Will they nudge other countries to recalibrate their economic relationship away from the US, perhaps even the US dollar? Will this lead to a significant weakening of the clout of the US globally, potentially reversing the nature of global capital flows? Will all these factors widen the chasm between Trump's working-class MAGA (Make America Great Again) base and his Wall Street backers?

A hundred days is too short a time to answer these questions. However, the fact that these questions are being asked shows that Trump 2.0 has moved more than one tectonic plate in geopolitics and economics.

The case for a popular government in Manipur

The Centre must consider favourably the plea by a group of 21 MLAs for installing a popular government in Manipur, which has been under President's Rule since February when the Biren Singh government was dismissed following its failure to enforce law and order in the state. The signatories calling for restoring the popular government include 14 BJP MLAs (out of the party's 37 in the assembly), three from the National People's Party, two from the Naga People's Front, and two independents. This may be a small section of the legislators — the legislative assembly has 60 members — but they do have a case.

Chief minister Biren Singh was responsible for the mess in Manipur. His actions and pronouncements when ethnic tensions roiled the state undermined the administration's authority and gave the impression that it was partisan in dealing with the violence. The party leadership's persistence with him diminished the government's credibility among the Kuki-Zo minority. The general election outcome — the Congress won both the Lok Sabha seats in Manipur — may have convinced the BJP that Singh's claim of popularity was exaggerated. But when the BJP got Singh to resign, the Centre chose to introduce Governor's rule rather than entrust the administration to another legislator. That has not helped disarm the ethnic militias that instilled fear or remove the distrust between communities that resulted in the carving of exclusive ethnic territories.

Civil society groups will be mobilising Saturday to mark two years of ethnic violence, which saw the loss of at least 260 lives and displacement of over 60,000 residents. A closure in the conflict may take time, but it is time steps to initiate the healing process are taken. A popular government may be better placed to lead this since the work needs to begin at the grassroots.

Calm before AI storm: A moment to prepare

India would benefit from launching a national initiative dedicated to building domestic capability in agentic AI



If this transition is managed wisely, India could leapfrog into global leadership in applied AI . REUTERS



Vivek Wadhwa

In *The Driver in the Driverless Car*, I warned of a coming storm: A jobless future driven by automation and Artificial Intelligence (AI). That future is no longer on the horizon — it has begun.

But unlike in the West, where entire white-collar industries are already being restructured by AI, India has a bit more time. Not because it is more insulated, but because so much of its infrastructure still needs to be built — smart cities, modern digital systems, and scalable platforms for a billion-plus people.

That breathing room is a gift. But treating it as a licence for complacency would be a costly mistake.

Let's be clear: The foundational work done by India's IT services industry — code maintenance, software patching, integration testing, report generation, and process documentation — is squarely in the crosshairs of the next wave of AI. That wave is now forming.

At a recent Google event, DeepMind CEO and co-founder Demis Hassabis laid out what's coming. He warned that within a decade, we may reach artificial general intelligence — the holy grail of AI, where machines exhibit human-level cognition. But the disruption won't wait that long. It is already underway in the form of agentic AI — software systems that don't just answer questions, but break down problems, reason through them, and take action. These systems are becoming capable of handling complex workflows with minimal human oversight. That's a polite way of saying: They can already do the kind of work that much of India's IT sector depends on.

Google's new Agentspace platform, rolling out this year, integrates tools like Gemini with enterprise data and provides company-branded agents that can search, decide, summarise, and execute — on command. Tools like NotebookLM can instantly synthesise vast troves of documents, emails, or manuals and surface insights that teams would take weeks to extract. These aren't passive chatbots. They're fully operational digital workers — reliable, tireless, and improving by the day.

Already, tools like GitHub Copilot are writing production-grade code. Salesforce's Einstein AI is autonomously handling customer support and sales optimisation tasks.

Within a few years, technologies like these will mature to the point where they can replace much of the repetitive, back-end work done by hundreds of thousands of professionals in IT.

The DeepMind CEO acknowledged that current AI models still suffer from what he calls "compounding error" — a 1% error rate multiplied over thousands of steps renders outcomes nearly random.

Games like Go or chess, with fixed rules, allow algorithms to plan and reason reliably. The real world, with its ambiguity and complexity, doesn't. That gap offers a brief window of opportunity.

India should be using this time to prepare.

The IT sector emerged not by building transformative technologies, but by filling the world's need for outsourced back-office work — digitising insurance forms, fixing Y2K bugs, maintaining legacy code. But those business models won't survive the AI transition.

The key question now is whether the country will remain a consumer of foreign-built AI systems — or emerge as a developer and exporter of its own.

This disruption presents massive opportunity. India has one of the world's youngest and most tech-savvy populations, broad English proficiency, and a long history of leapfrogging traditional development pathways. It has already demonstrated what's possible with Aadhaar, UPI, and ONDC — building platforms at population scale that solve real problems. But this next leap requires a mindset shift.

Agentic AI will need new interfaces, governance structures, fine-tuning tools, and orchestration platforms. It will need ethical frameworks, transparency layers, and sector-specific customisation. These are all areas where India can lead.

Smart cities, for example, could be designed from the ground up with autonomous agents managing traffic, energy usage, and public services in real time. The very AI that threatens to obsolete legacy IT jobs could drive a wave of hyper-efficient, AI-first urban development.

IT needs to pivot from outsourcing and services to intellectual property creation, developing AI co-pilots for health care, construction, law enforcement, and agriculture, and investing in open-source models, multimodal agent platforms, and domain-specific AI stacks.

Startups that train AI on India's tax codes, regional languages, SME supply chains, and labour markets can outperform western competitors in local contexts.

The government can use its digital infrastructure as a testbed for next-gen AI systems: Predictive disease surveillance, AI-based procurement, real-time policy simulations, and automated dispute resolution.

The old ways won't work. Engineering graduates can no longer coast on routine Java or testing jobs. Curricula need a ground-up redesign focused on prompt engineering, cognitive architectures, model tuning, and ethical AI. Students must train in real-world labs, not just on Zoom calls with remote teams.

India would benefit from launching a national initiative — akin to its semiconductor or space programmes — dedicated to building domestic capability in agentic AI. That means public-private partnerships, indigenous foundation models, and massive upskilling of the existing workforce. A five-year crash programme to prepare the next 10 million knowledge workers for a radically different tech industry.

If this transition is managed wisely, India could leapfrog into global leadership in applied AI — just as it did with fintech and telecom. But if it's mismanaged, the result could be a hollowing out of the very industry that lifted millions into the middle class.

This is the calm before the storm — and the moment to prepare.

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

Airlines must avoid getting grounded by pilot burnout



Anjuli Bhargava

Last month, India's aviation industry mourned the death of a 36-year-old commander of Air India Express who passed away from a cardiac arrest shortly after his flight landed in Delhi. Social media erupted with allegations that the pilot was overworked, and many were quick to blame the airline and its work culture. Air India Express defended itself saying that the roster of the pilot was anything but demanding. In fact, on average, the airline's pilots were averaging around half the duty limit timings. The pilot's death was, in all likelihood, unconnected to work pressure, the airline argued.

There has been growing concern in India over reports of young people dying on account of heart failures post the 2020 pandemic, unrelated to genetic or any other clearly discernible causes. The pilot in Air India Express instance could well be one of these. It remains a matter that needs deeper research.

The bigger worry for the aviation sector is that the cause for this and for previous deaths in the pilot community could be chalked up to 'cumulative fatigue', a sort of insidious burnout over a sustained period of time that results in loss of life.

Well before the pandemic, in 2018, I had detailed conversations with some pilots of low-fare airlines to understand what their daily work entailed and found the picture was pretty grim. Pilots were struggling with burnout and monotony as airlines tried to cope with growing demands without adding to their payroll headcounts. A low-fare airline commander and crew's life in India was certainly not one to be envied.

Over the years, things have worsened as the aviation sector has grown and pressure to improve bottom lines and stay afloat have mounted. Pilots and commanders of the erstwhile Air India, Indian Airlines, and Jet Airways led a life of relative leisure compared to those who entered the industry post-2004.

Earning less is one aspect, but the nature of the jobs takes a bigger physical toll too. Many low-fare airline pilots and crew do four take-offs and landings in a single duty assignment, and this can be tough on the body over a long period. "We as passengers find it tough and quite tiring if one takes a flight with a couple of stopovers even without a change in aircraft. You can imagine what the crew goes through if they have to do three or four sectors in a single day," argued a former civil aviation secretary.

In 2015, a GermanWings co-pilot deliberately crashed a jet, killing everyone on board. This opened a can of worms where the mental health of the crew became a key concern the world over. While the industry was equipped to assess the physical well-being of those in charge of so many lives at a time, assessing mental fitness was trickier and a bigger worry. The GermanWings incident blew apart the assumption that everyone values their own life.

The pandemic worsened matters. The aviation sector — commanders, co-pilots and cabin crew — faced layoffs or sharp pay cuts as airlines struggled to keep their heads above the water. Many flight personnel in India contracted and lost their lives to the virus while others suffered the stress of financial setbacks because of thin airline incomes.

As things limped back to normalcy, some of the financial stress lifted in 2022 and 2023. Yet in some ways, the work-life balance, especially for a low-fare airline pilot, has deteriorated. In 2022 and 2023, the news of two Indian pilots — one with IndiGo and one former SpiceJet commander who was with Qatar — dying while on duty made headlines. Several news reports identified poor health due to overwork, accumulated fatigue, and stress that is assumed to be common in the sector as reasons behind the untimely deaths.

After the pandemic, for the first time, commanders also came out and spoke openly. A senior SpiceJet commander told this writer that he had chosen to stay with his airline, despite its financial and other troubles, because it was flying less and, therefore, his work-life balance was better. He said at 51 years of age, he could no longer manage what he could when he was 28. Others pointed towards their gruelling rosters, which in one glaring instance included four early morning and six 'window of circadian low' (WOCL) flights (between 2 am and 6 am), a time when the mind and body are at their lowest functioning capacity.

The director general of civil aviation (DGCA) came up with new duty guidelines in October 2023 aimed at making the life of crew easier, with adequate and enhanced rest periods. For the airlines, this meant a spike in costs as they would need additional crew, and the matter expectedly landed up in court.

Based on a court directive, some of the new guidelines will be implemented in July, but the majority or the more substantive portions of the guidelines have been delayed to October. The pilot community, despite the court's intervention, is not convinced these will be implemented. The situation in India, airline executives say, is already at alarming levels with many pilots being declared unfit, some of whom have been temporarily or even permanently removed from duty. Whether this was a result of overwork, stress, a general neglect of their physical state or a combination of all three remains unclear. Regardless, a two-year delay in the implementation of the guidelines is both incomprehensible and unconscionable.



The situation in India, airline executives say, is already at alarming levels with many pilots being declared unfit HT PHOTO

Anjuli Bhargava writes about governance, infrastructure and the social sector. The views expressed are personal

{ ELON MUSK } HEAD, DOGE

Since at the end of the day, this is all taxpayer money, I think we should definitely look to see if indeed the Federal Reserve is spending $2.5 billion on their interior designer



HT

Caste census and changing narratives in Indian politics

The National Democratic Alliance government (NDA) has decided to include caste enumeration in the upcoming national census. Census with caste as a detail was a colonial invention, now being reinvented by post-colonial governance and given a new meaning and context. The census with caste enumeration — popularly called caste census — has both symbolic and substantial values. As a symbolic act, it may sharpen caste-based identity assertion in both politics and policymaking. However, it will also generate rich data and details that can help in framing policies for the equal and equitable distribution of material and political resources in society.

The caste census is also likely to reshape people's priorities, from a mere aspiration for development (read public resources) to assertion for representation and, through that, development among various under-represented social groups. It may also lead to an unfolding of caste and sub-caste identities and reshaping of society in an equitable manner in the long-run.



Badri Narayan

This decision of the Narendra Modi government has major political implications. First, it is likely to demolish the political and electoral strategies of the Congress-led anti-BJP Opposition, which was aiming to use caste census to mobilise OBCs and other marginal communities. They will need to reframe their political strategy, especially in Bihar, where assembly elections are due later this year. Second, the BJP has not only disarmed the Opposition from weaponising caste-based electoral polarisation of backwards and Dalits, but it has also appropriated the Opposition's caste-focussed social justice argument by recasting it in its own model of social justice — referred to by many political analysts as *samagra* (all-encompassing) social justice) model — by weaving in governance-centred empowerment with caste-based representation.

The caste census may appear to go against the grain of the ideological vision usually associated with the BJP. However, the BJP is a political party that imbibes whatever they find as *yuganukul* (a concept popularised by Jana Sangh ideologue Deen Dayal Upadhyaya, which means suitable to the time). The Bihar election is set to be a contest of various social justice models: The neo-Congress and neo-*samajwadi* (socialist) argument for social justice based on representation as per share in population, *bahujanwadi* politics, and the BJP's *samagra* social justice model. While the current Congress-Samajwadi social justice model is limited to the demand for caste-based representation, the BJP has been smart to combine governance with representation. The BJP has already been successful in shattering its historical image as a Brahmin-Bania party and transformed itself into a sarva samaj (all communities) party that provides substantial political representation to OBCs and Dalits.

This conscious transformation has already helped the party attract a large section of OBCs and Dalits, especially in the Hindi heartland. In the long-run, this will lead to a diminishing of the electoral base of influential parties such as the RJD and Samajwadi Party (SP). The social justice argument that energised their politics may be in crisis. Their one-dimensional social justice politics will have to compete with the NDA's multi-dimensional politics, that claims to offer social, cultural, and religious social justice with now, the promise of caste-oriented representation in power politics. The first test of the new political positioning by the BJP will be the Bihar assembly election. But it will have a resonance nationally.

The fact is few people now argue against a caste census. A section of the Hindu upper caste and a few activists who argue for the annihilation of caste may insist that not acknowledging caste in census and surveys is the right way to diminish its importance. Of the first lot, the Hindu upper castes may be disappointed with the BJP's decision to include caste enumeration in the census. However, the appeal of the Hindutva agenda and the absence of other political choices may keep them close to the party. A potent combination of Hindutva, an aggressive anti-Pakistan centric nationalism, the promise of Viksit Bharat is likely to help the party overcome the caste fault line in Hindu society that anti-BJP social justice groups have historically used for electoral mobilisation.

The caste census may turn the caste survey data collected by various state governments irrelevant and offer more rigorously collected, methodologically appropriate, elaborately collected politically neutral data that can be used for evolving policies and their proper implementation. Political parties may use their own data collected by the state surveys either to supplement or contest national data and sharpen their political posturing and arguments. These data can be weaponised, of course. But the outcome will depend on who is using it, how, and for what? One thing is for sure. A national caste census, whenever it is going to be conducted, will change the course of Indian politics, transform the structures of dominance, and the relations between the privileged and the deprived.

Badri Narayan is director, GB Pant Social Science Institute. The views expressed are personal

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OUR VIEW


AP

Caste enumeration: We must proceed with care

The government's decision to include a caste count in the next Census is welcome but let's get the details of it right and not compromise what's in our collective interest as a country

The government's decision to include caste enumeration in India's population census is welcome. As the basis of a social hierarchy that inhibits mobility in Indian society, caste is inimical to the notion of equality that's a core characteristic of democracy. The dynamism of our economy has weakened links between castes and occupations, with favourable socio-economic outcomes, especially for groups with a long record of deprivation. Our policy of affirmative action, with jobs and educational seats reserved for candidates from "socially and economically backward classes," in the Constitution's words, has helped many of the underprivileged move ahead in life. However, the extent to which caste has lost its power to hold people back and the challenge that remains is a matter of speculation in the absence of data on the country's caste composition. Independent India chose to dispense with a caste headcount, last done in 1931 under British rule. A reversal of that call may cause unease among citizens who do not want such an identity raked up officially, but it will replace the fog of guesswork with data.

How should this caste count be designed? Castes similar in occupation and ritual status have different names in different states. Even within the same state, caste nomenclature can vary. How to standardize these tags is one challenge. Then, there is the question of sub-caste, which poses the puzzle of whether a group should be subsumed in a larger caste identity. The 1931 Census used occupation to club groups, but modern professions would thwart such a solution. Also, the field-work gathers self-reported information. Since caste cannot be ascertained objectively, would the reliability of claims stir up a controversy? But one thing is clear. The questionnaire must make space for caste disavowal. For various reasons, people may resist such identification. Among the privileged, there may be those who see no need to derive social status from caste affiliation. Those who view it as a burden to be left behind in villages (or the past) may also want to transcend this identity. Many Indians have dropped caste-laden surnames to either oppose or escape it. There would also be people of 'mixed parentage'—in terms of caste or faith—who reject a patrilineal identity. Those who wish to identify as casteless should be able to. Those who declare themselves atheist are often clubbed with Hindus, since *naastiks* (those who do not believe in divinity or the primacy of scriptural texts) are treated as a Hindu sect. Such respondents ought to be classified as 'unaffiliated.'

To what end is caste being enumerated? For the ruling party, it could plausibly serve to deprive the opposition of a political plank that seemed to find some traction in last year's general election. But a national caste break-up is sure to generate fresh demands for quotas. Partisan politics could champion quota expansion beyond today's 60% total, a cause that may have a sizeable demographic constituency behind it. Ideally, affirmative action should neither negate the incentive to excel, nor reinforce perceptions of inferiority. Whether quotas pass this test is unclear, though we can affirm that distorted incentives are usually bad economics. Yet, such nuances may turn out to be irrelevant if quota beneficiaries hold the electoral balance of power as a swing vote and push for enlarged reservations. Regardless of the eventual ramifications, for this important policy debate to make headway, we need reliable data.

MY VIEW | FARM TRUTHS

India needs official poverty data for effective policy formulation

World Bank estimates are confusing and we must adopt our own measure of India's poverty ratio



HIMANSHU
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Last week, the World Bank released its latest estimates of poverty for India. According to its *Poverty and Equity Briefs*, poverty in India declined from 16.2% in fiscal year 2011-12 to 2.3% in 2022-23, with 171 million people lifted out of it in 11 years—or 15.5 million persons per year. These estimates are based on its $2.15-per-day poverty line used to measure extreme poverty.

These numbers differ from the World Bank's estimates of poverty using the same $2.15 poverty line on its Poverty and Inequality Platform (PIP). Indian poverty, according to this, was at 22.9% in 2011-12 and fell to 13% in 2021-22, with the number of poor falling by 107 million, or 10.7 million persons per year. Not just the level of poverty, the extent of its decline also varies vastly.

Part of the reason for the Bank's sharp downward revision in poverty was its use of the recently-released 2022-23 Household Consumer Expenditure Survey (HCES). However, its PIP estimates for 2021-22 were made through a survey-to-survey imputation using the 'consumer pyramids' data of the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy.

