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**The Indian EXPRESS**  
~ FOUNDED BY ~  
**RAMNATH GOENKA**  
◆ IN 1932 ◆

BECAUSE THE TRUTH  
INVOLVES US ALL

## In clean Indore, the rot and the stain

**T**HE TRAGEDY unfolding in Indore is disquieting. At least eight people have lost their lives, and more than 200 are in hospital after drinking contaminated water supplied by the city's municipality. The state government has taken disciplinary action against officials and instituted a probe. However, it intervened only after the crisis assumed grave proportions. In fact, Madhya Pradesh Urban Administration Minister Kalash Vijayvargiya's derisive response to a journalist's query on the incident betrays a shocking evidence of accountability — he described the question as useless. Municipal water is governed by Bureau of Indian Standards norms, and supplies must be monitored continuously to make sure no pathogen seeps in. Drinking water pipes and sewage lines must be segregated carefully. By all accounts, these fundamentals of urban governance were flouted in Indore, otherwise regarded as India's best-governed municipality — it has topped the Swachh Survekshan Index for eight consecutive years. The bacterial contamination responsible for the outbreak stemmed from a breach in the water pipeline in the city's Bhagathiya area. The residents had flagged this health hazard over two months ago. But officials did not heed the warnings, including those of the local corporator.

Water contamination has been a longstanding concern in Indian cities. In November, students of the Vellore Institute of Technology in Bhopal went on a protest against contaminated water supply after a jaundice outbreak on the campus. Three people died in Chennai in December 2024 due to the consumption of contaminated piped water. Disease outbreaks due to waterborne bacteria have also been reported in Noida, and Kochi in the past two years. They are a grim reminder that piped supply is not an assurance against contamination. Water supply in a large number of cities continues to rely on pipelines laid in colonial times or in the immediate years after Independence. Indore's water supply network, for instance, is 120 years old.

The 74th Constitutional Amendment gave an expansive mandate to municipalities — from land regulation to water supply, sanitation, and environmental protection. More than 30 years later, urban governance bears little resemblance to the landmark legislation's vision. Finances are often a problem for local bodies, but even some of India's richest municipalities — Delhi or Mumbai, for example — have faltered in performing basic civic functions. The local bodies must own a large share of the blame for the growing water and air pollution crises in large parts of the country. Indore's tragedy illustrates that municipal inertia dogs attempts to modernise infrastructure even in India's cleanest city. A rapidly urbanising country deserves better.

## Telecom sector needs more strong players

**T**ELECOM AND aviation were amongst the most robust success stories in the post liberalisation era, transformed by the entry of several new private players. But today, both sectors are dominated by a few players. In the aviation sector in India is dominated by two players — Indigo and Air India. In the telecom sector, two strong private players — Jio and Airtel — account for around 75 per cent of the market. Vodafone Idea, which is a financially weak third player and partly owned by the government, occupies 16.5 per cent of the market, while state-owned BSNL accounts for just 8 per cent. As recent events in the aviation sector have also shown, this degree of market concentration has unhappy consequences. It underlines the need to facilitate healthy competition in sectors across the economy. In this context, reports pointing to the possible government exit from Vodafone Idea are welcome.

Vodafone Idea has been in a precarious financial position. As of December 2024, its total debt was around Rs 2.3 lakh crore, comprising AGR dues and spectrum liability. Its subscriber base has fallen from 213 million in September 2024 to 203.5 million in September 2025. A few days ago, the Union cabinet approved a relief package for the beleaguered telco, freezing its AGR dues (adjusted gross revenue) and rescheduling their payment over a 10-year period ending in FY41. Alongside providing clarity over its dues, as per a report in this paper, the government is also exploring the option of bringing in an investor, who could eventually take majority control. A new investor could infuse money into the telco to ensure its long-term viability. This is much needed. The sector would benefit from the presence of a larger number of financially strong players, and better service consumer interest.

The importance of ensuring a level playing field cannot be emphasised enough. The rules of the game should be applied fairly, and to all. The telecom sector forms the backbone of the digital economy, the government needs to proceed carefully.