The World Bank acknowledges problems in using HCES 2022-23 data for poverty and inequality measurements, given the substantial changes it underwent, but it has still used it. This is strange. The last time it found data on consumption expenditure non-comparable with past data was in 1999-00, and it did not use it for poverty estimation. None of its reports has Indian poverty estimates for 1999-00.

The use of HCES 2022-23 is also responsible for the downward revision of the Bank's poverty estimates for 2011-12, the data of which is not controversial. Its new estimates as well as the PIP ones use the 2011-12 consumption survey of the NSSO and the same poverty line of $2.15. The downward revision is a result of a shift from the earlier estimates of consumption expenditure in 2011-12 that were based on a uniform recall period (URP) of 30 days to the modified mixed recall period (MMRP), which uses a mix of 7-day, 30-day and 365-day recall periods. These two sets of estimates are not comparable, with MMRP estimates pegging consumption expenditure significantly higher than URP estimates. As a result, using the same poverty line, estimated poverty using the MMRP method is only 16.2% in 2011-12, far less than 22.9% estimated earlier for the same year.

The fact that there are now two World Bank estimates of poverty using the same poverty line is problematic in the context of assessing India's poverty reduction. It also raises basic questions over the World Bank's methodology of estimating poverty for countries with non-comparable data on consumption expenditure. The appropriate method would have been to use a poverty line that takes into account changes in the recall period such that the poverty estimates remain the same. After all, the number of poor in a country is a given fact and a methodology shift should not result in such a different poverty ratio.

But even with the changes, both these World Bank estimates suggest a sharp deceleration in poverty reduction efforts. By its estimates, India managed to lift 175 million persons out of poverty between 2004-05 and 2011-12 using the same $2.15 poverty line. So an annual 25 million persons were lifted out of poverty. This declined after 2011-12 to only 10.7 million per year, if we go by the PIP estimates, and 15.5 million per year by the new estimates.

While there are issues with the Bank's poverty estimates that stem from comparability and its choice of poverty line, as well as deflators and the implicit inter-temporal inflation used for arriving at rupee-equivalent poverty lines, these have never been relevant for policy analysis in India.

India has been a pioneer in defining national poverty lines since independence. These have been used by several other countries to define and estimate poverty in their own countries. Unfortunately, there is no official poverty line for India currently, despite the Rangarajan panel that was set up to look into poverty estimation having submitted its report in 2014. Although there is consumption data available for 2022-23 and 2023-24, issues surrounding its robustness and comparability with earlier survey rounds warrant setting up a new committee to examine the data and suggest a national poverty line.

With a significant proportion of India's population still living in poverty, its estimation simply cannot be left to international agencies. The country needs an official poverty estimate to aid policymaking and determine poverty trends after 2011-12.

QUICK READ

The World Bank's dual estimates of Indian poverty on account of differences in consumption survey methodology have caused confusion over the progress we're making.

Its latest estimates show lower poverty and a sharper decline since 2011-12 than previously estimated. Like in the past, though, we need our own official poverty ratio to track.

10 YEARS AGO


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Horn OK please

JUST A THOUGHT

To abandon affirmative action is to say there is nothing more to be done about discrimination.

CORETTA SCOTT KING

GUEST VIEW

RERA was built for protection but undone by inaction

MANISHA NATARAJAN



is a journalist, content strategist, and host of 'Let's Get REal'.

When a Supreme Court judge calls the Real Estate Regulatory Authority (RERA) a "rehab centre for ex-bureaucrats," it's a wake-up call. Justice Surya Kant's blunt remark in March isn't the judiciary's first indictment and likely won't be the last.

Insiders have been sounding the alarm for years. Former Uttar Pradesh RERA member Balvinder Kumar admitted the authority lacks teeth to rein in rogue builders. Haryana's adjudicating officer Rajender Kumar called it a "toothless tiger." Even Union minister Hardeep Singh Puri criticized states in 2022 for weakening the law and diluting its core purpose: protecting homebuyers.

Now comes a shiny new infotech initiative: a unified digital platform for all state RERAs. It sounds great on paper, with the promise of more transparency, easier access to project details and a single central database. But access to information was never the real issue. The problem is that RERA is simply not delivering the protection it promised.

When it was launched in 2016, RERA gave hope to millions of homebuyers trapped in stalled, delayed or sub-par projects. It promised accountability, compensation and a way to fight back. Nearly a decade later, many of those promises remain unfulfilled.

Transparency? Hazy at best: Startling results emerge from a check of some basic RERA provisions: 70% of project funds must be deposited in an escrow account to prevent diversion; builders must compensate buyers with the same interest rate they charge for delayed payments; full refunds with interest are due if a project is cancelled or indefinitely stalled; and quarterly updates on construction, finances and approvals must be uploaded on the RERA site.

Most RERA safeguards are falling through the cracks because no one seems to be holding builders accountable. There is hardly any audit by state RERAs on whether a builder is meeting the money-in-escrow requirement, little or no scrutiny of project updates and poor enforcement of compensation or fair agreement clauses. In the absence of proper monitoring, RERA's transparency mandate remains a hollow promise.

Redressal mechanism? Don't count on it: The RERA Act also lays out a clear dispute redressal mechanism. Complaints must be resolved in 60 days, appeals must be decided within another 60 days and orders can include refunds, interest payments, compensation or directions to complete projects, apart from jail terms for errant builders.

According to data shared by Square Yards, of the 265 cases filed by it on behalf of homebuyers, recovery of claims from builders has been just 28%. More than 50 cases are stuck with "reserved orders" for 7–8 months and over 30 await execution even after final orders. In at least 15 cases, homebuyers have had to escalate matters to high courts because RERA orders were not complied with.

Even MahaRERA of Maharashtra, once considered the poster boy among all state RERAs, first tries to arrange mediation between the builder and homebuyers. That can take up to six months. If things don't work out, the case needs to be listed under an adjudicating officer. The first hearing could take between 12 and 18 months. Even after multiple hearings that could go on for up to two years, a remedy for orders not being enforced can prove elusive. That's RERA's Achilles heel. It has no teeth to bite when builders ignore RERA directives.

QUICK READ

The Real Estate Regulatory Authority has failed its promise of protecting the interests of homebuyers in too many states. Even its redressal mechanisms remain largely ineffective.

RERA orders seem to get implemented more in the breach than reality. For homebuyers in India to be assured of fair terms, we need both political will and legislative reform.

The problem isn't just delayed orders. There's no fixed timeline for enforcement or recovery. Even after a case is won, implementation of orders can up take up to a year or more, depending on which state's RERA one is dealing with.

RERA relies on state agencies—the police, district collectors and revenue officials—for the execution of its orders. But when those bodies either delay action or blatantly ignore RERA orders, homebuyers are left helpless. Maharashtra alone has hundreds of unexecuted recovery warrants gathering dust.

This is compounded by a serious lack of capacity. Most RERA offices are swamped, handling 80–100 cases a day. Many are staffed by retired bureaucrats, often with no legal training or understanding of real-estate complexities. Add to this the legal maze that builders use to delay proceedings, and you're left with a system designed to exhaust homebuyers, not protect them.

The problem is not just with adjudication. Even provisions meant to apply automatically, like compensation for delays, are now being treated as matters for dispute resolution. The difference is stark with systems in places like Singapore, where regulatory and adjudicatory frameworks operate smoothly.

If regulation is lax and developers aren't held to the promises they make buyers, the system can be deemed a failure.

So, what needs to change? *First*, RERA must start acting like a real regulator—watching builder disclosures and industry practices closely and stepping in at the first sign of a gap, not after things fall apart. That requires officials who are trained, agile, committed and enough in number. *Second*, orders must not be hostage to state machinery. Penalties must be meaningful and recovery mechanisms quick and binding.

This requires political will and legislative reform. Until that comes about, homebuyers would do well to stay cautious, even when a housing project proudly flaunts a 'RERA registration' number.

MY VIEW | THE LAST WORD

What India could learn from the complaints of its trade partners

There is vast scope for productivity enhancement in the economy if we pick up the right lessons from today's trade stand-off



INDIRA RAJARAMAN
is an economist.

ISTOCKPHOTO



Even before the US paused its Liberation Day tariffs for three months until 9 July, it was clear that those levies would have to be periodically updated since they were based on annual (flow) data. Any country on the high-tariff list can reduce its bilateral trade surplus with the US and demand a recalibration of its tariff.

It is important to remember this, because long-term export strategies based on the comparative advantage we might temporarily enjoy *vis-a-vis* Malaysia or Vietnam, just because they were charged higher tariffs in the first round, could come to grief. Even China has been promised a tariff drop from 145% (the 245% number is just for one or two products for which the new levy was added on to a pre-existing 100% tariff). The promise for China is in the 50-65% range, probably in response to Chinese restrictions on the export of rare earth elements (essential in the manufacture of magnets and much else).

India and the US are working on a bilateral trade agreement (BTA). There will be an initial focus on agricultural trade, where the tariff disparity is staringly wide, but not much more is known about the contours of the BTA other than that it will be in two phases.

Tariff concessions will be the principal focus of the BTA, but non-tariff access barriers are also very much on the table. It is these that we can learn valuable lessons from, because much of what hampers access for trade partners can work to hobble the domestic economy as well. There is enormous scope for productivity enhancement in the economy as a whole if we learn the right lessons from the trade stand-off.

Take for example what from an Indian perspective is non-negotiable: India's ban on the import of commercial feed for animals, like milch cattle, which carries ingredients of animal origin like bone meal. To quote from the 2025 *National Trade Estimate Report* (31 March) of the US Trade Representative (page 202): "In addition, unclear jurisdiction for the approval process for animal feed continues to complicate the process. For example, in December 2019, the [Food Safety and Standards Authority of India] published Direction I-95, announcing new requirements for commercial animal feeds and feed materials that are manufactured, imported, or distributed in India. Prior to the publication of Direction I-95, however, the FSSAI had not regulated the manufacture, import, or distribution of either commercial animal feeds or feed ingredients in India. India indicated it would issue an administrative order to clarify the formal regulatory authority of animal feed in 2024; however, as of December 31, 2024, the orders were yet to be issued."

The paragraph, if it is accurate, says the ban came into effect for the first time in December 2019, which is surprisingly recent for an issue of such great social importance in India. It points out that the ban did not lie within the FSSAI's remit. Further, India's promise of a clarification at that time is an admission of the need for a formal regulatory authority, either through expanding the FSSAI's remit or setting up another regulator for animal feed. Finally, the paragraph highlights a familiar story—to wit that five years later, the regulatory clarification promised had still not happened.

Delays, delays. I have written before on delays which plague the Indian system, principally on payment delays within the fiscal arena. There are also approval delays, response delays, you-name-it delays. Commercial delays may be reduced by Adam Smithian competition, but public institutions have no competition. The applicant is at their mercy. Exam dates are postponed. Jobs are promised but no appointment letter follows. Arterial road repairs are begun and then indefinitely delayed. Road repairs may destroy underground water and sewage pipes, or phone and internet lines, whose restoration can get indefinitely delayed. Commercial activity, whether for export or a domestic market, can only become more productive if the public infrastructure parameters within which it functions are known and do not hang in limbo.

QUICK READ

A report by the US Trade Representative, if accurate, suggests a delay on India's part to clarify its regulatory authority for animal feed, over which the US and India have a stand-off.

Delays are endemic to India in almost every sphere where the government plays a role and significant productivity gains could be made if an effort is made to end this problem.

The landmark Supreme Court ruling that prescribes time deadlines within which state governors must deliver their response to state legislation passed and awaiting notification is a massive step in the right direction. Practically every state has experienced periods during which duly passed legislation awaited the governor's assent for years.

The Supreme Court's ruling serves to uphold the paramount importance of elected bodies like state legislatures. It does not undermine those institutions in any way.

The Constitutional provision for Finance Commissions has over the years performed a sterling role in safeguarding the statutory sharing of fiscal resources between the Centre and states from politically-induced delays. The standard operating procedure for these statutory flows ensures that funds flow from the Centre simultaneously on known dates to all states in amounts that are formulaic and not discretionary.

These provisions have preserved the Indian federation and thereby the size and heft of the Indian economy. The 16th Finance Commission is now in session, but a member has resigned and is yet to be replaced. It is vital that this vacancy be filled without delay for the commission to function at full strength, as prescribed under Article 280 of the Indian Constitution.

MINT CURATOR

Economist-turned-politician: Mark Carney is Canada's hope

The Liberal leader could fix Canada's Achilles heel: productivity



ROBERT BURGESS
is the executive editor of Bloomberg Opinion.



Carney's comments suggest he's aware of Canada's economic challenge. BLOOMBERG

Canada's Liberal Party has won a fourth consecutive national election in a race that largely came down to which party would better stand up to US President Donald Trump. "We are over the shock of American betrayal," Mark Carney, a former central banker and the leader of the Liberal Party, said in a victory speech early Tuesday morning. "But we should never forget the lessons."

Indeed, there were many lessons, not the least of which is that Trump's provocations on tariffs and musings about making Canada the 51st US state probably would have been easier to laugh off if the country's leaders had taken steps to shore up its woeful productivity.

Productivity is Canada's Achilles heel. It is so bad that the 1.8% drop in labour productivity in 2023 was the worst among 38 members of the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD). The poor performance, which carried into 2024, erased all productivity growth since 2017.

The Deutsche Bank Trade Weighted Canada Dollar Index, a measure of the nation's economic performance compared with trade partners, has plunged 9.44% over the past four years. A similar measure for the US dollar surged 11%.

No wonder the OECD predicts that growth in Canada's gross domestic product (GDP) per capita will rank last among its member countries over the next 40 years. "A positive change in productivity could be the most significant factor in lifting economic growth, and the prosperity that goes with it," RBC Capital Markets noted in a recent report.

Luckily for Canada, Carney is more economist than politician. *Bloomberg News* describes him as "a consummate crisis manager," having steered the Bank of Canada through the global financial crisis of 2008 and the Bank of England through the UK's highly disruptive decoupling from the EU in 2016. Disclosure: Carney was the chairperson of Bloomberg Inc until January, when he resigned that post to enter politics in Canada.

Comments by Carney on the campaign trail suggest he understands the challenge, promising a capital spending budget that would allocate tens of billions of dollars to investments in productivity-boosting infrastructure.

More spending is a start, but more is needed. Canada needs to reduce its notorious bureaucracy and the stiff internal trade barriers between provinces that impede the flow of goods, services and people. It also needs a system to match education and skills with jobs to accommodate its immigrant-fuelled population boom.

Here, a little could go a long way. RBC notes that businesses in Canada invest about half as much per worker as those in the US, a trend that has only become worse since the 2008-09 global financial crisis. Lower taxes, especially for businesses that embrace worker training, should be an immediate priority.

Carney could also help the cause by adopting a policy championed by Pierre Poilievre, head of the defeated Conservatives, to boost housing in a nation that does not have enough supply by tying municipal grants to a requirement that cities increase home construction by 15% a year. Carney may have no choice, given that his party had about 43% of the national vote, falling short of the 172 seats needed for a majority in Canada's House of Commons. This means the government will be forced to work with other parties to pass budgets and other legislation, according to *Bloomberg News*. Carney is already talking about "working constructively with all parties across parliament."

Although Canada's tax burden isn't bad relative to other advanced economies—with tax revenue amounting to 34.8% of GDP in 2023 as measured by the OECD—it's meaningfully higher than the US's 25.2% of GDP. Bringing the tax burden down would go a long way to spurring growth and productivity.

It's not like Canada doesn't have the fiscal space to accommodate lower taxes, with a budget deficit of around 2% of GDP versus 7% in the US. In its 2025 outlook, the OECD recommended that Canada could make its tax system more growth friendly by switching the burden from direct taxation to indirect and environmental taxes. Canada could also incentivize research and development, which the OECD notes is "a key driver of a country's innovation capacity." Carney has already promised to run deeper budget deficits to cut income taxes and step up spending on infrastructure.

Fixing what ails Canada's economy will not be either easy or quick. But Carney's credentials as an economist and comments about never forgetting "lessons" suggest he understands the root of the problem that Canada faces. ©BLOOMBERG

GUEST VIEW

Non-executive directors needn't get entangled in fraud

VIRAL MEHTA & ANURAG SHAH



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The Gensol-BluSmart crisis has drawn corporate fraud in India's startup ecosystem into the spotlight. It has sparked a debate over a 'fake it till you make it' culture and whether it's driven by sheer greed, naive optimism or intense pressure to keep the company's stock on an ever-rising curve. While the causes remain debatable, the consequences of corporate fraud follow a predictable path. Once discovered, law enforcement agencies and regulatory bodies spring into action. Probes are launched, notices are dispatched and litigation ensues.

One may expect these proceedings to target executive directors, who are responsible for running the business and its affairs. But that is not the case. They invariably implicate all board members, including those who serve in non-executive roles, such as nominee directors appointed by private equity firms. This occurs despite the stark difference between the roles of executive and non-executive directors. The latter play a limited role on the board. They represent the shareholders that nominate them. As their involvement is usually restricted to attending board meetings, they often have no clue, let alone knowledge, of any fraud. Nonetheless, they find themselves arrayed with those accused of carrying out the fraud.

Noticing this, the ministry of corporate affairs (MCA) came out with a circular dated 2 March 2020, drawing attention to a provision in the Companies Act of 2013. This provision limits the liability of non-executive directors to wrongful acts that occur with their knowledge (attributable through board processes), consent or connivance, or where they do not act diligently. In the light of this, the MCA required that the specified criteria be satisfied before non-executive directors are arrayed in any civil or criminal case under the Companies Act. The MCA also instructed registrars of companies (RoCs) to ensure that sufficient evidence exists of their involvement before proceeding against them.

To comply with the law's mandate and avoid liability, non-executive directors can take preventive measures. *First*, it is crucial for them to demonstrate that they acted diligently. This involves dedicating adequate time and attention to the company's issues, especially those that may raise red flags. They must remain sceptical of management actions until they independently evaluate them. Rather than accepting rosy narratives or optimistic portrayals, they should pose incisive questions to discern the true picture of the company's operations.

Second, non-executive directors must act decisively upon detecting signs of corporate wrongdoing by notifying management and insisting on prompt corrective action. Problems arise when, instead of confronting the management, they succumb to pressure, overlook fraudulent conduct in fear of repercussions or dismiss it as an isolated incident. Such responses are not prudent, and by the time this realization dawns, it is often too late. They risk being accused of negligence or wilful blindness, as they can be presumed to possess constructive knowledge. Non-executive directors must speak up if they detect signs of fraudulent activity, as their silence can be used against them.

Third, non-executive directors must keep a record of any instances of having highlighted red flags. Should these concerns pertain to an issue being addressed through a board or shareholder resolution, they must ensure their dissent is noted and accurately recorded in the meeting minutes. Plus, any correspondence with management should be preserved as evidence.

By taking these steps, non-executive directors can shield themselves from liability should a fraud be eventually uncovered.

However, the reality is that they are only able to escape punishment, not the process. They still get caught in the crossfire between regulatory bodies and the fraud's perpetrators. These bodies may include the Securities and Exchange Board of India for listed companies and Reserve Bank of India for banks and financial institutions. Non-executive directors could also get embroiled in civil and criminal proceedings pursued by various agencies such as the local police, Enforcement Directorate and Serious Fraud Investigation Office. Even if the charges levelled against non-executive directors lack evidence or merit, they are forced to endure arduous and lengthy proceedings before they can be exonerated. This process can be extremely taxing; they incur litigation costs, face inconvenience, undergo stress and suffer reputational harm. They may even need to resign from their board positions in other companies, especially those which operate in tightly regulated sectors. This is because, in many such sectors, maintaining a 'fit and proper' status is essential for directors.

QUICK READ

As attending board meetings is usually all they do, they often have no clue of fraudulent acts but may still find themselves arrayed with perpetrators who actually run the business.

Law enforcers should follow a provision of the Companies Act that shields non-executive directors from prosecution in cases that have no *prima facie* evidence of their role.

At the end, the real question that needs to be answered is whether it is possible to shield non-executive directors from this ordeal without neglecting evidence that may point to their involvement. This is precisely what the MCA circular aims to address. By adopting a balanced approach, it sanctions the prosecution of non-executive directors only in cases where there is *prima facie* evidence of their participation. Rather than indiscriminately implicating all board members, it calls for an initial assessment before tagging them with executive directors. The need of the hour is for regulatory bodies and enforcement agencies to embrace the circular's intent and enforce it in letter and spirit.

These are the authors' personal views.

WORDLY WISE

CASTE IS NOT JUST A DIVISION OF LABOUR, IT IS A DIVISION OF LABOURERS.

— B R AMBEDKAR

The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

IT COUNTS

Decision to hold caste census is very welcome. It's also a win for Opposition, carries promise of evidence shaping social justice

THE NARENDRA MODI government's decision to hold a caste census with the next population Census is a turning point and a milestone. In a sense, it is the state catching up with the lived socioeconomic and political reality. Caste shapes hierarchy and discrimination, culture and belonging. It plays a role in structuring opportunity and social mobility. It influences choices and trajectories, from education to employment, and rituals of birth, death and marriage. Political parties have long recognised the power of caste as a mobilisational tool and category. And in 1990, with the acceptance of the recommendations of the Mandal Commission Report, the central government acknowledged and affirmed what different state governments across the country had already responded to — the upsurge of the middle castes or Other Backward Classes, and their demand for a more equitable participation and representation. The Mandal moment made job and education quotas the centrepiece of affirmative action policies for OBCs at the Centre, but at the same time, it also inaugurated a long period of dissonance — after all, the government was framing caste-based policy without the empirical data on caste that is necessary for evidence-driven policy. That this glaring gap is now set to be filled is much-needed and enormously welcome.

The demand for the caste census has been central to the agenda of Congress, and more specifically Rahul Gandhi, for at least two years now. It was first heard prominently in the Karnataka assembly election in 2023, and it dominated the Lok Sabha poll campaign the following year. The Modi government's Wednesday announcement can, therefore, be read as a vindication of its main opponent's plank, and as a bid to wrest it. It is also a turnaround for a party whose leader said only recently that he recognises only four castes — women, the poor, youth and farmers. By all accounts, ever since Mandal became a political force in the 1990s, rearranging the national political lexicon and giving rise to new caste-based parties, the politics of Mandir was seen as the political counter to it. The project of Hindutva consolidation, went the argument, was threatened by the caste-centric framework. It soon became apparent, though, that the lines were shifting, and that the binary was not tidy. Over the years, even as the original votaries of "social justice" let their political platform become faded and frayed — Congress, a late convert, has sounded more insistent than credible in its demands for the caste census — the BJP has proved to be agile in criss-crossing the political-ideological fence, and in planting its flag on the other side. Its decision on the caste census now puts its imprimatur on a politics that it opposed to begin with, was awkward with for some time, and then purposefully worked to make its own.

There is work to be done after the caste census announcement. The design of the questionnaire will be consequential, and there will be the task of connecting the dots between the data and government policy. The caste census will also pave the way for the delimitation exercise — the OBC numbers and the gaps they point to may blunt the north-south faultline — and the implementation of women's reservation in Parliament. It may lead to demands for extending quotas, and for removing the Supreme Court-mandated cap of 50 per cent reservation. There are challenges ahead, but the fact that caste will finally be counted provides a robust, data-driven basis for policy and politics.

SIGNED AND SEALED

Critical minerals deal with Ukraine highlights US challenge of balancing economic interests with strategic goals

ON FEBRUARY 28, it looked like the relationship between Ukraine and its hitherto principal backer in the conflict with Russia had reached a nadir. At a time when Washington and Kyiv were expected to sign a deal on critical minerals, a conversation between US President Donald Trump, Vice President J D Vance and Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy descended into a shouting match, with the latter largely at the receiving end. Two months on, the broader geopolitical context has shifted again and the agreement was finally inked on April 30. Officially known as the US-Ukraine Reconstruction Investment Fund, it will ensure US access to Ukraine's vast reserves of critical minerals. The breakthrough comes at a time when Washington's push for peace has hardly yielded any dividends.

Ukraine's mineral wealth has become a key factor in geopolitics. As the world accelerates efforts to decarbonise, the demand for critical minerals is surging. Electric vehicles, wind turbines, solar panels and energy storage systems all depend on minerals such as lithium, cobalt, and rare earth elements — resources that Ukraine holds in significant quantities. These are also used in semiconductor technology and for a wide range of defence production. Washington's drive to secure these minerals is unsurprising, given that China controls the largest share of deposits.

Kyiv had insisted that any agreement must include strong and lasting security guarantees. However, Washington apparently acknowledges no such obligation. Instead, it merely states that the US "supports Ukraine's efforts to obtain the security assurances necessary to build a lasting peace". Despite this, Kyiv is likely to view the agreement positively, as a business arrangement with Trump may make him more receptive to Ukraine's security needs. Additionally, the language used by the Trump administration towards Russia is harsher than usual. The deal highlights the US challenge of balancing economic interests with strategic goals but its implications for ending the conflict in Ukraine remain unclear. Although the US-brokered talks previously resulted in a 30-day limited ceasefire and ensured safe navigation in the Black Sea, the fighting has continued. Washington had also played a leading role in organising talks in Riyadh, but that momentum has waned. In the end, renewed dialogue among all parties remains the only path to peace.

WELCOME BACK, GRUFFALO

A new book — after 20 years — on the celebrated character promises wonders for a new generation of children

LIKE POOH DRIFTING back to the Hundred Acre Wood or Peter Rabbit stealing once more into Mr McGregor's garden, there's a rustle in the forest, a whisper of childhood come again. After more than two decades, British writer Julia Donaldson and German illustrator Axel Scheffler's goofball of a monster, Gruffalo, is set to return, complete with "knobbly knees and turned-out toes and a poisonous wart at the end of his nose". The first book, *The Gruffalo*, appeared in 1999, followed by *The Gruffalo's Child* in 2005. The news of the third in the picture-book series, to be published in September 2026, comes like the visit of a long-lost friend: Unexpected, thrilling, and utterly welcome.

In the world of picture books, Donaldson is no meek mouse but a monster cult. The story of a little mouse's clever defiance in a predator-filled forest has been part of the architecture of childhoods across generations, a resounding validation at a time of brief attention spans. She had set out to write a play based on a Chinese tale about a tiger, but Donaldson's inability to find a word rhyming with "tiger" led, instead, to the serendipitous birth of Gruffalo.

Children's literature is replete with storied comebacks. A A Milne's characters outlived him to amble through sequels; Narnia flickered anew in later tales; even Paddington resurfaced for marmalade-sticky adventures. So what might Gruffalo find emerging from his cave? A world bleaker and more complicated but still full of children alive to the thrill of believing in the impossible. That sometimes the shadows in the wood shift just enough to reveal familiar silhouettes. That monsters can make for good friends, and that courage can come in the smallest, squeakiest of packages.

Despite tariffs

First 100 days of Trump administration have shown that India-US ties are on an even keel



SUMIT GANGULY

ON APRIL 29, Donald Trump completed 100 days as US President. How has India navigated these first three months, given the high stakes with respect to multiple issues like tariffs, immigration and defence?

On February 12 this year, Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Washington, DC. He was one of the first national leaders of any consequence to visit the United States, barely a month after Trump's triumphant return to office. Even before he visited Washington, DC, he had dispatched his Minister of External Affairs, S Jaishankar, to meet with his counterpart, Marco Rubio, the US Secretary of State. Jaishankar, as a senior cabinet official, no doubt enjoys Modi's confidence and probably prepared the ground for the Prime Minister's visit.

Modi's alacrity in visiting the United States was hardly accidental. Despite their apparent personal bonhomie, Trump had referred to India as the "tariff king" and had made it abundantly clear that he planned to impose significant tariffs on India as part of his trade strategy. Through an early visit to the US, Modi, no doubt, sought to curry favour with Trump to ward off the punishing tariffs.

Such a strategy had much to recommend it. Trump, who fancies himself a deft negotiator, has many of the attributes of a schoolyard bully. Those who seek to propitiate him can often win favour in his universe. More to the point, even before he visited Washington, DC, Modi had already signalled a willingness to address Trump's obsession with tariffs. To that end, he had reduced tariffs on a range of American products, including the iconic Harley-Davidson motorcycle, a symbol of American manufacturing. During his visit, likely at Trump's prodding, Modi also made a tentative offer to purchase an unspecified number of F-35 fighter aircraft for the Indian Air Force — an extraordinary expense that India will incur if it proceeds with this acquisition.

> Gabbard's trip included a meeting with Modi and an address to the Raisina Dialogue. During her visit, she highlighted the Trump administration's interest in working with India on matters ranging from intelligence sharing to counterterrorism — both issues of considerable significance to New Delhi. These visits and gestures all indicated that despite the fraught issues of tariffs, the relationship was now multi-faceted and that, despite a change in administrations, India enjoyed bipartisan support in the US.

The Modi government had also accepted a host of Indian illegal immigrants whom the Trump administration had deported. Even as some members of the Opposition expressed reservations about the treatment of these deportees, including reports of them being shackled on the flights from the United States, Modi maintained a studied silence on the matter. All these acts of commission and omission were clearly designed to avoid a fracas with the second Trump administration.

Since his visit, Trump's new director of national intelligence, Tulsi Gabbard, visited India in late March. Her trip included a meeting with Modi and an address to the annual Raisina Dialogue that the Ministry of External Affairs takes part in. During her visit, she highlighted the Trump administration's interest in working with India on matters ranging from intelligence sharing to counterterrorism — both issues of considerable significance to New Delhi. These visits and gestures all indicated that despite the fraught and contentious issues of tariffs, the relationship was now multi-faceted and that, despite a change in administrations, India enjoyed bipartisan support in the US.

On "liberation day", April 2, Trump imposed a sweeping set of tariffs on a global basis, not even sparing traditional American allies across Europe. On India, he imposed an overall tariff of 27 per cent. Barely a week later, for complex reasons including significant global backlash, he paused them for the next 90 days. This has provided India with an important reprieve, and the Modi government has made a concerted effort to try to arrive at a trade pact with the United States before the three-month moratorium ends.

Meanwhile, in late April, Vice President J D Vance and his wife, Usha, who is of Indian heritage, along with their three children, visited India. The visit clearly had both personal and professional components. Apart from the obligatory visit to the Taj Mahal, Vance also met with Modi and sought to boost two of Trump's key goals in the bilateral relationship. The first, of course, was to boost US-India trade and to induce India to reduce a range of tariff barriers. Second, Vance also raised the matter of India purchasing more defence equipment from the United States.

From a strictly bilateral standpoint, the optics of the visit were quite positive. Tragically, a brutal and unprecedented attack on Indian tourists in Kashmir — reportedly carried out by The Resistance Front, an offshoot of the vicious, Pakistan-based terrorist organisation Lashkar-e-Taiba — cast a pall over the Vice President's maiden visit to the country.

The timing of this horrific incident — which Gabbard has unequivocally condemned — notwithstanding, it appears that US-India relations remain on an even keel in an otherwise turbulent and uncertain world. The key issue, which hangs like a sword of Damocles over the relationship, is the question of tariffs. If New Delhi manages to demonstrate some dexterity in tackling this vexed issue, then a bilateral relationship that has gathered much steam since the end of the Cold War may not lose its momentum.

The writer is a senior fellow and directs the Huntington Program on US-India Relations at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University

THE ACT OF SEEING

Discovery of new colours comes as a reminder that perception is fluid



NAVDEEP KAUR

IN 2014, the world encountered a colour that seemed to bend reality. It wasn't bright, it wasn't bold — in fact, it wasn't even really seen. Vantablack — short for Vertically Aligned NanoTube Array black — wasn't just the darkest colour humans had ever created. It was an absence made visible. Absorbing 99.96 per cent of visible light rendered any surface coated into a void.

It was originally engineered by Surrey NanoSystems for scientific use, but designers, artists, and technologists became obsessed with its potential. It was a black that erased shape, a colour that turned three dimensions into flatness. To witness it was to question what your eyes were telling you.

Then came the twist: Anish Kapoor, the British-Indian artist, blocked the colour for himself. He acquired the exclusive usage rights for Vantablank in artworks. Just like that, the blackest black was a controversy. Could — and should — one artist own a colour? Kapoor, already known for creating giant reflective voids and sensorial paradoxes, saw it as a tool to continue his life's work — exploring the unseen, the formless, the spiritual. But his monopoly sparked outrage. What began as a technological marvel has now become a cultural battleground over access, authorship, and the politics of perception.

While the world argued about who could use the deepest black, something else was happening: A quieter but equally radical expansion of the colour universe.

Five years before Vantablack made headlines, a lab in Oregon accidentally stumbled upon a new kind of blue. YInMn Blue — named after its chemical components (Yttrium, Indium, Manganese) — wasn't discovered for art but for durability and energy efficiency in coatings. Still, its brilliance was undeniable. It was pure, bold, stable, and non-toxic, unlike cobalt or ultramarine. This colour generated a lot of curiosity among designers and artists. Here was a blue that didn't just look new; it felt like a missing piece in the spectrum.

> We live in a world saturated with colour — in ads, apps, objects, spaces. Yet, we often forget to see it until something jolts us. A sickly green hospital wall. A brand colour that feels 'off'. A sunset we can't quite capture. That's the paradox: Colour is everywhere — but we treat it like background noise. These moments remind us that colour is always around us, yet rarely noticed unless it misbehaves or surprises us.

From there, the imagination stretched further. What if there were colours we hadn't even named yet? Enter Olo, a fictional, conceptual hue that lives between known digital colours. It's not invented, more like revealed. Olo doesn't sit neatly in a Pantone book or appear in a screen's RGB settings. It shimmers at the edge of familiarity, changing subtly with light and angle. Like an emotion you can't quite name, Olo is a colour that seems beyond language.

But the story of Olo isn't really about whether it's real. It's about what its idea represents — the ever-expanding edges of human perception. Because colour is not fixed, it's a relationship between light and matter, biology and culture, memory and mood. What we see is shaped not only by our eyes but also by our tools, our technologies, and our collective imagination.

That's why colour discovery still matters — not because we're uncovering new wavelengths of light but because we're learning to see more precisely. And in this discovery, finding ways to articulate subtleties — emotional, perceptual, expressive — that we couldn't until now. Systems like NCS (Natural Colour System) and Coloro help designers describe colours and how they feel.

In design, colour is a strategic tool. It can infuse trust, create urgency or suggest calm — all without saying a word. It influences whether we buy, believe, or feel welcomed in a space. In that sense, colour is a soft-power tool with measurable impact. With new pigments and systems of perception, designers can work with greater nuance. We now have the agency to operate with greater specificity — ascribe colours to mirror the emotional complexity of the consumer. Think of Tiffany Blue — more than a shade, it's an idea of luxury, timelessness, and aspiration; Jio Pink — a colour of energy, accessibility, and youthful confidence. These are deliberate emotional codes embedded in visual language. A choice that more brands, creators and experts can continue to use to decode and trigger the desired emotion in the society.

We live in a global attention economy and novelty matters. Discovering a new colour offers a competitive edge. As our emotional and sensory worlds grow more layered, so does the palette we use to express them. New colours are not just additions to a colour gamut. They're shifts in consciousness. They give form to new feelings.

We live in a world saturated with colour — in ads, apps, objects, spaces. Yet, we often forget to see it until something jolts us. A sickly green hospital wall. A brand colour that feels "off". A sunset we can't quite capture. That's the paradox: Colour is everywhere — but we treat it like background noise. These moments remind us that colour is always around us, yet rarely noticed unless it misbehaves or surprises us.

So maybe a colour like Olo, or a black so black it eats light, isn't just a novelty. Perhaps it's a call for attention. A reminder that perception is fluid. Even in a world where we think we've seen everything, there's still more to perceive. More to feel. More to invent. And maybe that's the real power of colour: Not just to decorate or define, but to expand the very act of seeing.

The writer is founder & design director, The Colour Workshop

MAY 2, 1985, FORTY YEARS AGO


INDIAN EXPRESS

Merger of Akali factions claimed

Gujarat grilled for govt in SC

CPI-M, CPI on merger of friendship

Poor nations pin hopes on Bonn

PM makes gesture of India's will

AKALI 'MERGER'

SIKH POLITICS IN Punjab took a piquant turn when Joginder Singh, the father of Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, announced the merger of all the Akali Dal factions into a single unit that will be managed by a nine-member ad-hoc committee. Simranjit Singh Mann, IPS officer and alleged extremist currently interned in Bharatpur jail, has been appointed the convener of the committee.

GUJARAT GOVT GRILLED

THE GUJARAT GOVERNMENT was grilled in the Supreme Court and faced severe observations from the judges for first consenting to a probe into the Ahmedabad riots — after the police allegedly ran amok, cut off power and attacked women and children in their houses — in the high court and then challenging the court's power when the inquiry became inconvenient to the government.

COMMUNIST BONHOMIE

THE CPM, DESCRIBED by Moscow as pro-Chinese after the 1964 split in the Communist Party, is on the threshold of friendship with the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU). A delegation of the CPSU arrived in Delhi and soon began the first ever party-to-party level talks with general secretary E M S Namboodiripad and his senior politburo colleagues. The CPM has already received and accepted the first official invitation from Moscow.