## Scallops, pineapples & bitter taste of geopolitics

**H**ARVESTED FROM the cold, pristine waters off Hokkaido island, the Yesso scallop is no mere mollusc. It is a prize of the culinary world, sought after for its sweet, buttery flesh, Chinese gourmands, in particular, are so partial to Hokkaido's famous scallops as to have made their country the top destination for the Japanese delicacy. This, unfortunately, has also made the bivalve a soft target. Piqued by Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi signalling support for Taiwan in the event of Chinese military action, Beijing has banned the import of seafood from Japan.

The humble scallop may seem like an unlikely pawn on the chessboard of diplomacy but history has shown that food can be a sensitive topic in international relations. In 2021, the pineapple was at the centre of a diplomatic row, which started with China banning imports of the fruit from Taiwan. The support that Tokyo showed to Taiwan that year — ordering a record 19,000 tons of the rebranded "freedom pineapple" — was repaid in November 2025 when Taipei took up "tsai di pomodoro" as a response to China's strong-arm tactics against Japan. India, too, is not unfamiliar with the pains and pleasures of gastropolitics. Thorry as Bengalis' favourite *hilsa machh* (hilsa) is, Bangladesh's periodic suspension of supply to India has been harder to swallow.

Of course, the complex problems of geopolitics are best left to the experts. Much as humans have an instinct for commensality, wars are rarely resolved over the breaking of bread, and when the stakes are high, even the most delicious scallop makes for a weak bargaining chip. But when the squabbles of nations descend from the high table to the dining table, statecraft — no matter the high principles or noble ideals it may be built on — leaves a bitter taste that is hard to ignore.

**I**NDIA'S RENEWABLE energy transition is no longer constrained by the ability to build clean energy generation capacity. Solar and wind installations have crossed 180 gigawatts and renewables have become among the lowest-cost sources of new generation. Instead, the transition is constrained by the urgent need for reforms in distribution and market design. The challenge today is whether the power system can utilise the green electrons it already produces as efficiently as possible.

That challenge has three pieces. First, distribution reform is the decisive bottleneck. Second, dynamic retail tariffs and smart technologies are key to scaling access to clean and reliable electricity. Third, wholesale market reform is essential both to attract investment and to reduce renewable curtailment by improving how power is scheduled and traded across the country.

Distribution companies (discoms) sit at the heart of India's clean energy transition. Improving their operating performance is therefore critical. National aggregate technical and commercial losses remain around 16 per cent and several discoms continue to face persistent cost under-recovery even after initiatives such as UDAY and RDSS. These programmes have rightly focused on modernising distribution infrastructure, funding smart metering, and building capacity, but financial and operational stress remains widespread.

This challenge becomes more acute as renewable penetration rises. Variability increases, peak demand becomes costlier to serve, and balancing and forecasting become core system functions. Yet discom incentives remain tied primarily to volumetric electricity sales rather than to maximising overall system efficiency. Some of the very changes needed for the energy transition can appear financially threatening to dis-

coms because they reduce sales and shift fixed costs onto a smaller base of consumers.

In many states, discoms recover a substantial share of their revenues from commercial and industrial consumers who pay tariffs well above cost, subsidising households and agriculture that pay below-cost tariffs. When these high-paying consumers invest in energy efficiency, adopt rooftop solar, or shift to open access, discoms lose their highest-margin sales but continue to bear the obligation of serving subsidised consumers, which strains their finances.

At the same time, discoms face large, fixed costs from network operations and maintenance to capacity payments under long-term power purchase agreements. When energy efficiency or behind-the-meter solar reduces demand, these costs do not disappear. If tariffs are predominantly volumetric, fewer kilowatt-hours sold means less revenue to cover the same fixed obligations. Demand response may lower peak demand, but the overall cost savings on power procurement can be limited when fixed costs dominate while revenue could take a hit immediately.

Rooftop solar further alters the economics of discoms' most valuable customers. Net metering, where permitted, credits exported solar power at or near the retail tariff, even though that tariff often includes network costs and cross-subsidies. Consumers reduce purchases during the day when the sun is out while continuing to rely on the grid at night. Unless a tariff design evolves, discoms effectively become backup providers without being fully compensated for that service.

None of this implies that energy efficiency, rooftop solar, or demand response are inherently harmful to discoms. What makes these measures financially



SHEFALI  
KHANNA

India has mandated time-of-day tariffs and scaling smart meters at unprecedented speed. Around 49 million smart meters have been installed, with many more planned. This is an essential foundation for a modern grid

threatening is the absence of complementary tariff reform, the deployment and usage of smart technologies and incentive redesign. If regulators allow discoms to recover fixed network costs and earn returns for reliability, loss reduction and flexibility, then these same measures can become tools discoms actively want rather than risks they seek to avoid.

India has mandated time-of-day tariffs and scaling smart meters at unprecedented speed. Around 49 million smart meters have been installed, with many more planned. This is an essential foundation for a modern grid. But price signals alone are not enough to shift demand away from peak times. For time-varying tariffs to work, consumers must understand when electricity is expensive, know which appliances drive peak consumption, and be able to respond without constant effort. In practice, many households and small firms lack the time, information, or coordination to do this manually.

Tariff reform must be paired with smart technologies that allow demand to respond automatically — such as smart thermostats for cooling, smart charging for electric vehicles, and smart plugs and switches for appliance-level automation. Without automation, we are effectively asking households to act as real-time energy managers, which is unrealistic. While investments in grid networks and energy storage are essential, well-designed demand response can often deliver similar flexibility at lower cost, especially for managing short-duration peaks.

On the wholesale side, India's renewable challenge is also geographic. Renewable resources are unevenly distributed across states, while demand is concentrated in urban areas. Although the physical grid allows power to move across regions, the market design remains

fragmented. The majority of supply continues to be tied up in long- and medium-term contracts, with discoms largely self-scheduling generation from their contract portfolios. Organised power exchanges that optimise dispatch only account for 7 to 9 per cent of total electricity supplied. This limits India's ability to use cheap renewable power efficiently across the country.

Two wholesale reforms are important. The first is transitioning to a nationwide market-based economic dispatch system. A centralised framework would ensure that the cheapest available power — including zero-marginal-cost renewables — is dispatched first ahead of generators with a higher short-run marginal cost. CERC estimates suggest that such a reform could reduce annual power procurement costs by around \$1.6 billion while significantly improving renewable integration.

The second is integrating captive power plants into wholesale markets. Captive power plants represent a large and underutilised source of flexible capacity. Bringing them into markets would increase competition, improve liquidity, and lower system costs. Taken together, retail and wholesale reforms could redefine the role of discoms from passive intermediaries to active system optimisers. With the right incentives and market design, discoms can use demand flexibility to manage peaks and improve reliability, and more integrated wholesale markets can support the efficient integration of renewable energy. If renewable integration delivers better service quality, public support will deepen; if it delivers uncertainty, resistance will grow.

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## Casual racism is normal, let's start calling it out every time



MUNISH  
TAMANG

**L**AST WEEK, I had invigilation duty — something I have done hundreds of times over my 25-year teaching career at the University of Delhi. As I walked into the room, I heard cries of "ching-chong" from the very first desk, designed to be overheard by nite and others around.

As somebody from the Northeast, I have faced innumerable instances of casual racism. But this time, it happened in a room where I was the principal authority. It wouldn't be remiss to assume that no student would make such remarks against me, particularly in a controlled institutional setting. I am also the nodal officer for Northeast students in my college, as well as the staff advisor to the Northeast Students Organisation of my college.

And yet, how casually the student could make racist remarks against me, without fear, clearly expecting to get away with it.

Such situations are common for people who look like me. Adjectives such as "Nepali", "chinky", "momo", "Chinese" are all too familiar to us. What was worrying, however, was the fact that the student was a typical urban middle-class youth studying in a premier university, sharing space with many students from the Northeast.

If he thought he could get away by doing this to a teacher, what must his daily interactions be with his peer group? It made me worry about the students and young people who face harassment daily without a social safety net.

Far away from home, they are left to fend for themselves, facing slurs, insults, and even physical assault. Racial discrimination lurks in the educational institutions they study in, local neighbourhoods where they live, markets, public transport.

A Nido Tania from Arunachal Pradesh, killed in Delhi's Lajpat Nagar or an Anjel Chakma from Tripura, brutally murdered in Dehradun, act as occasional reminders of the severity of the racism.

Tania's murder and the subsequent public outcry led to the formation of the

Bezbaruah Committee in 2014. They made important recommendations that led to some concrete impact, including amending the IPC to make racial slurs and acts cognisable; creating nodal police stations and helpines; appointing special prosecutors; sensitising the police, and integrating northeastern culture in textbooks. Nodal officers were appointed in institutions, and the Special Police Unit for North East Region (SPUNER) was set up in the Delhi Police.