INDIRA GANDHI'S WILL

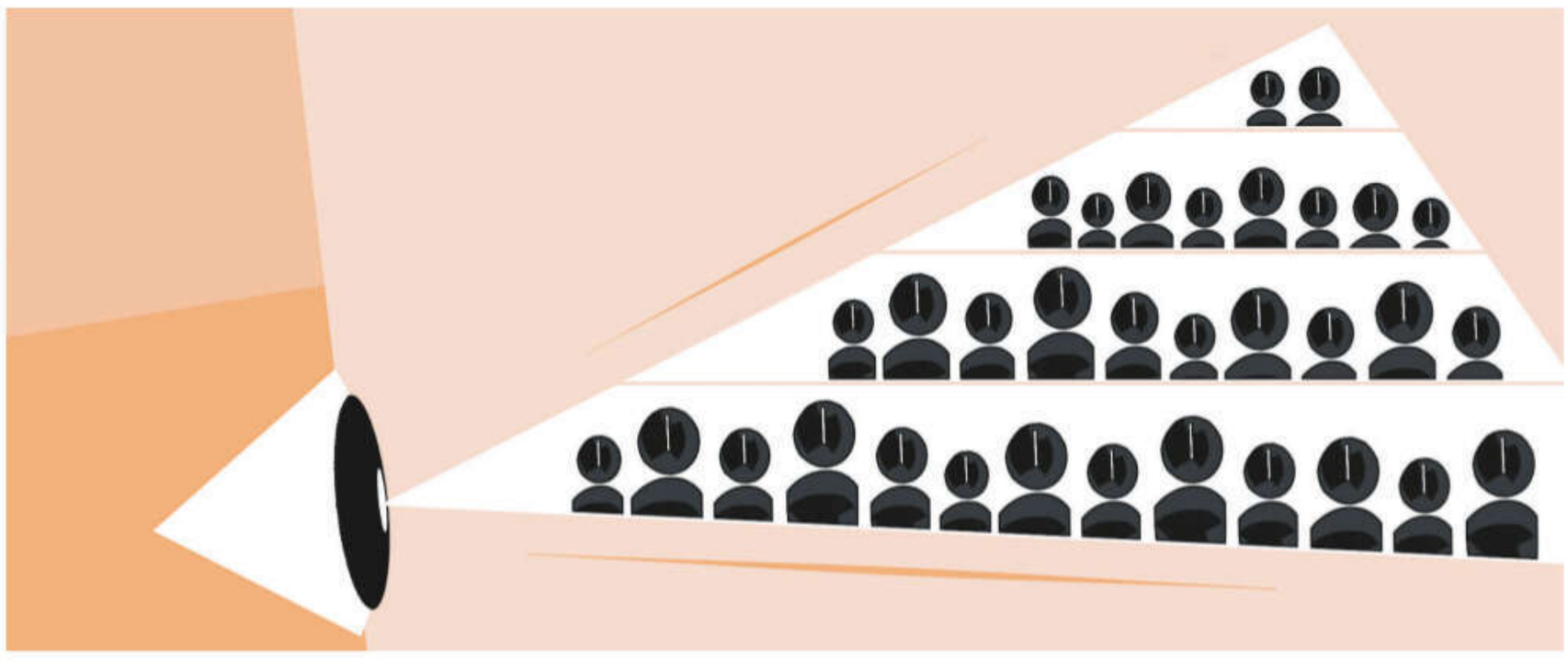
A PETITION HAS been filed before the Delhi High Court on behalf of Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, seeking probate of the will of his mother, Indira Gandhi. She has bequeathed her farm and farmhouse at Mehrauli in Delhi to the Prime Minister's children, Rahul and Priyanka. Some of her other assets, mainly royalty on books, have been given to Feroze Varun Gandhi, her third grandchild and son of the late Sanjay Gandhi. Her jewellery, and antique articles registered with the Department of Archaeology, will go to Priyanka.

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"As Iran is cementing ties with Russia, China and North Korea, the United States will need its friends, too, especially when it comes to sanctions. Iran can be expected to insist on assurances that any future deal won't be as easily discarded as the last one."
— THE WASHINGTON POST

DIS/AGREE
THE BEST OF BOTH SIDES

A weekly column, which offers not this-versus-that, but the best of both sides, to inform the debate



C R Sasikumar

The Union government has announced that the Census will collect data on caste. Is the decision driven by imperatives of social justice?

Counting caste is inclusive Hindutva

Opposition's demands for caste census were marred by hypocrisy. Centre's move is a political and moral milestone



GURU PRAKASH

ON APRIL 30, the NDA government announced its decision to collect caste data in the upcoming national Census. The move has surprised people in political circles and analysts alike. In a country where caste runs deep, through both daily life and the political calculus, this step marks not just a policy shift but a defining moment in modern Indian governance.

The Narendra Modi government's decision is timely, bold and forward-looking. It has received bipartisan support, especially in my home state of Bihar. Babasaheb Ambedkar once said that India had yet to attain social democracy. The government's move is a tribute to Ambedkar's vision and mission. It is a move that will enable and ensure social justice and cohesion.

Including caste data in the Census isn't just a bureaucratic decision. It is a long-pending transformation. The last time India conducted a detailed caste census was in 1931. That was under British rule. Since then, we have relied on outdated estimates, political guesswork and patchy surveys. The 2011 Socio-Economic and Caste Census (SECC), started under the UPA government, could have filled the gap — but it was bogged down by inconsistencies, underreported data, and, in the end, was never officially released. It was a missed opportunity, and perhaps a reflection of political hesitation to confront uncomfortable truths.

Neither Indira Gandhi, Rajiv Gandhi, nor Manmohan Singh could make such a move. When PM Modi came to power in 2014, he asserted in his speeches that the deprived sections of society were at the centre of this government. The announcement of the caste census reaffirms that stand. It is important to recall and acknowledge that PM Modi comes from an OBC community in Gujarat and, with tireless hard work, he rose to be the CM and was subsequently elected PM of the country.

For nearly a century, caste enumeration has been absent from the Census. The blame falls squarely on the Congress party's lackadaisical attitude towards social justice. Congress has historically been against such important policy decisions because it is not genuinely committed to mending social fissures. Congress and its allies are only interested in serving their personal and familial interests. Their invocations of social justice are marred by lies and hypocrisy. It is also important to remember that Congress's SECC had its fair share of glaring flaws.

The Modi government's intervention will now ensure a systematic approach to the caste census, which is in accordance with Pandit Deendayal Upadhyaya's vision of empowering the last citizen in the village. Moving beyond state-level divides on the issue, the central government will ensure transparency in bringing out a Census that facilitates human-centric development and helps society come together. It will reaffirm that we are one. Congress must be reminded of the way it has paid short shrift to tall Dalit leaders like B R Ambedkar and Babu Jagjivan Ram when party leaders try to push their false propaganda of championing Dalit empowerment and assertion.

Adding caste data to the next Census isn't just a bureaucratic move. It's a political and moral milestone. It challenges the Opposition's claim that the BJP is out of step with caste-based inequities.

The recent by-election results in Uttar Pradesh tell a compelling story. The BJP's mix of inclusive Hindutva and grounded caste outreach struck a chord with voters — undercutting the narrative that only caste arithmetic wins elections. The Opposition's belief that a caste census would automatically tilt the balance proved off the mark.

The Modi government's resolve to empower the subaltern has been discernible throughout its tenure. Be it accommodating those from the SC, ST, and OBC communities in the Union Cabinet or ensuring India got its first tribal woman President or ensuring representation for subaltern leaders in governments by appointing them as chief ministers or deputy CMs. Its actions show the country that it not only cares for subalterns but is also resolute in enabling them to occupy the highest echelons of power.

> The last time India conducted a detailed caste census was in 1931. Since then, we have relied on outdated estimates, political guesswork and patchy surveys. The 2011 Socio-Economic and Caste Census, started under UPA government, could have filled the gap. But it was bogged down by inconsistencies and was never officially released.

To top it all, Samajwadi Party supremo Akhilesh Yadav — Congress's ally in UP — was seen in a poster where half the frame was his face, the other half Babasaheb Ambedkar. The Samajwadi Party and its leaders clearly have little sympathy for Dalits and their icons and have merely used them as token vote banks.

PM Modi has led and shown the way. Seventy-eight years after Independence, India is poised to take its rightful place amidst global uncertainties. The caste census comes as a policy imperative that can be showcased to the world, to display that India is uniquely positioned to solve deep-rooted social divisions. While this will not happen overnight, we are making rapid strides.

I hope the Modi government uses to its full advantage Web 3.0 technologies in the process of conducting the Census, which will show the world India's technological ability. With caste enumeration, India's policymakers will be able to shape public policies that improve the lived reality of citizens.

The writer is national spokesperson of the BJP

Congress demand has been met

Government had been evasive on collecting caste data. It's good news that it has given up resistance to it



ANSHUL AVIJIT

THE BJP-LED Narendra Modi government has relented grudgingly, and that's good news. It has announced that the Census will enumerate caste. There is little doubt that for the past few years, the government was rattled by Congress's constant demand for such a Census — a demand which was accompanied by the charge that the current regime is a votary of status-quo norms. Congress's objectives were always clear — resources must be apportioned according to the needs of communities, and for that, the magnitude of historical deprivation must be out in the open. The government resisted — till it couldn't.

The BJP's response to Congress's demand had been either evasive or diversionary. In late 2023, Prime Minister Narendra Modi went on to say that only four castes exist in India — the poor, the youth, women and farmers — ironically appropriating the classic Marxist dogma of social divisions. The class-based repudiation of caste, though a trite, even well-meaning rhetorical device, had a different intent for the PM. First, it was meant to weaken the voices calling for a caste census by initiating so-called welfare schemes for targeted classes. These schemes were essentially compensation for the government's economic blunders. But the government appeared to see them as magical potions of sorts that would suddenly turn caste into class.

Second, there was already a slow project to expunge references to caste discrimination in textbooks and university curricula. For instance, Delhi University removed celebrated writer Mahashweta Devi's short story 'Draupadi' — about an eponymous tribal girl who wages a gritty battle against patriarchy — from its BA English course. Another text chronicling caste-gender relations by Bama, a Dalit Christian writer from Tamil Nadu, suffered a similar fate. And NCERT's policing has created an impression that social divisions were absent in the past.

Meanwhile, Congress, along with other opposition parties, kept up the pressure on the government. In the run-up to the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, the Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra led by Rahul Gandhi emphasised *nyay* or justice. Throughout the journey, tough and disturbing questions on India's asymmetrical social order were repeatedly asked. Who wields real power and who follows orders? Who owns and who serves? How representative are our executive, bureaucracy, judiciary, and newsrooms? How equitable are our everyday encounters? The *yatra* was a springboard of uncomfortable truths, belying those who had suggested that the politics of caste census would not be able to sustain itself.

Congress had a history to protect. Social justice was a challenge but the party had ensured notable victories. Reservation, as an empowering tool, was added to the Constitution in 1951 by the First Amendment. This was followed by the abolition of untouchability and the institution of quotas in promotions in government service. The latter was significant because discrimination, as yet, has no expiry date — access to power does not ensure that people from historically marginalised sections continue to wield it. That is the reason hierarchies of bureaucratic authority mimic traditional caste stratification, with privileged groups cloistered at the top.

The Rajiv Gandhi government enacted the SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, while the 73rd and 74th Amendments enacted by the Narasimha Rao government mandated women's reservation in panchayats. The Manmohan Singh-led UPA-I implemented OBC reservation in higher education institutions, while UPA-II initiated the Socio-Economic and Caste Census — the first time since 1931 that such a Census was conducted. The government's term came to an end before the report could be made public. The UPA was working to include reservation in the private sector, emphasising the responsibility of all stakeholders to be agents of social justice.

If the caste enumeration is undertaken, then the almost primitive debates over reservation and its perceived antithesis, merit, will no doubt rage again. Along with the caste census, there has been a demand for removing the 50 per cent cap on caste-based quotas. In 2015, the RSS chief called for a review of the reservation policy, mouthing a widely held right-wing belief. It's surprising that many who call themselves liberals publicly agreed with him. The peddlers of meritocracy must be exposed, since in India, it is a direct function of the entitlements and opportunities accorded by caste. That is why the economic argument for reservation does not hold — wealth and poverty are dynamic categories while caste attributes are inherited. To a great extent, caste-based reservation can mitigate these age-old polarities, which is why it must be given full play. The bogey of merit needs to be debunked.

> There is now consensus that Congress's clarion call for a caste census, and the BJP's own low tolerance for social justice, led to a big fall in the ruling party's seats in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections. It has been forced to apply correctives, albeit only in nominal terms.

There is now consensus that Congress's clarion call for a caste census, and the BJP's own low tolerance for social justice, led to a big fall in the ruling party's seats in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections. It has been forced to apply correctives, albeit only in nominal terms. With the BJP government, there is, of course, no guarantee that the Census will run its course. But the question of injustice needs to be settled. It remains among the incomplete tasks in the process of nation-building. For many of us, caste discrimination is a shameful scourge. For some others, it appears that such discrimination never existed. With the Census, it will be apparent that it did.

The writer is national spokesperson of Congress

The tourist in the Valley

The idea of Kashmir has been, will always remain, evocative and attractive



SHEELA BHATT

VISITING KASHMIR IS a very different experience from going to Gujarat or Tamil Nadu. There is both a deep connection between tourists and their Kashmiri hosts and a serious gap between them.

While welcoming tourists, residents of the Valley want to protect their own voice, identity and culture. For tourists from other parts of the country, Kashmir has been and continues to be "integral" to India. This silent conversation between those visiting the Valley and those who live there was, at last, blossoming when the Pahalgam attack took place.

No matter what separatists propagate, the relationship between the tourists and Valley residents is not merely transactional. In the 1980s, while reporting in Ahmedabad on arranged marriages in middle-class families, I came across an educated young woman who was mesmerised by the beauty of Kashmir's mountains from watching Hindi films. Among the many terms and conditions that she laid out for prospective bridegrooms, this was one: She asked, "I have a dream of going to Kashmir for my honeymoon. Will you agree?" When you see many newlyweds, the brides with fresh *mehndi* on their hands, you know the flight is going to Srinagar. In 2024, around 2.36 crore tourists arrived in J&K. According to government data, more than 15.3 crore tourists have visited J&K in the past 10 years.

Goa and Kerala confidently compete with the Kashmir fable, but their success is for different reasons. And while domestic travellers are visiting other places, including the Taj Mahal, in greater numbers, Kashmir remains "heaven on earth". In many middle-class Indian families, the refrain is "*zindagi main ek baar to Kashmir jana hai*".

What is commendable is that Kashmir carries this weight of expectation even though it is not a "normal" tourist destination. Despite the atmosphere of fear and foreboding, despite its people having witnessed so much bloodshed, violence and suffering, the bond between the Valley and the visitor did not fray.

The Pahalgam terror attack has changed some ground realities but, before April 22, a new, healthy interdependence was in the making between domestic tourists and local Kashmiris. This bond was helped by the fact that terror incidents are declining. In 2018, there were around 228 incidents, while in 2023 the number was just 46.

In fact, after the dilution of Article 370 in 2019, the tourism sector has flourished because Kashmiris themselves are feeling much safer. Flights to Jammu and Srinagar were nearly always full. Hotel rooms were not easily available even at Rs 25,000 per night in the peak season. There are now more than 100 vegetarian "Vaishnaw Dhabas" in Srinagar and around tourist hotspots. Around one million people are employed in the tourism industry. Kashmir was at the cusp of many changes because booming tourism would see more money in the hands of people across the value chain.

Kashmir will never lose its relevance for tourists because fables woven over centuries don't fade easily. Kalidasa wrote extensively on Kashmir and the Himalayas, and his works are part of India's collective memory. In the eighth century, Adi Shankaracharya's walk from Kaladi in Kerala to Srinagar and Amarnath to spread Advaita Vedanta birthed a new era and made Kashmir integral to the history of Hinduism. In the early 17th century, the Mughal emperor Jahangir fell in love with Kashmir and built the Shalimar Bagh for his wife Nur Jahan. He made famous the lines "*Gar Firdaus, bar ruhe zamin ast, hamin asto, hamin asto, hamin ast*" (If there is paradise on this earth, it is here, it is here, it is here). These words have turned out to be the best tourism slogan written for any region.

After Independence, both Hindi and regional films continued to etch the Valley into the national psyche. In the early '60s, *Junglee* (1961), *Kashmir Ki Kali* (1964) and *Jab Jab Phool Khile* (1965) intertwined depictions of romance with Kashmir. O P Nayyar's unforgettable playful melody 'Yeh chand sa roshan chehra', set on Dal Lake, defined romance for us. And when Shammi Kapoor screamed, "*Yahoo! chahe koi mujhe junglee kahe*" at the sight of the first snowfall, many young people thought that Kashmir frees you of inhibitions — it makes you dance.

There are political, religious, cultural, nationalistic and patriotic reasons for Indian tourists' connection with Kashmir but above all, the allure is of natural beauty and being close to the Himalayas, the gods' abode. Some Indians find Kashmiri Sufism soothing, some find the Persian and Central Asian influence on J&K fascinating, and many Hindus find in Trika Shaivism their link to the region.

Since the late '90s, many aggrieved Kashmiri Pandits have asked why Indians are flocking to the place from where Hindus had been selectively and forcibly driven out. And, for many hardline Hindus, Kashmir is the "crown of Mother India". They would like to visit Kashmir precisely because "*Kashmir hamara mukut hai* (Kashmir is our crown)".

Only about 10 crore Indians have passports. Exotic locations around the planet are out of bounds for most of us but "mini-Switzerland" is just a flight away. It helps that the people of the Valley are known for their warmth and hospitality. Many tourists have lifelong relationships with those who help make their stay comfortable. But many of them have one common experience. On a return journey, they feel a searing pain when they recall how their *shikarawala* or a Kashmiri taxi driver asked them, "*Aap India se aaye ho?*"

This ever-evolving story saw a new beginning soon after the tragic massacre. On April 22, the tourists who were present in Srinagar saw tears in the eyes of local shikarawalas and Pashmina shawl sellers while participating in the protest march. They were condemning terrorism and Pakistan's support for it. Many residents of Srinagar joined the rest of India to mourn the brutal deaths of tourists in Pahalgam.

This national dialogue must not end. It should expand beyond tourism, to all walks of life.

The writer is a Delhi-based journalist

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

READING THE TREND

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Well begun' (IE, May 1). Capex by the private sector over a four-year period ranging from 2021-22 to 2024-25 has shown an increase of over 66 per cent. However, the survey also found that intended capex in the current fiscal (2025-26) shows a decline of around 25 per cent. Despite facing headwinds like tepid demand, global uncertainties and high borrowing costs, about 30 per cent of private sector firms planned to invest in upgradation in 2024–25, supporting the sharp increase in capex for that year. The broader trend suggests a revival in corporate confidence, coupled with strategic and measured capital deployment as economic stability improves.