While such initiatives have instilled confidence in the community, there is a lack of demonstrable institutional and political intent in fighting the menace. This is a reflection of a society where a culture of racism is normalised.

Take the instance of Anjel Chakma, who was critically injured and spent 18 days in the hospital. It is only after he succumbed to his injuries that the government made assurances on future preventive measures.

What is even more disturbing is that a senior police officer is reported to have said that the remarks against the victim were made in jest and were not a racial attack. Such a statement is symptomatic of the increasing normalisation of racial harassment.

The student in the examination hall gave me an unconvincing explanation and later tendered a weak apology, insisting there was no racist intent. I accepted his apology, allowing him to proceed with the exam.

Clearly, more needs to be done to combat the casual racism that one comes across daily in the form of offensive jokes at its mildest, to racial chants, physical and mental assault, and grievous physical violence at its worst.

One way forward is for institutions to have mandatory sensitisation for their students, staff, and other members so that they understand that even "harmless" throwaway remarks and name-calling have no place in our society.

The writer teaches at Motilal Nehru College, Delhi University



PAVITHRAN  
RAJAN

**I**NDIA OFTEN speaks of becoming a *Vishwaguru*. Aglobal teacher and thought leader. Yet, global influence is never won with slogans. True leadership comes from ideas, frameworks, and theories others must use. Britain did not dominate the world merely through fleets. It exported a liberal political economy. The US did not lead solely through military and economic power; it advanced realism and liberal institutions. Today, China promotes a new global order and digital sovereignty as alternatives to Western universals. Nations that define the terms of debate shape what others can imagine as possible. India too often falls in carrying other people's ideas.

This is not a talent problem. India has a rich intellectual heritage and a large, English-speaking elite. Think of Aryabhata and Bhaskara, whose work in mathematics and astronomy influenced global knowledge; or Chanakya, whose *Aryashashtra* codified statecraft, economics, and diplomacy. Jagadish Chandra Bose, C.V. Raman, and Satyendra Nath Bose shaped scientific thought worldwide. The problem lies in the ecosystem. Universities chase publication counts over conceptual impact. Interdisciplinary work remains a career risk. Think tanks churn out policy briefs for news cycles. Media rewards certainty, not patient reflection. Bureaucracies optimise procedure, not enduring frameworks. Without an ecosystem that prizes deep thinking, India remains a consumer of frameworks invented elsewhere.

India's military often operates on doctrines suited for other nations' realities. When India "does" foreign policy, it mostly works within imported frames — realism, liberalism, deterrence, or constructivism. These frameworks dictate what states count as rational and who counts on the global stage. Consider George Kennan's "containment", Joseph Nye's "soft power", or Albert Hirschman's ideas on development. India's today often reacts; it rarely redesigns the board. Even in forums like BRICS or the Quad, India demonstrates competence, not conceptual leadership.

The 21st century is turning on technology and data. India has leverage: Over a billion users, rapidly growing digital infrastructure, and a reputation as a stable democracy. Yet if the vocabulary remains imported, from Silicon Valley, Brussels, or Geneva, India remains a consumer of norms. Questions around digital sovereignty, privacy, and ethical AI are opportunities to define legitimacy in a networked world.

*Vishwaguru* is not a title claimed on stage. It is a pattern in citations, syllabi, and policy documents. Influence begins not with applause, but with argument. That requires patient statecraft, long-term investment in research, open debate, and tolerance for dissent. India stands at a fork. It can remain a skilled consumer of external frameworks, adapting competently but always on someone else's map. Or it can produce concepts that others must cite, contest, and live with. Strengthening the ecosystem for ideas is central to *atmanirbarta*.

The writer is an Indian Army veteran and former advisor to the Ministry of Home Affairs

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## 40 YEARS AGO January 3, 1986



## Top-grade US arms for Pak

PAKISTAN IS poised to acquire sophisticated electronic countermeasure weaponry from the United States this year. The Ronald Reagan administration has agreed for Pakistan several advanced, top-of-the-line weapons based around computerised electronic countermeasures technology like the AN/TPQ37 fire-finder radar systems with ancillary and support equipment. The financial worth of these, according to Reagan administration documents submitted to the Senate foreign relations committee, is \$41 million.

## Srikkanth maiden century

A HURRICANE 116 by Srikkanth and an unbeaten 132 by Sunil Gavaskar, his 32nd Test hundred, helped India make a solid 334 for one on the opening day of the final cricket Test in Sydney against Australia. At the increase at stumps with the little man was Amarnath on 72. Srikkanth spent 190 minutes at the wicket for his maiden century, which included one six and 15 fours. It came from only 117 deliveries.

## Wali Khan against pact with Zia

THE VISIT of Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi to

Islamabad slated for this summer for discussions with President Zia-ul-Haq might pose serious political problems if the mood of the political leaders of opposition parties in Pakistan is any guide. The president of the Pakistan National Democratic Party, Wali Khan, is in New Delhi on an official visit accompanying his father, Khan Abdul Ghafar Khan.

## Hashish worth ₹1.77 cr seized

THE DIRECTORATE of Revenue Intelligence made a record haul of 2.95 tonnes of hashish valued at ₹1.77 crore in Bombay. According to an official release, the contraband was put in 163 bags.

## To resolve the street dogs issue, use reason and compassion, not fear and cruelty



DR MEHTA

**O**VER THE past decade, street dogs have moved from being neighbourhood sentinels to legal battlegrounds, caught between compassion and commotion. Have you ever heard of any constitutional court in the world getting involved with issues relating to dogs? The Indian Supreme Court is an exception. Despite the pendency of several lakhs of cases, some very serious, dogs are getting special attention.

Some time ago, the Supreme Court picked up a case of dogs and that too, *suo motu*, on the basis of an unverified newspaper report. Furthermore, without hearing the lawyers on the other side, a specific requirement, the Court issued a direction that all street dogs should be picked up and confined in pounds. That would require an expenditure of thousands of crores, and that too in a few months, making it impossible to execute. Fortunately, the then Chief Justice of India constituted a new bench that is currently seized of the matter.

Yet another constitutional issue is that of the separation of powers, a part of the basic structure of the constitution, laid down by the Court itself. Under the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act, 1960, the Animal Welfare Board (AWB) is the executive authority to issue guidelines regarding the management of animals, including dogs. It seems that the appropriate course would be for the Supreme Court, instead of issuing the guidelines itself, to direct the AWB to revise its existing ones, harmonising human needs on the one hand and compassion — one of the fundamental duties enshrined in the Constitution, which is binding on all — on the other. In our view, the Supreme Court may kindly consider not descending to act as



ILLUSTRATION: C S SAKSHAMUR

the Animal Welfare Board.

The tragedy of India's "dog problem" isn't a lack of law. It's a failure to apply it. The Animal Birth Control (Dogs) Rules, first notified under the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act and updated in 2023, already lay down a clear, evidence-based national protocol: Capture-sterilise-vaccinate-release (CSVR). They embody the scientific consensus of the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the World Organisation for Animal Health (WOAH) that sterilisation and vaccination are the only sustainable ways to control the dog population and prevent rabies. Removal or culling, in contrast, simply opens ecological "vacuum zones", inviting unsterilised dogs from surrounding areas to move in, restarting the cycle of fear and anger.

There is no nation on earth that has resolved street-dog management through detention. There are, however, nations that have done it through science, co-operation, and respect for both people and animals. France offers one such model. By the

1980s, French cities were struggling with uncontrolled dog populations. The government implemented a combination of mandatory registration, sterilisation incentives, strict enforcement of pet abandonment laws, and robust waste management — all coordinated by the municipalities, not the courts. Public education campaigns shifted the narrative from nuisance to responsibility. Within a decade, stray populations plummeted without mass removal or cruelty.

The Netherlands went further, achieving what few thought was possible: It became the first country in the world with zero stray dogs, without killing a single one. How? Through a nationally implemented CSVR programme, the same model India already enshrines in law

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and health authorities, acting in concert with civil society, that delivered this transformation. In India, too, many cities, by using the ABC programme, have ensured not only stabilisation but also a decline in the dog population. These examples will dispel the impression that the persons arguing for a different approach are doing so not for rational but for sentimental reasons. Indeed, the logic is based on successful scientific achievements.