S S Paul, *Nadia*

SET THE RIGHT TONE

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Manipur standstill' (IE, May 1). President's Rule was imposed because there was no consensus on who would replace then Chief Minister N Biren Singh. And now 21 NDA MLAs are writing to the Prime Minister and Home Minister with claims that there are no visible actions to bring peace and normalcy. Clearly, President's Rule is not the way to go anymore. This is a manifestation of people's loss of trust because the state apparatus is viewed as partisan. The first step is to bring in new leadership trusted by all groups. This will set the tone for the peace process and other affirmative and ameliorative actions.

L R Murmu, *New Delhi*

BACKED BY A VISION

THIS REFERS TO the report, 'Caste census to be held with national Census, Shah calls it historic' (IE, May 1). The government's intent to include caste enumeration in the upcoming Census has sparked much debate, and rightly so. While gathering granular social data is important for targeted policymaking, the critical issue lies not in data collection but in its effective and ethical use. India's social landscape is deeply shaped by caste dynamics. Recognising and addressing the disparities that arise from this structure requires more than just counting communities — it demands sincere political will and strategic action. There is a risk, however, of such data being used predominantly to expand vote banks through competitive populism. Affirmative action should not become a tool for short-term political gain but a means to uplift the genuinely marginalised. A caste census can be a step forward only if it is backed by vision and resources to address deep-rooted inequalities — not just reinforce them.

Sanjay Chopra, *Mohali*

Opinion

FRIDAY, MAY 2, 2025



COUNTERING TARIFF COSTS

Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella

I think if you sort of buy into the argument that software is the most malleable resource we have to fight any type of inflationary pressure or any type of growth pressure where you need to do more with less, I think we can be super helpful in that

A bigger bite of Apple

The scaling-up of US tech giant's plans in India is good news but it does have challenges

APPLE'S EFFORTS TO navigate through the disruption of US President Donald Trump's trade war with China augurs well for the scaling up of its iPhone production in India. The $3-trillion US tech giant has been deepening its local presence over the last four years. Now it plans to shift the assembly of all US-sold iPhones as soon as next year to India, according to the *Financial Times*. This is an opportunity that must be seized although it is not without its challenges. Apple's pivot away from China — where is still has the manufacturing ecosystem to assemble 80% of all iPhones — has been driven by Trump's disruptive tariffs of as much as 145% on the mainland. Although the US suspended reciprocal tariffs on electronics on April 12, the dragon's exports of smartphones to the US still face 20% tariffs. A 20% cost advantage clearly makes India a more attractive supplier for Apple that dominates US smartphone imports. In fact, after Trump's tariff announcements, Apple rushed to export available Indian-made iPhones to the US.

Apple's plans to shift all US-sold iPhones — that amounted to 65 million or 28% of its global iPhone shipments last year — entail a doubling of its production in India. Prima facie, it appears ambitious as India assembled 40 million iPhones out of which 32 million worth $17.5 billion headed to the US market (including West Asia) in FY25. India accounts for a fifth of Apple's global production of 232 million iPhones as it has been steadily building up capacities in the country through its preferred contract manufacturers like Foxconn and Tata Electronics who operate five facilities in Tamil Nadu and Karnataka. For a doubling of production as soon as next year, an ecosystem of suppliers and labour force must be in in place.

The need is for a supply base of components to be co-located with these assembly facilities to enable a scaling-up of production. Of the 187 companies that produce the components that go into the making of an iPhone, 169 have a manufacturing presence in China. A big problem in luring such suppliers is that investments from the mainland are still subject to restrictions despite a recent thaw in Sino-Indian relations. Apple's supplier Luxshare failed to secure approvals although it was ready to a have a local joint venture partner. Nevertheless, there has been some progress with Apple's supplier Salcomp — which produces chargers, displays, and other smartphone components — having a base in Tamil Nadu. Last year, US smartphone glass-maker Corning partnered with Optiemus Infracom. Another supplier, Jabil, inked a memorandum of understanding with Tamil Nadu last September.

To replicate Apple's success in the mainland, there is also the need to have a similar ecosystem of a steady supply of trained female workers in place. In this regard, the good news is that Tamil Nadu is taking the initiative (along with Foxconn and Tata) by investing in dormitories for women near the assembly facilities. Many states now permit women to work in night shifts. The state governments and contact manufacturers also must invest in training programmes to enable greater productivity of the workforce. While India gears up for a bigger bite of Apple, it must facilitate this by reducing import duties and non-tariff barriers on components, and accelerate the import and adaptation of manufacturing know-how.

MARKETING LESSON

LIKE JCPENNEY, INDIAN RETAILERS NEED TO SUBVERT NARRATIVE OF 'JUST ANOTHER TRADITIONAL BRAND'

Reframing India's retail

M MUNEER

Fortune-500 advisor, start-up investor, and co-founder, Medici Institute for Innovation *X: @MuneerMuh*



THE INDIAN RETAIL industry is at a critical crossroads. Proliferation of e-commerce, accelerating digitisation, a consumer base that is increasingly getting younger, and the shriller cries for diversity and personalisation necessitate a reframing of the sector for growth, and even survival. Conventional marketing appears to be failing, going by the struggles of the sector.

If the experience in developed economies is anything to go by, the answers might seem embedded in the local context. Inspiration can also come from unexpected places. Take the case of the recent reinvention of JCPenney, the US department store chain that once represented a bygone era of suburban shopping. It was long dismissed as stale and out of touch. Its new strategic repositioning can offer relevant lessons for Indian retailers seeking to redefine themselves for the next generation of shoppers.

At the heart of JCPenney's bold move was a campaign that challenged consumer assumptions head-on. Surprisingly unbranded ads that featured polished, fashion-forward visuals of model shots, lifestyle images, clean aesthetics. Each ad included a QR code, which, when scanned, revealed that the products came from none other than JCPenney. The idea was simple and sharp: break the bias before the brand is revealed. By stripping away the traditional branding, the campaign forced consumers to judge the clothing on its own merit: Contemporary, stylish, relevant. The surprise of discovery flipped expectations and created an emotional payoff.

From Shoppers' Stop and Lifestyle to Trends and Westside, this approach holds great potential given their obvious traditional or budget-conscious positioning. Imagine a campaign where saris are photographed in edgy, high-fashion settings, or where a kurta is styled like a global streetwear piece. Such re-imaginings are not gimmicks — they are powerful cues that help reposition the brand in the minds of a new generation. If the product quality is sound, all that remains is to change the frame through which consumers view it. Like JCPenney, Indian retailers need to subvert the narrative that they are "just another traditional brand" and prompt consumers to look again, and differently.

JCPenney's revival wasn't just visual. It leaned heavily into cultural aspects by partnering with designer Prabal Gurung to launch the iMPOWER collection, a line rooted in inclusivity and empowerment. The collection offered a wide range of sizes and styles and was modelled by people from various backgrounds and body types. This was not simply a symbolic gesture, but a commercial strategy aimed to open the brand to a broader, more diverse audience.

Retailers that treat India as a unified market will miss the micro-moments that drive true loyalty

This idea is profoundly relevant for India, where diversity is everywhere, from streets to wards to districts — regional, linguistic, economic, and aesthetic. Yet, marketing and merchandising still cater to a narrow interpretation of who the "ideal" consumer is. There is an enormous untapped opportunity in speaking the truth: complex, multi-ethnic, and proud of it. Brands that embrace broader sizing, represent a range of skin tones and body types, and showcase regional identities in authentic, contemporary ways will drive inclusion, and hence loyalty.

Digital transformation was another key piece of JCPenney's playbook. When the Big Billion Day sales started by Flipkart in 2014, one of the leading retail chains wanted to go digital as a knee-jerk reaction, and failed miserably. Recognising that consumer behaviour had shifted irreversibly post-Covid toward digital-first experiences is key. JCPenny has invested heavily in e-commerce, mobile optimisation, and social engagement much beyond a website which most Indian retailers did. It went much beyond selling online, and crafted a cohesive digital identity that complemented its in-store experience. In doing so, it reintroduced itself to a younger, tech-native audience.

With the explosion of internet penetration and smartphone access, digital presence is non-negotiable. The next big brand will not be built just through store footprints or billboard campaigns; it will be through compelling Instagram content, frictionless mobile shopping, and sharp data-driven personalisation. Indian retailers need to look beyond just digitising categories and focus on creating brand worlds online — spaces that are immersive, interactive, and designed to build community.

Private labels are another area where JCPenney carved new ground. Developing in-house brands allowed the company greater control over design, pricing, and positioning. These labels became tools for differentiation — unique product lines that couldn't be found elsewhere. For Indian retailers, particularly those operating across categories, private labels represent a powerful lever. They allow for faster experimentation, better alignment with consumer preferences, and healthier margins. More importantly, private brands give retailers the chance to tell their own stories. The Westside-Zudio combo from Tata Group has mastered this strategy well and carved out a sweet spot for themselves with 1,000 stores and 100 million customers according to the company.

Perhaps the most underrated aspect of JCPenney's strategy was its focus on hyperlocal marketing. The brand moved away from generic national messaging and tailored its efforts to connect with local communities. By aligning with regional events, collaborating with local influencers, and adjusting product selections to match local tastes, it created a more intimate relationship with its consumers.

India, in many ways, is a continent disguised as a country. A campaign that works in Chennai might fall flat in Chandigarh. A product that's a bestseller in Mumbai may not find the same traction in Lucknow. Understanding and responding to these differences is no longer a luxury; it's a requirement. Retailers that treat India as a unified market will miss the micro-moments that drive true loyalty. The future belongs to those who can think nationally but act locally, blending brand consistency with cultural relevance.

The lesson from JCPenney isn't just the usual copy-paste tactic — it's about mindset. It's about challenging assumptions, moving with agility, and meeting consumers where they are, not where they were. All the ingredients for a delicious dish are there: a booming market, an increasingly aspirational consumer, and a vibrant culture to draw from. What's needed is a willingness to surprise — to subvert the expected, to reframe the familiar, and to make people look twice. Because in that moment of reconsideration lies the real magic of marketing.

Greenspan set Carney on path to political stardom

WHEN ALAN GREENSPAN was nominated for a fourth term as Federal Reserve head in 2000, Bill Clinton had some fun. The internet boom was in full swing, and the-then US president cracked that he thought about taking "Alan.com" public.

The joke acknowledged the expanding footprint of the Fed in economic and political life. It also nodded to the cult of personality that accrued to the chair — and the new emphasis that monetary agencies were placing on messaging and the ability to shape perceptions about the path of jobs and inflation. The trend has grown since, as central banks become more powerful, and those who lead them acquire still greater influence. That transformation goes some way to explaining Mark Carney's elevation to prime minister of Canada.

Carney ran in Monday's election as an antidote to US President Donald Trump, who made a habit of belittling his predecessor, Justin Trudeau. The White House imposed steep tariffs on Canada and refers to the country as the 51st American state, a derision which saw a revival of support for the beleaguered ruling party. But it would be a mistake to see Carney as just contra-Trump.

He embodies the rise of central bankers to all-purpose troubleshooters. From Lucas Papademos, the one-time European Central Bank vice president, who led Greece through a short though perilous period when it teetered on collapse, to Mario Draghi, who became Italian prime minister when Rome, enduring a deep recession, was unable to break an impasse among parties about a new coalition line-up.

Carney's ascent, though, is in its own league. Unlike Draghi and Papademos, he can now claim a mandate from the people — aided by Trump. (Carney was the chair of Bloomberg Inc. until January, when he resigned to enter politics.)

For decades, monetary chiefs have had to refine their approach to suit the times, be performers in their own right — and step in when politicians stumble. There are limits to what they can do, but their role and influence has expanded in ways that some of their predecessors couldn't have imagined. Some of this is contentious. It's right to worry about democratic accountability. Central banks' intrusion on fiscal prerogatives wrought by quantitative easing and the dabbling in climate policy have understandably irked lawmakers. But monetary authorities helped stave off a second Great Depression in 2008 and prevented a public-health emergency turning into a financial catastrophe 12 years later.



DANIEL MOSS

Bloomberg

Monday's contest, which saw Carney's Liberal Party win another term after being written off six months ago, was far from his first time in the spotlight. As governor of the Bank of Canada and then its UK counterpart, he helped manage solutions to two era-defining events: the 2007-2009 Global Financial Crisis and Great Britain's shocking vote to leave the European Union. World markets and more than a few major employers hung on to not just his words, but his body language, in the morning after the Brexit referendum. He projected calm and determination to see the economy through. With David Cameron having quit as premier, Carney effectively ran the country for a time.

When he left the Bank of England in 2020, he wouldn't have been content to serve as a mere backbencher or minister. From London, he was keeping tabs on goings on in the corridors of Ottawa and asking old acquaintances who they thought was up or down. In the end, though, Carney needed to acquit himself well at the BOE. His forward guidance on the path of borrowing costs sometimes fell short. In 2014, the bank was likened by a member of parliament of being an "unreliable boyfriend" for its conflicting signals. And after a strong post-Brexit showing, Carney at times seemed hesitant.

Perhaps caution is what's required in this moment, along with an instinct about when to use the podium. For all the relief in Liberal ranks, the party fell short of an absolute majority and will need to govern with the support of smaller players. The ascent of this former bank governor seems like an extension of a trend toward more powerful monetary figures rather than a sea change.

Despite attempts by assemblies to curb the clout of central banks, they have only grown more powerful. Alan Blinder wrote in his book *A Monetary and Fiscal History of the United States, 1961-2021*, that when he arrived at the Fed as vice chair in 1994, a colleague remarked in jest that most Americans thought the institution was a national forest. Greenspan, having not yet attained guru status, was less famous than Smokey Bear, according to Blinder. That would change.

Nuclear revival needs a clear road map



VP SINGH
PRADEEP S MEHTA

Respectively former governor, Punjab, and secretary general, CUTS International

Since nuclear energy will be a key pillar of India's clean energy transition, integrating it into the climate finance framework could be a strategic move

THE US DEPARTMENT of Energy's (DoE) approval for an American company to design and build nuclear reactors in India is a welcome move. It will help India achieve its goal of trebling its nuclear energy capacity by 2031-32, strengthening energy security and advancing clean energy commitments to address climate change.

It also reflects India's diplomatic prowess in a shifting geopolitical landscape and suggests recent administrative changes in the US have not diminished bilateral cooperation. On the contrary, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Donald Trump pronounced a joint declaration on February 13, which reinforced prior commitments made on all fronts, including nuclear energy. Given the highly sensitive nature of nuclear technology, the finer details will require utmost vigilance.

The recent approval of Holtec International, a US-based supplier of energy industry equipment and systems, to transfer its small modular reactor (SMR) technology to Indian firms comes against the backdrop of the 2008 India-US Civil Nuclear Agreement. The agreement initially struggled to materialise due to multiple challenges, with the Civil Liability for Nuclear Damage Act (CLNDA) being a major hurdle, as it places liability for nuclear incidents on technology suppliers too. Further, despite receiving a Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) waiver under the India-US agreement, India's non-membership in the group remained a limiting factor.

Now that amendments and measures introduced in the CLNDA over the years have paved the way for nuclear development in India, it is crucial to sustain the momentum by addressing the critical gaps in safety assurance, technology preparedness, and financing strategies.

SMR technology enables reactors to be manufactured in a controlled factory setting rather than being built entirely on-site, helping to address concerns related to cost and timelines. India has recently completed the concept design for its indigenously developed "Bharat Small Modular Reactor", a 200-megawatt unit based on pressurised water reactor (PWR) technology. This reflects a growing commitment to building domestic capabilities.

In contrast, large-scale nuclear projects like Hinkley Point C and Flamanville 3 have faced significant delays, often taking twice the estimated time to commission and exceeding their budgets two-three times. These challenges reflect the limitations of traditional nuclear power plant construction, reinforcing the potential of SMRs as a more efficient alternative.

Allowing private developers to participate would be sensible, and they should be helped in raising investments

Nevertheless, SMRs do not inherently guarantee safety. While CLNDA revisions have somewhat addressed concerns over the initial years of construction and operation, the end-of-life phase demands even greater caution. Decommissioning a nuclear plant is time-consuming and costly, with critical safety challenges like fuel removal and managing radioactive waste.

European countries are facing significant difficulties in this regard. The challenges are so extensive that many ageing nuclear plants are now considering lifetime extensions, a technically demanding and expensive alternative that presents its own set of safety concerns. India must seek technical support not only for the design and construction of nuclear power plants but also for their decommissioning phase, ensuring this aspect is an integral part of agreements with foreign or private developers.

Technology remains a critical consideration. India has traditionally relied on pressurised heavy water reactors and has gradually introduced PWRs — the most widely used globally — with the Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant in Tamil Nadu. The anticipated deployment of Holtec's PWR-based SMRs reinforces this trend.

While the adoption of PWR technology enhances India's nuclear capacity, an over-reliance on imported reactor designs could shift focus from indigenous R&D in advanced nuclear technologies. The recent concept design of the Bharat SMR by scientists at the Bhabha Atomic Research Centre and the Nuclear Power Corporation of India (NPCIL) highlights the country's potential in technological self-reliance.

India's long-term strategic interests lie in fast breeder reactors and thorium-based reactors, which align with its three-stage nuclear programme and leverage the country's thorium reserves — the largest in the world. Ensuring a balanced approach that incorporates PWRs while advancing domestic reactor innovations will be crucial for India's long-term energy security and technological self-reliance.

Generating electricity from nuclear energy is capital-intensive, with project costs varying significantly. While state-owned agencies such as the NPCIL and NTPC are expected to lead India's nuclear expansion, allowing private developers to participate would be sensible, and they should be helped in raising investments.

Since nuclear energy will be a key pillar of India's clean energy transition, integrating it into the climate finance framework could be a strategic move. Given its high costs, innovative financing mechanisms — particularly blended finance — can help unlock its full potential.

As countries worldwide grapple with challenges in maintaining a carbon-neutral trajectory — including geopolitical divides, financing gaps, technological uncertainties, and fragile supply chains — nuclear energy is emerging as an underutilised yet transformative clean energy source. Its potential to advance net-zero ambitions for India and other nations makes it a compelling addition to the global climate agenda, with the possibility of gaining traction in future COP negotiations.