Now, about the ground realities as I understand them, having partly worked in the field of animal welfare. For about 30 years, I was connected with a dog pound run by the Jodhpur municipality, where most of the dogs died within a few weeks or months for want of food on most days and non-existent medical facilities. It was a veritable hell for them. There were doubts about the use of the municipal budget for this purpose. Further, the sanctioned municipal staff were nowhere to be seen. A group of friends provided some limited support. The fact is that most of the present pounds elsewhere or in the future may have these problems. Thus, the impression that pounds are the places to save picked-up dogs is not at all borne out by facts. They are a death warrant.

The dogs that bite are generally those that are hungry, have been disturbed in their sexual activity or pelted with stones. If they are fed and neutered, they are not only non-aggressive but also mostly sleeping. Only a microscopic minority of them are vicious, and surely, they can be picked up or dealt with differently. It is also a fact that poor- and lower-middle-class people love and feed the dogs living in slums and other areas. In many colonies, dogs are unpaid guards against thieves. The problem is basically with the elites. In schools, children share a part of their snacks with the dogs, a way of acquiring compassion. For psychologists, dogs are occasionally used for therapy. Dogs are man's best friend. They must be dealt with rationally and humanely, and not with impractical solutions, or at times, with phobias.

The writer is former chairman, Securities & Exchange Board of India (SEBI)

## In 2026, two opportunities for India to prove critics wrong



RAM RAJYA  
BY RAM MADHAV

**I**N 2026, India will have two important global responsibilities. On December 3, 2025, India's Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) Gyanesh Kumar was in Stockholm, Sweden, to receive the chairmanship of an influential global body called the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA). The 35-member global body, of which India has been a member since 1995, is an inter-governmental institution created to promote sustainable democratic culture, values, and practices. A week later, on December 11-12, Sudhakar Dales, India's BRICS sherpa, was in Brasilia to receive the chairmanship of that coveted body for the year 2026.

India is a founder member of BRICS along with Russia and China. It has held the BRICS chair three times before, in 2012, 2016, and 2021. Unfortunately, although India is the "world's oldest, largest, the most diverse and inclusive modern democracy" in the words of the CEC, it took 30 years for the chair of the International IDEA to come its way.

In the past few years, India has faced severe criticism from several international bodies regarding its democratic credentials. The Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project, jointly funded by the Swedish and US governments, is one such group. Claiming to study democracies based on more than 350 parameters, V-Dem has consistently projected India in a poor light. Other, non-official bodies like the US-based Freedom House and the UK-based Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index are also responsible for creating a negative image of Indian democracy.

The Indian government has consistently rejected all such reports, which are largely the outcome of politically motivated propaganda, including by some Indian leaders and the intelligentsia. But indignation is no substitute for facts. As the chair of prestigious international bodies, India has ample opportunity to prove critics wrong by showcasing its strong democratic credentials.

The Election Commission of India, which too is at the receiving end of the propaganda, has the responsibility to deliver on this front in 2026. It should co-opt several stake-holders from government and public institutions to set the record straight about India's democracy.



The BRICS+ leadership, too, has come to India at a time when the two-decade-old body is floundering on several counts. Over the past decade or so, the body has increasingly turned from a "non-Western" to an "anti-Western" group, to the discomfit of some members, like India. Both Russia and

China have repeatedly sought to use the platform to mobilise anti-Western forces and sentiments in the name of opposition to sanctions and demands for an alternate international financial transaction platform for the Global South. On a couple of occasions, there were moves to introduce a resolution for "de-dollarisation" and the creation of a BRICS common currency. In the face of opposition from some member countries, including India, those efforts have been shelved.

Despite India's reservations, BRICS has expanded to include more members — Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Indonesia, and the UAE. Saudi Arabia, too, was invited to join, but its leadership has yet to decide on the matter. Another 35 countries have reportedly sought entry into the body, increasingly seen as an antidote to Western hegemony. While there is growing resentment against the world order dominated by Western powers, creating an unwieldy group will defeat the raison d'être of BRICS. It is more important to build a coherent narrative for BRICS, based on pluralism, national sovereignty, family values, environmentalism, and human dignity, that includes rights and duties, that resonates with both the Global South and the developed West.

Meanwhile, US President Donald Trump is fuming that BRICS has become an anti-American bloc "trying to destroy the dollar". He has mocked it, saying the "little group is fading fast".