Akash Sharma, associate fellow, CUTS International, contributed to this article

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Beyond caste count

The Centre's intent to include caste enumeration in the upcoming Census has sparked much debate, and rightly so. Granular social data is important for targeted policy-making, but the critical issue lies not in data collection but in its effective and ethical use. India's social landscape is deeply shaped by caste dynamics. Recognising and addressing the disparities that arise from this structure requires more than counting communities — it demands political will and strategic action. Generating statistics serves little purpose unless it translates into tangible improvements in education, employment, and public welfare. There is a risk of such data being used to expand vote banks with competitive populism. We must also be wary of deepening identity divisions. The inclusion of a voluntary "no caste" option could allow individuals to step beyond rigid labels, if they so choose.
—Sanjay Chopra, Mohali

100 days of Trump

Apropos "100 days of shock and awe" (*FE*, May 1), no other President has faced protests within 100 days of assuming office, but then no one else signed 142 executive orders and declarations in such a short span. Donald Trump has pushed the world to the brink of economic chaos. Though he has paused the tariff war and diluted his earlier stance, what he is likely to do cannot be predicted. In trying to "make America great again" he has alienated America's traditional allies. Americans may be happy with his stance on immigration but it has come at the cost of their liberal image.
—Anthony Henriques, Maharashtra

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EDITORIAL



The world is not ours to keep. We hold it in trust for future generations — Kofi Annan

INDIAN EXPRESS IS NOT AN INDUSTRY. IT IS A MISSION.

— Ramnath Goenka

CASTE COUNT IN CENSUS WELCOME, BUT SOME BIG QUESTIONS COME NEXT

THE Union government has sprung a surprise by clearing the inclusion of caste enumeration in the long-awaited census. BJP leaders had been equivocal about it, sometimes stridently opposing it and at others sounding supportive. But the Congress had been clear in calling for such enumeration, with its state governments in Telangana and Karnataka bringing the issue to the fore in recent months. So, coming as it does months before the Bihar assembly election, where NDA constituent Janata Dal (United) has already conducted such a survey, the BJP has pulled a major poll plank from under the opposition. But the timing of the announcement amid the ongoing tensions with Pakistan prompts the question, 'Why now?' Such a decision is far too consequential to be timed for a short-term consideration like redirecting the nation's attention, but the question still begs for an answer.

In a country increasingly dependent on welfare schemes for the marginalised, a fresh caste enumeration has been due for a long time. Such numbers were last published in 1931; the caste data from the 1941 census and a socio-economic survey done in 2011 have not yet been made public. So there is merit in conducting such a count this time. No wonder a number of leaders across political divides have welcomed the Centre's decision. It needs to be heeded that even if the census is officially notified soon, it will take at least another half year to prepare for it, before beginning to conduct the enumeration exercise. So the fresh numbers will not be available before either the 2025 assembly election in Bihar or those in Tamil Nadu and Kerala in 2026.

All governments will be mindful of the hurdles in what comes next—first in conducting the count and then in acting on the new numbers. Will the government and the opposition work together to relax the 50 percent cap on reservations imposed by the Supreme Court? The top court has repeatedly affirmed the quota cap given in the *Indra Sawhney* case. In that judgement, the court had ruled that social and educational backwardness must be considered. Then there will be the question of delimitation. Meanwhile, all parties would do well not to make the census a tool to foment disharmony. For this, the onus lies on the opposition as well as the government.

100 DAYS THAT UNMADE U.S. EXCEPTIONALISM

WHILE Donald Trump's tariff tantrums grabbed more headlines during his first 100 days in office, lakhs of Indian parents are anxiously looking at his administration's hardline immigration enforcement and the next 100 days, when a fresh cohort of students will finalise their plans to study abroad. The anxiety is triggered by the US federal government's overzealous revocation of F-1 and M-1 student visas, mostly for protesting on campus or online. The National Association of Foreign Student Advisors reported that at least 1,400 students from over 200 colleges had their visa status changed by early April, two-fifths of them from India and China. After facing dozens of legal challenges, the administration reversed many of the revocations in late April. But amid scant official communication, many Indians are still unsure about when they can join back the courses their families took large loans to fund.

Adding to the anxiety is a new bill introduced in the US Congress to terminate the Optional Practical Training programme, which allows students to stay back in the US and work for up to three years after their studies. Indian students, especially the majority studying STEM courses, often use this route to earn in dollars and work towards employment visas. When the bill was introduced this March, Indian students in the US were already fewer by more than a fourth than in the previous March. If the bill emerges from the House judiciary committee's scrutiny and lurches towards enactment anytime soon, the number of students will surely take a dive.

It's not just Indians who are turning away from Trump's America. The administration's defunding of basic science research and gutting of diversity programmes have made the US increasingly unattractive to top talent. Three-fourths of the 1,600 scientists in the US recently polled by *Nature* said they were considering leaving for jobs in Europe, Canada and Asia. The trend of Chinese scientists returning home from the US—a wave that nearly tripled between 2010 and 2021—has changed the global research landscape. India, where the number of full-time researchers at government-funded institutes has fallen in recent years, must quickly absorb the lessons. Meanwhile, keep your eyes on the next 100 days—before the new academic season commences in August—when judicial pronouncements and executive action are expected to outline what foreign students can do to keep their American dreams alive.

QUICK TAKE

FINGER ON MANIPUR'S PULSE

IF we needed a reminder that things are not yet back to normal in Manipur, a recent letter from 21 state MLAs—including 13 BJP legislators—to the Union home minister should convince us. They called for return to a "popular government" after more than two-and-a-half months of president's rule. Meanwhile, the governor conducted a security review on Thursday after a land dispute between two Naga villages in Tamenglong district left 25 injured, including at least a dozen security personnel. None of this is normal. The state's communities have always wanted their genuine troubles to be heard. Popular representation across the state can follow grievance hearing sessions in the districts.

Article 105 gives MPs broad immunity to speak freely in the House, while Article 118 allows the House to set boundaries. It's time this tension is resolved through a law

IN DEFENCE OF FREE SPEECH IN PARLIAMENT

MANISH TEWARI



Lawyer, third-term MP and former Union Minister of Information and Broadcasting



SOURAV ROY

DURING the recently-concluded budget session of parliament, a lighthearted repartee about who, how and in what order of precedence members get the right to address the House brought up a substantive issue. For when MPs speak in parliament, they articulate the views of millions of their constituents, often on critical issues. To speak is to breathe.

So, what are the privileges of an MP provided for in the Constitution? Where does the power to frame the rules and procedures for conducting business in both Houses of parliament flow from? How did the office of the chairperson of the Council of States and the speaker of the House get created? What are the powers, privileges and immunities that the Constitution bestows on these august offices?

Article 93 creates the offices of the speaker and deputy speaker by election, while Article 64 provides that the vice president would be the *ex-officio* chairperson of the Council of States. Articles 89 to 97 about the officers of parliament and the procedure to appoint and remove them.

However, the Constitution only partially defines, that too spread over different Articles, the scope of the presiding officers' powers. The roles of these constitutional functionaries are delineated more by convention, tradition, precedent, rules of procedure, directions for functioning, rather than by the Constitution itself. Conversely, Article 105, which deals with the powers and privileges of the Houses, their members and committees, is far more precise and expansive.

Essentially, it provides for four kinds of powers and privileges. The first is that, subject to constitutional provisions and parliamentary procedures, there shall be freedom of speech in parliament. Two words—constitutional provisions—refer to Article 19, which gives all citizens the right to freedom of speech and expression. Mind that the words 'shall' and 'may' have very different connotations in constitutional jurisprudence.

Second, MPs would be indemnified from proceedings in any court of law for anything said or done in parliament.

Third, the powers, privileges and immunities of parliament, its members and committees are the same as those available to the members of the House of Commons in the UK.

Fourth, all those persons who are constitutionally entitled to speak in the House or participate in its proceedings—for example, the attorney general, under Article 88—will have the same rights, privileges and immunities as enjoyed by the MPs. Under Article 118, parliament may frame rules for procedures to conduct its business, subject to constitutional provisions. Mark the word 'may' in this article, as opposed to 'shall' in Article 105(1).

Therefore, the question that needs to be determined is whether and to what extent, if at all, can the freedom of speech of MPs in parliament provided under Article 105(1) be circumscribed by provisions of the Constitution, and the rules made in pursuance of the power available under Article 118?

India follows constitutional supremacy instead of the British view of parliamentary sovereignty. The Constitution provides and delimits the power of all state organs. Parliament has legislative authority. However, it is not absolute. In addition to the Constitution itself, it is ringfenced by the basic structure doctrine.

The Supreme Court ruled in *Kihoto Hollohan* (1992) that even anti-defection orders delivered by the presiding officers of legislative bodies are subject to judicial review, thereby underscoring that the powers exercised by presiding officers under the 10th Schedule are also not unfettered.

Furthermore, the court underlined in *Raja Ram Pal* (2007) that even parliamentary privileges are not free from examination, especially when they compromise democratic accountability or fundamental rights.

Parliament is, therefore, a creature of the Constitution under Article 79 and subject to its rigours.

As outlined earlier, Article 105(1) gives MPs the freedom of expression inside parliament, subject to certain caveats. This is a fundamental and inviolable constitutional right. The Rules of Procedure and Conduct of Business, promulgated under Article 118, only control everyday proceedings. At best, these rules are subordinate laws, if not bye-laws, rather than constitutional mandates. Therefore, Article 105(1)'s rights cannot be substantially constrained through procedural guidelines.

In constitutional hierarchy, Article 105's clauses 1 and 3 have a better normative value. They have a direct constitutional provenance and form a part of the fundamental text passed by the Constituent Assembly, unlike parliamentary regulations promulgated under Article 118, whose remit is solely limited to conduct of business. Can procedural discretion trump legislative freedom provided by the Constitution? The answer is an obvious *non sequitur*.

The Supreme Court highlighted in *Special Reference No 1* of 1964 that Article 105(3)'s powers have to be read in line with Articles 21 and 32. Renowned constitutional expert H M Seervai also underlined that rules made under Article 118 are procedural and cannot substantially define the scope of rights or privileges, unless authorised by the Constitution.

But our system continues to be in a state of inertia on the codification of parliamentary privileges. Article 105(3) originally stated, "The powers, privileges, and immunities shall be those of the House of Commons of the UK at the commencement of the Constitution, until defined by parliament". That continues to be the case even today.

Rajendra Prasad had rightly apprehended during the Constituent Assembly debates that 'the definitive moment' may never arrive when these privileges are enacted into law. Other members such as H V Kamath and Alladi Krishnaswamy Iyer had also underscored the need for defining these privileges through law.

It's time for a clear exposition of the constitutional position on the inherent jurisprudential tension between Articles 105(1) and 118, for this goes to the heart of the parliamentary remit to hold both the executive and the judiciary accountable within the four corners of the Constitution. It is also now imperative that a law clearly codifying parliamentary privileges in terms of Article 105(3) is enacted. It's already 75 years too late.

(Views are personal)

(manishtewari01@gmail.com)

OLIVE BRANCH ON A GNARLY TREE

KAJAL BASU



Veteran journalist

HOW to end terrorism? Not to contain it, nor to wear it down, nor to thwart it with counter-terrorism. End it. Put it to sleep. Disappear it.

This is not a question taken lightly anywhere in the world. In 2024, according to the Institute for Economics & Peace's Global Terrorism Index, 98 of the world's 195 countries were contending with some form of terrorism. The question is especially crucial for India, because, with a score of 6.41 out of 10, India was at 14th place on the GTI list. It is even more critical for Pakistan, which occupied the 2nd place with a score of 8.374.

State counter-terrorism won't cut it, because, by definition, it partakes substantially of the characteristics of terrorism itself: counter-violence, often on populations vulnerabilised by the presence of unrepresentative terrorists in their midst; sanctions that immoderately impact these defenceless soak-pits; unmanaged—and often unmanageable—societal disruption caused by the crossfire between terrorism and counter-terrorism.

Clearly, both terrorism and counter-terrorism feed the wolf in an endless spiral of escalation. This happens nearly everywhere in the world. Nearly: but not in some advanced democracies such as in Scandinavia—where multifaceted terrorism does happen, but rarely enough to not attract statal blowback, which is constrained by embedded policies of restraint.

Terrorist attacks in northern Europe are so infrequent that they stand out in public memory. The worst one happened a decade-and-a-half ago, when the rightwing extremist Anders Breivik killed 77 people in Norway in an anti-government rage. In 2015, two people were killed by an Islamist in Denmark. In 2017, an Islamic terrorist killed five people in Sweden. In 2019, a Norwegian rightwinger and a Finn killed one person each. In 2022, two people were killed in a homophobic mass shooting in Norway. Despite these attacks, the Nordics remain the least impacted by terrorism. Only one Scandinavian country features in the Statista list of 10 worst terrorist attacks in terms of fatalities in Europe from 1980 to 2023: Norway. The only Scandinavian country to make it in the GTI's top 50 states was Sweden—at the very last spot, with a score of 1.84.

Meanwhile, in the countries most ravaged by terrorism—Burkina Faso, Pakistan, India, Russia and Nigeria among them—the government wears tactical gloves of studded iron. These are all countries whose level of democracy is contested within and without. Even in democratic countries, the measures—which are often counter-measures—to shield citizens from ultra-violence risk compromise the very foundations of democracy.

Policy measures such as warrantless searches, arrests on whimsical suspicion, protracted detention without bail or charge-sheet, and phone-tapping may be defended as protection features that need no referendum validation, but they are also civil rights infringements, for the very reason that they are not democratic, consultative decisions.



AFP

More than half the world's 195 countries were affected by terrorism in 2024. We in the subcontinent can learn from Scandinavian countries where radicalisation is minimised through a preventive network of schools, social and health services, and the police

According to NordForsk, "In the Nordic countries, prevention of radicalisation and violent extremism is based on an existing crime prevention collaboration within the SSP framework (school, social and health services, and police)."

In much of the subcontinent, statal measures to end terrorism resemble designs to scrap it out: immiserating populations of terrorist embedment in order to have them ejected by a public exhausted by their presence; the use of laws that have no place in a democracy; the proscribing of protesting groups; and the deployment of cutting-edge weaponry meant for defence against an outside enemy. This is as true of Pakistan—which has its bugbears in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan—as it is of India, which has ultraviolent hotspots in Kashmir, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and, intermittently, in the Northeast.

In these countries, action and reaction are disconcertingly fungible. One can be mistaken for a mirror image of the other. It is a truism that the law is the government's domain of implementary privilege, terrorists being scofflaws, and the citizenry being only marginally capacitated.

But it does not necessarily have to be this way if terrorism is to be 'ended', its issues resolved, its maddened heartbeat calmed. The Scandinavian countries have what I would call simple terrorism: terrorist events not rooted in a sense of historical wrongs, or irruptions from sovereigntist or subnational impulses. India, Pakistan and many African nations have complex terrorism, where it is almost mandatory that grievances are indurated and long-unaddressed, and the former because of the latter.

So, what works for Scandinavia might not work here—or, at least, not with such comprehensiveness, integrality and efficacy. Nevertheless, what happened in Kashmir in the days following the Baisaran terrorist carnage is a lesson in self-service and holding to account—and, possibly, a way out of this unrelenting hyperviolent action-response mess. Kashmiris poured onto the streets—"for the first time in 35 years", emphasised Farooq Abdullah, president of the National Conference—protesting the massacre and branding the attackers as zalim (oppressors).

In a move that resembles excommunication, Maulana Mohammed Ahmed Nadvi, head of the All India Imams Council, passed fatwas ordering Muslim clerics to not conduct funeral prayers or provide burial grounds for terrorists. AIMIM president Asaduddin Owaisi distributed black armbands during Friday prayers at a mosque.

The last two might well have been performative. The first was not. Where the state fails, everything is up to the citizenry.

(Views are personal)

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Avoid war

Ref: *Reshape cost-benefit calculus of terror for long-term deterrence* (May 1). A war with Pakistan is not in our interest. It will result in further loss of innocent lives and damage our economy all the while exacerbating the hostilities between the two countries. We should use our influence in the international community to punish Pakistan.

T Kailash Ditya, Hyderabad

Canada reset

Ref: *A chance to mend India-Canada ties* (May 1). Mark Carney appears to be a pragmatic leader capable of safeguarding Canada's interests while navigating the challenges posed by Donald Trump. His appointment indeed presents India with an opportunity to mend its ties with Canada. The two countries must work together to revive discussions on the free trade agreement.

Sridevi Tejaswani, K Secunderabad

Treaty suspension

Ref: *Rivers that connect and divide* (May 1). India's decision to suspend the Indus Waters Treaty to support hydroelectric projects and apply pressure on Islamabad is justified following the recent terrorist attack in J&K, which killed 26 civilians. However, this move could backfire if China proceeds with its plans to build large dams on the Brahmaputra River, ignoring India's concerns.

N A Joseph, Ettumanoor

Dangerous policy

Ref: *Lawmaking can't be left to AI* (May 1). Letting AI make laws presents more risks than benefits. Incorrect data can have serious consequences. Who would be held responsible? What are the courses of correction? Many questions need to be addressed before trying to integrate AI models into lawmaking.

Jaikishan N, Kengeri

Caste call

Ref: *Centre to embed caste enumeration in census* (May 1). The Centre has made the right decision by including caste enumeration in the forthcoming census exercise. A caste census is a crucial tool for socio-economic assessment and the pursuit of equality. Its careful implementation is key to fostering a more just and inclusive society.

Jayaram Dunga, Visakhapatnam

Missed opportunities

Ref: Out of form, but not out of fans (May 1). Nothing has gone CSK's way this IPL season. The middle order failed to step up, and the openers missed crucial opportunities during the powerplays.

A P Thiruvadi, Chennai

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A Good Time to Bump Up Our IPR Regime

Tech, pharma, entertainment need parity

The US has retained India among the priority watch list of jurisdictions that it claims do not provide adequate safeguards to intellectual property. The Indian response has, on earlier occasions, highlighted that its IPR regime is compliant with WTO rules. This standoff must end. The two countries are negotiating an agreement to rebalance their trade, and the obvious way forward would be for India to improve market access to US exports. The primary concern of negotiators is to bring about a reciprocity in tariffs to trim India's trade surplus with the US. Attention will also have to be paid to non-tariff barriers to trade, among which US misgivings about India's IPR regime are serious enough. Since New Delhi has chosen not to confront Washington over Donald Trump's threatened reciprocal tariffs, it may not be able to defend its IPR protection record as vociferously as it did earlier.



A new wave of American imports into India is likely to be led by energy and arms. These do not run into the thicket of IPR accusations and rebuttals. However, technology, pharmaceuticals and entertainment constitute politically sensitive bilateral trade in quest of a common ground on IPR. American companies now constitute a sizeable section of IP protection-seekers in India, and engagement between the two governments over harmonising rules is not progressing fast enough. Compliance burden and ineffective enforcement are among major concerns the US has shared with India.

Trump's trade war presents India an opportunity to fast-track its plans to create a manufacturing export base in the country. US companies seeking to diversify their supply chains from China need to be convinced about India's intent to scale up IPR protection. It is a key input for investment decisions by American companies, and should not be allowed to become a binding constraint. It may be time for India to calibrate its IPR regime against best-in-class as part of ease of doing business in the country. India, after all, is enthusiastic about being a bigger part of the world.

Modi-ji, Why Don't You Give Xi-ji a Call?

India has been working the phones, reaching out to UNSC non-permanent members in the wake of difficult negotiations over the statement condemning the Pahalgam terror attack. With Pakistan currently serving as non-permanent UNSC member, India has had to go that extra mile. Even S Jaishankar has got into the act, reaching out to his counterparts across the world, especially in the 'global south'. There is another call that New Delhi would be smart to make: Prime Minister Narendra Modi should give Chinese premier Xi Jinping a call, *mano e mano*.

Investigations have reportedly found that the terrorists were using Chinese comm systems — Huawei sat phones and encrypted chat apps. Pakistan-based terrorists killed in encounters in J&K have often had satellite phones and navigations systems based on BeiDou, the China National Space Administration (CNSA)-owned and operated system. While there is no evidence of a direct link, Beijing is unlikely to like the idea of being known as provider of choice to this murderous lot. During 2019-23, more than 80% of Pakistani arms were from China. Beijing would not like to be openly linked with terror groups.



Given the circumstances, a call from Modi to Xi won't be out of place, especially with the latter recently stating the need for a 'dragon-elephant tango' to emphasise friendlier ties between the two countries. Modi giving Xi a tinkle is unlikely to stop China from being Pakistan's UNSC veto card and sugar daddy. Beijing has its own reasons for shielding and supporting Pakistan. But it could bring China out into the open regarding its relationship with Rawalpindi, much like its support for Russia in the Ukraine war, never mind the denials. The Pakistan ball is for India to lob into China's court.



JUST IN JEST

Flaunting nothing and living on less than less is gaining traction among the rich

Paupacy, the New Trending Faith

Some of us may be following the news to figure out who the next pope will be. Trump has joked that he's his first choice, a matter not to be taken lightly since he once said something similar about the American presidency. But apart from Vatican's vendors congregating to choose Catholicism's new boss man (women need not apply just yet), there's a new religion emerging in the form of… the paupacy. In a world obsessed with GDP and dosh, looking rich and posh, this countercultural movement is gaining followers. Believers of impoverishment flaunt their wealth of nothing. The paupacy thrives on the motto: less is more, especially when you've got less than less. Their spiritual leader, His Brokest Holiness, is the anti-elite elite, celebrated for his mastery of loopholes in budget airlines' carry-on luggage policies, and his ability to recycle instant noodle seasoning packets into artisanal rubs.

Paupacists hold gatherings in minimalist spaces like underpasses and tea stalls. Their holy relics include expired credit cards and frequent-flyer miles. The holy paupacy even boasts an anthem: a soulful rendition of the sound your wallet makes when turned inside out. Critics might call it satire, but paupacists argue they've redefined luxury. The rich are now trying to buy into the paupacy. But, sorry, boss, exclusivity's reserved for the truly penniless.

With the pvt sector indifferent to R&D, India risks missing the deep-tech bus, or getting locked out

Be Paranoid, Very Paranoid



Aditya Sinha

In the 2000s, China recognised that technological dependence was a strategic liability because it relied on US chips, Western operating systems and telecom infra. This triggered a strategy rooted in constructive paranoia, and the launch of mission-driven policies:

▶ **Medium-and Long-Term Plan for the Development of Science and Technology (2006-20)** This aimed to make China an 'innovation-oriented nation'.

▶ **Made in China 2025** It targeted dominance in 10 hi-tech sectors.

▶ **Thousand Talents Plan (2008)** This programme was launched to reverse brain drain, and attract global researchers. It has received massive state support through guidance funds, industrial subsidies and tech-focused SOEs.

China also doubled down on patenting, domestic standards and end-to-end industrial ecosystems, from semiconductors to green energy. R&D investment surged past 2.5% of GDP, with a rapidly rising share from the private sector. Today, China leads the world in AI patents, EV production, solar capacity and quantum publications.

Meanwhile, India faces similar vulnerabilities China faced 25 years ago: imported chips, weak indigenous IP, low-tech exports and a fragmented research base. And the response has been uneven.

GoI has launched Anusandhan National Research Foundation (ANRF), a ₹1 lakh cr R&D fund, expanded PLI schemes, and invested in semiconductors, space tech, clean energy and quantum. For the first time, the government is adopting a full-spectrum approach to funding research and innovation across all technology readiness levels (TRLs).

While ANRF will focus on early-stage discovery (TRLs 1-3) and improve ease of doing science with DST, a soon-to-be-finalised ₹1 lakh cr R&D fund should drive private investment in mid-to-late-stage innovation (TRLs 4-9) through long-term, near-zero-interest loans. This fund shifts focus from grants to outcome-linked support for developing commercially viable tech. While the need for greater funding in basic research is acknowledged, GoI is laying the essential groundwork to build a self-sustaining R&D ecosystem.

Yet, the private sector remains risk-averse, contributing barely a third of national R&D. India's R&D-to-GDP ratio remains stuck below 0.7%, with little traction in patenting or deep-tech commercialisation. The innovation pipeline is still thin.

Ex-Intel CEO Andrew Grove made the line, 'Let's be paranoid' — with its philosophy of the importance of proactive preparedness for unexpected changes and strategic inflection points — famous. And, yet, even Intel wasn't paranoid enough. It missed the AI inflection point, and today Nvidia has overtaken it in valuation, strategic relevance and tech leadership.

A similar inversion is unfolding between China and the US, driven by who innovates faster and scales deeper. Unfortunately, while GoI is paranoid, India's private sector isn't.

In 2024, Foundation for Advancing Science & Technology (FAST) published a comparative study, 'State of Industry R&D in India', of 59 Indian and 60 global firms across six key sectors: pharma, software, defence, chemicals, automobiles, and energy. The study, conducted between FY16 and FY23, reveals a persistent input-output gap. Global firms, on average, reported 2.9× R&D intensity (spend as % of revenue), 3.7× share of PhD-qualified employees, and 2.9× R&D spending as share of profits than Indian firms.



Staying on the surface won't do any more

India's R&D-to-GDP ratio remains stuck below 0.7%, with little traction in patenting or deep-tech commercialisation



On output indicators, the disparity is starker. Global firms generated 13.1× patents and 1.3× scientific publications per billion dollars of revenue compared to their Indian counterparts.

▶ In software, global firms had 32× R&D intensity and 12.1× patents by revenue.

▶ In pharma, India's strongest sector, R&D intensity (5.8%) lagged far behind global peers (17.3%).

▶ The only parameter where Indian firms outperformed was in R&D disclosure, with an average disclosure score of 6.2 (out of 10) vs 3.7 for global firms.

The European Commission recently released the EU Industrial R&D Investment Scoreboard 2024. It presents data on the top global 2,000 companies investing in R&D. They invested €1,257.7 bn in R&D in 2023. Indian firms accounted for €5.5 bn, or about 0.4%, of global industrial R&D investment, with only 15 companies featuring among the world's top 2,000 R&D spenders.

This places India behind not only advanced economies like the US (€531.8 bn, 681 firms) and China (€215.8 bn, 524 firms), but also innovation-intensive small economies such as South Korea (€42.5 bn, 40 firms), Taiwan (€24.7 bn, 55 firms), and Ireland (€10.4 bn, 24 firms).

Sustained long-term economic growth is driven by investments in knowledge and innovation. India's failure to internalise this principle within its industrial ecosystem suggests presence of constraints: low absorptive capacity, weak industry-academia linkages, and limited interest from the private sector in high-risk R&D.

Persistent underrepresentation of Indian firms in global innovation rankings reflects a missing industrial policy focus on Schumpeterian creative destruction, without which India risks being confined to low-value segments of GVCs.

In Liu Cixin's 2008 science fiction novel, The Three-Body Problem, the world gets paralysed by the sudden collapse of scientific progress. Stagnation is the real nightmare. It's not fiction any more. For India, the risk isn't that we fail. It's that we're too comfortable even to try. Innovation can't be outsourced.

If there's a gap between what scientists are doing and what businesses need, then companies must invest in R&D, collaborate with academia, and shape research. If the private sector stays disengaged, we'll keep watching others lead. We just aren't paranoid enough.

The writer is a public policy professional

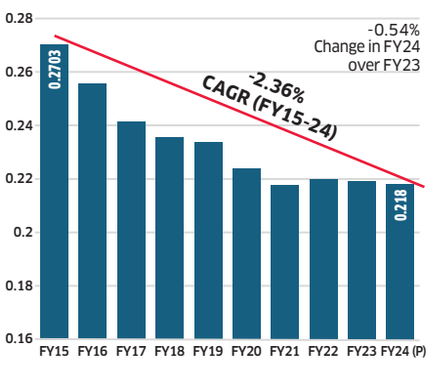
ChatGPT SHAIRI OF THE DAY

A pacifist chap
from Chittor,
Was slapped by a chap
from Lahore.
He smiled with grace,
While the slapper lost
face —
Now, he's the meme, while
the Chittori world-tours.
•••

Energy-Efficiency

India's overall energy intensity*, a crucial metric for evaluating the energy efficiency of a country's economy, has improved slightly. In the financial year 2023-24, it took 0.2180 megajoules of energy to generate 1 rupee of GDP as compared to 0.2192 MJ per rupee of GDP in FY23...

India's Energy Intensity (Megajoules per rupee)



Sector-wise, while energy intensity for industry has come down (from 361.47 MJ per thousand rupees of GVA in FY15 to 284.20 MJ/₹1000 during FY24) it has gone up for the transport sector (328.7 MJ/'000 rupees in FY15 to 486.9MJ/₹1000 in FY24)

*Energy consumed to generate one unit of GDP at constant (FY12) prices

SANJEEV RAJ JAIN

Bell Curves ■ R Prasad



Firewall our merit-based system against potential data-driven threats!

Come to a Pakistandstill



Soumya Kanti Ghosh & Ashish Kumar

India's strategic retaliatory measure against Pakistan, pledging to ring-fence it on multiple fronts for its active patronage and sustenance of terrorists, signals the return of an iron-fist approach. In this context, GoI's decision to suspend the Indus Waters Treaty (IWT), signed in 1960 in Karachi with mediation by International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD), is important.

In the original treaty, the term 'eastern rivers' meant Sutlej, Beas and Ravi taken together, while 'western rivers' were to encompass Indus, Jhelum and Chenab taken together, along with their tributaries. All the waters of the eastern rivers were marked as 'shall be available for the unrestricted use of India, except as otherwise expressly provided'.

Pakistan was bestowed rights to receive for unrestricted use all those waters of the western rivers that India was under obligation to let flow under the extant provisions. Thus, by design, India was magnanimous in providing water to Pakistan.

India has always helped nations in the neighbourhood — Nepal, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh. This benevolence yielded results for the economic renaissance of these countries. But Pakistan was the odd one out, digging a deep trench for itself even as India tried its best to engage with it for peace and prosperity.

The benevolent, tactical 'Sada-e-Sarhad' bus diplomacy of the Vajpayee government, initiating a passage of people's movement through borders, promising to foster abundant trade and commerce, never fructified. Successive military rules, directly or by proxy, orchestrating anti-India moves, ensured only frosty results.

Such non-economic intervention has ensured that Pakistan GDP has grown at a snail's pace, flip-flopping from $339 bn in FY17 to $373 bn in FY24. Average growth comes to less than 1.5% in the intermittent period, even as average inflation since FY21 stands at 16.8% with red-hot high price prints of 29.2% and 23.4% in FY23 and FY24, respectively. The Pakistani rupee, mirroring internal fractures of a failed state, depreciated by 100% between September 2021 and August 2023 in a vicious cycle. While both food and energy have retraced in recent days, there are apparently fault lines in the calculation methodology, as share of food and beverages comes at just 36% in its CPI basket.

Unsurprisingly, Pakistan stands 13th in terms of countries with highest defence spending as percentage of GDP. Market capitalisation of the KSE-100-led Pakistan Stock Exchange is only 15% of total GDP, undermining investors' lack of confidence even as KSE-100 has remained flat YTD.

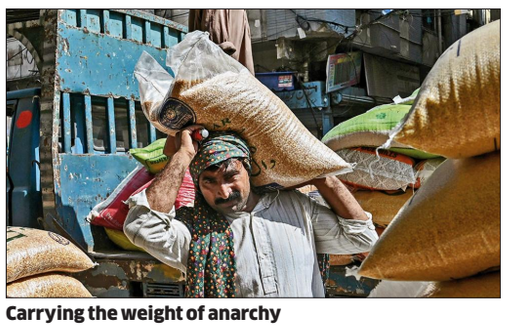
The International Commission on Irrigation and Drainage (ICID) report puts the rural population percentage at about 63% for the fifth most-populous country on the planet, its current population estimated to be more than 25 cr. Livelihoods of Pakistan's rural population are mainly agriculture-based, which, in turn, is dependent chiefly on irrigation. This, even as close to 40% of the population lives BPL.

There lies the economic significance of IWT, as Punjab remains the largest economy in Pakistan, contributing close to 60% in national output. Sindh, second-largest province in terms of population and GDP, factors close to 25%. Share of agriculture in GDP stood at 24% in 2024, falling from a high of 30.6% in 2000-01. But it continues to shoulder around two-third of the population, directly or indirectly. Two of Pakistan's largest exports, textiles and basmati rice, depend on irrigation dynamics even as trade deficit threatens to vault in a volatile tariff-induced environment.

The road to Brussels goes through Rome, is a well-accepted preamble, cementing the belief that long-term peace comes at the cost of innumerable sacrifices. When Atal Bihari Vajpayee wrote in the visitor's book at Lahore's Minar-e-Pakistan in 1999 that a 'stable, secure and prosperous Pakistan is in India's interest. Let no one in Pakistan be in doubt. India sincerely wishes Pakistan well,' Islamabad mistook it as Indian weakness, surreptitiously preparing to capture Kargil.

It's time the people of Pakistan realise that India can be a friendly neighbour. Or be made to revisit 1971. The choice is completely in their hands. As for agencies like IMF, which have frequently bailed out Pakistan, they would do well to introspect if common, scarce global resources should be put in the hands of a rogue nation on the brink of anarchy.

Ghosh is member, 16th Finance Commission, and group chief economic adviser, SBI, and Kumar is AGM, SBI



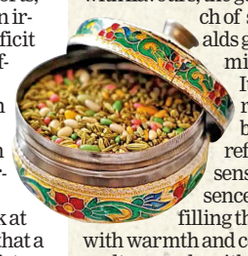
Carrying the weight of anarchy

ALGO OF BLISSTECH

Having Saunf

The humble saunf embodies a world of simple, yet profound, pleasures. A staple in households and after-meal entries at restaurants, this heap of 'seed-like' herb doesn't merely tantalise the taste buds, it evokes a sensory celebration, a quiet poetry that dances across the palate, both cleansing it and enriching it at the same time.

After a hearty meal awash with flavours, the gentle crunch of saunf heralds gastronomic closure.



It is nature's reset button to refresh the senses. Its essence unfurls, filling the mouth with warmth and coolness simultaneously with a sense of completeness. There's something extraordinarily soothing about its unassuming presence. It's an everyday joy that often goes unnoticed, yet remains indispensable.

Roasted or candied, saunf is the prince of mukhwas. From weddings to paan shops, it plays the mediator, bridging traditions and generations. It teeters between sacred offerings and casual indulgence — a spice for all seasons, all moments. It isn't just consumed but quietly celebrated.

The bliss of saunf extends to the body, too. Its cooling properties whisper comfort on a sweltering day, while aiding digestion and easing bloated woes. To savour it is to recognise subtlety.

THE SPEAKING TREE

Speak Less, Listen More

SUMIT PAUL

I like to listen. I have learnt a great deal from listening carefully. Most people never listen — Ernest Hemingway is spot on. As humans, we possess the unique ability to truly understand and empathise with someone when we listen. By listening carefully, we can learn a great deal. Yet, many are more focused on what they have to say rather than understanding what others are conveying. Listening is key to learning and understanding the world around us.

To listen is to discern. Someone rightly said, nowadays, it's not 'all ears; it's all mouth'. Listening requires patience. To listen is to relate to the other person and to understand oneself. There's pithy Persian dictum: Kamtar harf bezan, beshtar gosh kon; speak less, listen more. When everyone is speaking, it becomes the Tower of Babel. There's only noise and chaos, whereas listening creates tranquillity. An agitated mind speaks. A calm and composed mind listens as it helps us process our thoughts and disentangle them.

Monks of Theravada Buddhist tradition are taught to listen and speak only when it's necessary. Buddhists believe that talking and speaking are impulsive actions, whereas listening is a trained reaction; it's a catalyst for sagacity. Words often create violence and negative vibes. Listening encourages silence and solitude. It is not just a sign of mental placidity, it's also an indication of an individual's existential evolution.

Chat Room

Mainstream Everyone

Apropos 'Connected, Without Strings' by Subimal Bhattacharjee (May 1), in both the cases, the defendant is GoI. In fact, to prove that it's pro-underprivileged, GoI should have submitted to the Supreme Court that it would study all possibilities to help disabled citizens get all the facilities available to able persons. It will be interesting to study the defendant's arguments. GoI should be proactive in providing equal rights to everyone, unmindful of their physical incapacities.
R V Bhat
Belagavi, Karnataka

TGIF: Shukr Hai Aaj Shukrvaar Hai

This refers to 'Everything, It's AIndian' by Anil Nair (Apr 30). Indian LLMs hold immense potential, but they faces unique hurdles in a competitive global landscape. Among major challenges are data scarcity and quality because of limited digitised datasets for Indian languages. This could hinder training, compounded by a lack of massive GPU clusters needed for the task. OpenAI, Google and Meta have heavily invested in multilingual LLMs that include Indian languages. While India will address the issues over time, Sarvam will help reduce dependence on foreign LLMs to align with India's push for data localisation and AI sovereignty. It could power vernacular voice assistants for rural users, 90% of whom interact with the internet via voice. As our price-sensitive market favours lightweight and energy-efficient models for low-end smartphones, an indigenously configured technology will ensure both efficacy and financial returns.
R Narayanan
Navi Mumbai



But They Need to Smell the Kahwa

Apropos 'Practise True-Nation Theory' by T K Arun (Apr 30), the cornerstone of Pakistan, the two-nation theory, has its roots in the Deoband doctrine, which compels its followers to view India as an unfinished conquest that needs to be won back and converted to Dar al-Islam. So, making Muslims secure in a Hindu-majority India won't stop this dogma from driving hatred towards India. Now, history has not given Pakistan the right to judge India on how to uphold democratic principles and treat minorities. Logically, isn't the 78-year socio-economic trajectory of both the countries proof for the Pakistanis to have a change of heart?
Abhyudita Gupta
Ujjain

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CONTRAPUNTO

I once bought my kids a set of batteries for Christmas with a note on it saying, toys not included

– BERNARD MANNING

Toy Story

Just how bad Trump tariffs are became clear when he told kids how many dolls they should play with

It's a good thing children don't vote, or Trump would have lost that third, improbable, presidential election his heart is set on. Telling five-year-olds they should make do with only two dolls, not 30, as Trump did on Wednesday, is the same as telling their parents they should drive only two miles, not 30. Nixon said something along those lines in the '73 oil crisis – which was beyond his control – and it didn't win him any points. Trump, however, has only himself to blame for America's coming doll crisis.

While the 47th president firmly believes he can do no wrong, facts are refusing to toe his line. US economy shrank 0.3% in the first three months of his watch. Why? Because firms imported stuff in excess before his tariffs kicked in. Tariffs that were meant to right America's balance of trade, make the country great again, and cut China down to size. Since only 30% – $10bn worth – of Chinese toy production comes to US, Chinese toymakers aren't losing sleep. They've turned their attention to South America and West Asia instead. But US gets 77% of its toys from China, and with 245% tariff, those dolls, cars and whatnot will probably cost more than the "couple bucks" apiece Trump predicted. Big brands like Barbie maker Mattel, and MGA Entertainment have been prepping for this by shifting production to India, Vietnam, etc. Mattel CEO Ynon Kreiz, for instance, has said they will have only one factory in China by the end of this year, down from four in 2018. But small family-owned American businesses that buy cheap in China and sell online will suffer. Many of those small business owners are part of Trump's MAGA base.



Trump is a billionaire businessman, so it's unlikely he doesn't understand this. He's already pulled back from the brink on tariffs, and the way his admin snarled at Amazon this week, for planning to reveal tariff impact on each order, shows it's aware of the political cost. In fact, Trump called up Jeff Bezos to complain. But asking people to swallow the pain now, after playing policy roulette the last three months, won't do. Trump's job was to raise America's living standard, giving people the means to buy 30, 40, or 100 dolls, if they choose to. He's failing there.

Simply Magisterial

Mumbai magistrate's ruling on live-in couples' rights contrasts with many higher courts' dodgy moralising

Given the times, a magistrate court's order on live-ins was especially welcome. The court ruled that a woman in a live-in relationship is entitled to monthly maintenance, as provided in the domestic violence Act. The magistrate didn't agree with the monetary claim the woman asked for but, even while setting a smaller amount, agreed in principle she has a right to claim maintenance. The order is excellent news for legal protections for live-ins. But that it came from a subordinate court is perhaps the greater win. High courts and subordinate courts far too frequently issue orders contravening Supreme Court's precedents and legislative amendments, especially on issues involving live-in relationships and couple-rights. As a result, petitioners must trudge through the arduous appeals process to avail simplest of protections. Not everyone has the financial wherewithal or stamina to do this.



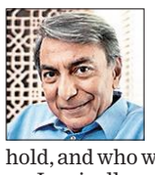
In 2003, Malimath Committee recommended that a woman in a live-in relationship for a reasonable period has the legal rights of a wife. In 2006, the domestic violence Act extended protection against violence to live-in partners. SC's view has consistently evolved from considering such partnerships as a precursor to marriage to seeing living-in as a parallel, autonomous institution of civil union, partners deserving the same protections as a married couple in terms of family finances, inheritance/succession, and physical/mental securities.

On live-ins, many subordinate courts and even some high courts have brazenly flouted established precedents. Uttarakhand HC, while hearing a 23-year-old's PIL against the state's terrible new rules mandating registration of live-ins, told the petitioner they were "brazenly living together without marriage". Gujarat HC called a couple's live-in status "timepass". Allahabad HC asked for "saving moral values in society". Given that many judges' moralising instincts are getting the better of their jurisprudence skills, the Mumbai magistrate's order has exceptional significance.

Friends no more

Digital tech has eliminated geographical distance but enlarged the emotional distance between people

Jug Suraiya



We've never had so many 'friends' in our lives. And we've never been so friendless.

One of the causes of this paradox is digital technology and the networking it provides via Facebook and similar sites.

The more time we spend with our e-friends, the less time we have for old-fashioned friends, the kind you could see, and hold, and who would, literally, present themselves to you as you would to them.

Ironically enough, social media is abuzz with an article in *Harvard Business Review*, about 'The Friendship Recession', which says that 12% of American adults say that they have no friends, a figure that's grown fourfold since 1990.

Increasing work and social pressures, the growing sprawl of urban dispersal, and the trend of residential and professional relocation which severs neighbourhood and community ties, are creating a climate of isolation which according to a US study can lead to serious emotional and health problems.



The 24/7 convenience store of communication provided by the internet fills the emotional gap of friendlessness with the ersatz company of what might be called e-palship.

jugular*vein*

Who is a friend, a true friend, and not just an e-pal? According to the old saying, you can't choose your family but you can choose your friends. In fact, friends *are* the family you choose, often closer to you than your biological relatives.

You choose your friends early in childhood, in school, in college, the workplace, the sports field, the local coffee shop you frequent. Through shared experiences and escapades, triumphs and tribulations, an interweaving of memory and memes, your friends become part of your psychic DNA, as you become part of theirs.

Your friend is a presence that's with you even when you're all by yourself. You see your friend without the refracting prisms of age, or gender, or creed, as your friend sees you. Your friend is a face more familiar than the one that appears in your mirror.

We can find words of sorrow for the passing of friends. But what words can we find to grieve the passing of friendship itself?

It's A Deal, For India Too

The business logic behind Ukraine-US minerals pact allows New Delhi to plan a better logistics play for the many products it buys from Kyiv. Ukrainian Black Sea ports will be a vital link

Anastasia Piliavsky and Ugo Poletti



Columnists based in Odesa

Like it or not, Trump's geopolitical business schemes, from Gaza to Ukraine, confirm that the order of international law no longer holds water, and that the world needs new forms of security. Putin's conquest campaign in Ukraine laid bare the helplessness of UN and the futility of old international charters, agreements and treaties in face of brute force.

Trump's insistence on exploiting Ukraine's rare earths, on which an agreement on a 50/50 joint US-Ukraine investment has just been signed, offers an alternative model of security – the enmeshment of business interests as a safeguard of peace – and not only to Ukraine.

According to the minerals deals, both sides will jointly manage and equally contribute to the Reconstruction Investment Fund; future American military aid will count as US contribution to the fund; the fund will exclusively be supplied with revenues from newly issued licences in Ukrainian minerals, oil and gas; and profits earned by the fund will be reinvested for Ukraine's reconstruction. Sure, the deal doesn't provide for the security guarantees Ukraine was seeking. But it also doesn't hinder Ukraine's accession to EU.

Trump's geo-economics also runs through his dealings with European leaders. A recent White House press release about Trump's meeting with Italian PM Meloni mentions a joint effort by Italy and US to develop the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), launched in 2023 by Modi. This ambitious new project, which offers an alternative to the Suez Canal threatened by Houthis, will boost trade along a route running through conflict zones, including Israel-Palestine. Italy is a key partner in this initiative. Its port of Trieste can link India to wealthy European markets. It also houses the largest Mediterranean Nato fleet that can offer maritime security along the route, allowing US to scale back its regional naval presence in favour of the Indo-Pacific.

Trump is not alone in looking to business for security. The louder the alarm bells have chimed about the threat of China, the faster Indo-Chinese business relations have grown. Only last year, China quietly overtook US to reclaim the status of India's biggest trade partner, visa restrictions for Chinese engineers were lifted and Chinese investment in India's infra and tech swelled. It's no coincidence that later that year India and China saw a thaw in their border tensions.

Today China holds a near monopoly on rare earths, controlling around 80% of the global market. It not only holds rich deposits, but is also willing to sacrifice its air and water to the intensely polluting extraction process. This puts it in the position to blackmail Western countries.



This is why Trump is so keen on exploiting Ukraine's rare earths, a proposal made originally by Zelenskyy. Rare earths are indispensable to electronics, from mobile phones to electric cars and heat-proof magnets used in fighter jets, missile control and spacecraft. Access to them has elemental strategic significance, which will only expand as technologies grow.

Ukraine's confirmed rare earths are substantial. Long before the Russian invasion, Ukraine's govt invited Musk to invest in mining its lithium. Ukraine holds a third of Europe's lithium reserves. Mines in central Ukraine generate 6% of global titanium used across industries, from orthopaedic implants to aircraft. Ukraine is also one of the world's largest producers of neon gas, generating between 45% and 54% of the global supply, essential for chip production. The country holds Europe's largest reserves of uranium and a high concentration of cobalt.

Extracting rare earths in Ukraine will be no easy task. Mining will require intensive demining, but the prospect of an alternative source of these elements, paired with the promise of American investment in their exploration, has the potential of major geopolitical change. This is why the US administration is far from alone in clamouring over Ukraine's minerals.

One of the key strategic lessons of the Russo-Ukrainian war for Europe has been the realisation of the risks of depending on autocracies for strategic materials. While Trump speaks openly about these risks, off-display Europe too is looking to diversify its supply of raw materials and strategic technologies. Having lost uranium mines in its former African colonies, France needs new sources for its expansive nuclear sector. German medical and defence industries are equally keen to diversify their sources of REF. Asia's tech giants, Japan and South Korea, are no less keen to relieve their dependence on Chinese rare earths.

IMEC opens the door to this market. It's the world's biggest logistical project since China's Belt and Road Initiative, which sidesteps the dangerous Bab el-Mandeb Strait, connecting India to UAE, Saudi Arabia, Israel, Italy, Germany, France, and US. The strategic significance of Ukraine's resources, which will ease India's dependence on China, makes it essential to add its Black Sea ports to the route. Rare earths aside, India already imports vast quantities of Ukrainian products, from sunflower oil to coal and gas turbines used in its navy. Indian entrepreneurs control ArcelorMittal, Ukraine's largest steelworks based in Zelenskyy's hometown Kryvyi Rih, and hold most shares in the Zorya-Mashproekt gas turbine complex.

Ukraine's Black Sea ports of Odesa and Yuzhny do not only house investments from IMEC's key partner countries – Germany (HHLA), Dubai (DP World) and US (Cargill) – they also connect the Corridor to Eastern Europe and Baltic Sea via Ukraine's elaborate railway infra.

As Ukraine, US and Russia negotiate peace over Black Sea's troubled waters, India should keep a beady eye on it as a space of historic strategic opportunity.

Piliavsky is a social anthropologist and Poletti is a journalist

Caste Counts: Why Data Must Drive Justice

If we want caste to matter less tomorrow, we must first understand how much it still matters today. For that enumeration isn't enough. Only deep sample surveys can provide a detailed diagnosis

Rajesh Shukla



India's decision to include caste enumeration in the upcoming national census marks a significant shift in how the state understands its people. This can be a transformative step towards evidence-based, inclusive governance – if implemented with care, clarity, and purpose.

For decades, development has moved ahead with a critical blind spot. While we've pursued GDP growth, digitisation, and global competitiveness, we've largely ignored caste – a structure that continues to shape access to education, employment, healthcare, housing, and justice. Though we disaggregate data by gender, geography, and age, caste has remained statistically invisible, despite its persistent role in determining life outcomes.

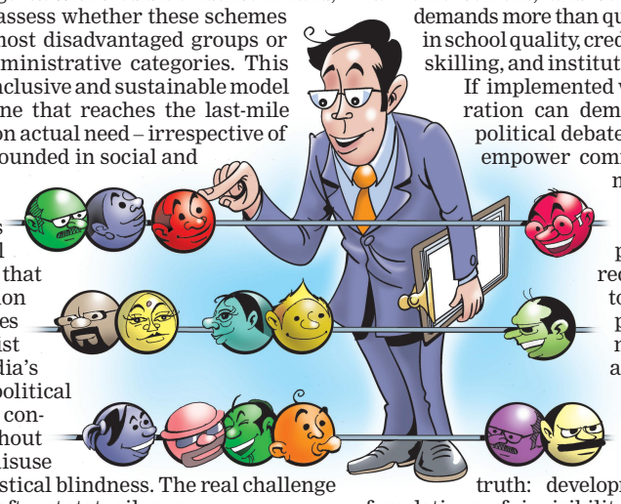
This invisibility has produced a paradox: we debate reservation policies without knowing the real distribution of disadvantage, and deploy caste-neutral tools in a deeply stratified society. Well-meaning policies often miss their mark because the information base is incomplete.

Caste enumeration offers a chance to correct this misalignment. It can generate granular insights into how various communities live – not just their population size, but the social and economic conditions they face. This is not about reinforcing identities, but about recognising structural inequities. If we want caste to matter less tomorrow, we must first understand how much it still matters today.

However, it's essential to recognise that the census is not a substitute for scientific sample surveys. The census provides scope, not depth. Its role is to offer a foundational map of diversity, not a detailed diagnosis. This makes the inclusion of well-crafted, relevant questions in the caste module paramount – questions that capture socio-economic realities like education, occupation, asset ownership, and access to basic services.

The data collected should serve as a launchpad for deeper, need-based studies. Focused surveys, conducted by institutions like the National Sample Survey Office or independent research bodies, will be crucial for unpacking regional, community-specific, and intersectional disparities. This layered approach – broad census followed by focused inquiry – is what distinguishes robust evidence-based policymaking in countries like Brazil and South Africa.

Equally important is that such data can help objectively rationalise the extensive array of caste-based welfare schemes and reservation policies currently run by central and state govts. With credible evidence in hand, policymakers can assess whether these schemes are reaching the most disadvantaged groups or merely serving administrative categories. This allows for a more inclusive and sustainable model of development, one that reaches the last-mile beneficiary based on actual need – irrespective of caste labels, but grounded in social and economic realities.



Undoubtedly, the exercise carries political and social risks. Critics fear that caste enumeration may harden identities or fuel populist demands. In India's highly charged political environment, such concerns are not without merit. But fear of misuse cannot justify statistical blindness. The real challenge is to ensure statecraft, not state silence.

What's required is a transparent, ethically grounded process. Global best practices offer guidance. US, for example, uses racial and ethnic data not to divide, but to enforce civil rights and shape affirmative action. South Africa uses such data to monitor post-apartheid transformation. India must similarly anonymise data, protect privacy, and establish an independent oversight mechanism to ensure that data collection and usage remain aligned with constitutional values.

Crucially, caste enumeration should be seen not merely as an instrument of social audit but as a tool of equity diagnostics. Just as gender-disaggregated data has improved maternal health outcomes and informed women-focused policies, caste data can help address development gaps that have persisted for generations.

Moreover, this moment offers an opportunity to reframe the public discourse on caste. Too often, caste is reduced to who gets how much reservations. But caste-based exclusion is far more complex. It spans generations and penetrates education systems, labour markets, law enforcement, and social capital. Addressing it demands more than quotas. It calls for investments in school quality, credit access, healthcare equity, skilling, and institutional reform.

If implemented with integrity, caste enumeration can democratise data. It can shift political debate from anecdote to analysis, empower communities with evidence to make claims, and hold policymakers accountable to outcomes rather than promises. It can also help recalibrate existing policies to reflect real, contemporary patterns of disadvantage – moving beyond outdated assumptions or fixed lists.

As India approaches 100 years of Independence with the vision of Viksit Bharat, it must confront a difficult truth: development cannot be built on foundations of invisibility. A bridge to an inclusive future must be supported by facts. To exclude caste from the census is to continue policymaking in the dark. To include it (thoughtfully and responsibly) is to bring long-overdue light to the problem we seek to solve.

Caste enumeration is not about division. It is about design – designing fairer systems, targeted interventions, and more inclusive institutions. It is not about looking backward. It is about moving forward – justly, wisely, and with eyes open. The numbers we gather today will shape the justice we deliver tomorrow.

The writer heads a consumer research organisation

Calvin & Hobbes



Sacred*space*



May your work assume
A proper space
in your life;
Instead of
owning or
using you,
May it challenge and refine you,
Bringing you every day further
Into the wonder of your heart.

John O'Donohue

Islam And Myth Of Two-Nation Theory

Farida Khanam

In a deeply polarising and arguably reckless assertion, Pakistan's army chief Asim Munir recently reiterated the two-nation theory, declaring that 'Muslims and Hindus are two separate nations, not one,' and that they differ in 'religion, customs, traditions, worldview, and aspirations'.

The two-nation theory, which claims that Muslims and non-Muslims form inherently separate nations, finds no basis in Islamic teachings. In the Quran, prophets consistently addressed those who did not follow their religion as Ya Qawmi, meaning 'my people', reflecting a spirit of inclusiveness. Prophet Shu'ayb, for instance, said: 'O my people' (Quran 11:85). This message directly contradicts divisive ideologies like the two-nation theory.

Islamic history itself refutes the notion of separate national identities based on religion. The Prophet of Islam spent 53 years in Mecca, living with non-Muslims without ever advocating religious segregation. Even when some Muslims migrated to Abyssinia, a Christian country, they lived peacefully within local society without asserting any special religious identity. Despite Mecca's non-Muslim majority and fierce opposition to his message, the Prophet deeply loved the city and said that he would not have left it had he not been forced. Throughout early Islamic history, no notion of Muslims being a separate nation existed. This idea only surfaced in the 19th and 20th centuries under political pressure, falsely attributed to Islam.

After migrating to Medina, the Prophet established a formal covenant with the city's non-Muslim tribes. A significant clause affirmed: "The Jews of Banu Awf are one community with the believers. Jews have their religion, and Muslims have their religion," Sirat Ibn Hisham, Vol 2, p 107. This covenant, which extended to other tribes as well, set a clear model of coexistence based on mutual respect and shared civic identity.

The Quran also clarifies Islamic concept of nationality. It does not define nationality by religion, but by a shared homeland. The term *millat* refers to religious affiliation, whereas *qawmiyat* refers to the bond formed through common land. Attempts to redefine nationality along religious lines are distortions introduced by later political ideologies, not by Islamic thought.

THE SPEAKING TREE

The Quran states: 'Mankind! We have created you from a male and a female, and made you into shu'ub, people, and qaba'il, tribes, so that you may know each other,' Quran 49:13.

Here, people are national groupings based on land, and tribes are family-based lineages. Classical scholars such as Abu Rawq al Hamadani interpreted nations as groups sharing cities, villages, and territories, reinforcing the idea that geography, not religion, shapes national identity.

Islam's teachings about relations between Muslims and non-Muslims further invalidate separationist ideologies. The two-nation theory stands in contrast to Islam's inclusive and universal message. The Quran and Prophet's example show that national identity is rooted in mutual coexistence, not in religious division. Islam promotes justice, compassion, and unity among all people, regardless of faith. Therefore, Muslims must rise above divisive ideologies and embrace their fellow citizens, working together for peace, progress, and collective well-being, fostering harmony and shared responsibility in building a just society.

The writer is chairperson, Centre For Peace and Spirituality International