India needs to use its tenure to steady the wobbling body and give a proper direction to it. As the Western-led world order declines, BRICS countries — the majority of whom come with rich histories and vibrant civilisational and cultural experiences — must offer a new vision and play a critical role in shaping the new order.

During India's G20 presidency in 2023, PM Narendra Modi invested heavily in influencing an Indian vision into the group's agenda. India should take its leadership of the two important global bodies — International IDEA and BRICS+ — with equal seriousness and enthusiasm.

The author is chief economist, Vedanta

The writer, president, India Foundation, is with the BJP

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Know thy neighbour

WALLS that once allowed connection have now become barriers of silence. ("We used to talk across the wall. Now, we are separated by them," IE, January 2). Neighbourhoods were once vibrant spaces of shared joy and sorrows. But today, urban lifestyles, migration, and technology have weakened those bonds. We live closer than ever in physical terms, yet farther apart in spirit. A smile, a greeting, or a helping hand can break down invisible walls. In an age of solitude, rediscovering the neighbour is rediscovering ourselves.

Shreyas Warkad,  
Chhatrapati Sambhaji Nagar

### Platform transparency

THE MINDSET of aggregation platforms needs to be acknowledged. They realise that most gig workers live paycheck to paycheck. They use this fact to simply wait out any protests or strikes. The new labour codes, though a good beginning, do not do enough to grant gig workers enough bargaining power against these enterprises. ("Gig worker concerns must be addressed fairly, IE, January 2") Transparency needs to be brought in not just for delivery fees, but for the platform fees that these apps charge as well. How the "priority" and "VIP" delivery fees are shared with drivers needs to be revealed too.

Anany Mishra, Noida

### For stability in Iran

IRAN IS, once again, witnessing a people's protest against the theocratic state that has throttled their freedom and democratic rights ("In Iran, a new moment of reckoning," IE, January 2). Iranians are facing livelihood issues like rising food and fuel prices, suppression of women's rights and the gross violation of freedom of speech. This time around, the uprising demands that seem to be affecting the idea of a university in India today. One, the increasing traction of the argument that academic rigour and academic schedules are a source of stress to students in higher educational institutions (HEIs). Two, the requirement of minimum discipline in an HEI is being seen as antithetical to student creativity. Three, requiring students to attend a minimum number of classes is being seen as stressful. In November, the Delhi High Court ruled that no law student in the country should be barred from taking examinations due to insufficient attendance.



DIHRAJ NAYYAR

US PRESIDENT Donald Trump is no fan of either multilateralism or multilateral partnerships — the UN, NATO, G20, G7 have all faced either his ire or cold shoulder. That made the recent announcement of the US-led Pax Silica initiative — to secure supply chains in critical minerals, energy, semiconductors and AI — noteworthy. The nine member countries do not include India. That the initiative is implicitly directed at countering China makes India's exclusion puzzling. Or does it? In Trump's transactional world, India's exclusion makes perfect sense.

Each of the nine member countries — the US, Japan, South Korea, Singapore, the UK, the Netherlands, Israel, the UAE and Australia — brings something to the table either in terms of high technology capability or resources (energy/minerals). India isn't even among the "guests", which include Canada (resource-rich) and Taiwan (semiconductors). In the things that preoccupy today's great power politics — semiconductors/AI and energy/minerals — India doesn't bring much to the table.

This is a result of India not giving enough attention to high technology and minerals over decades. The statistics are telling. India spends just 0.6-0.7 per cent of its GDP on R&D. And this percentage has been largely unchanged for the last two decades.

If India wants to be relevant in the emerging geopolitics, it has to be a player in the emerging geo-economics. The only other option — call it the third way — for India to get a seat at the global high table in this new era is to leverage the one thing it does have — its market

## Classroom teaching is essential. HC ruling misses that

member, the Delhi High Court ruled that no law student in the country should be barred from taking examinations due to insufficient attendance.

Before analysing these issues, let us go back to the idea of a university and its objectives.

In his classic 19th-century work, *The Idea of a University*, John H Newman emphasised that a university is a transformative space where knowledge, freedom, and purpose combine to create enlightened individuals who can steward the transition to a just society. He argued that the autonomy of an institution is best left to its leader. The creation of original knowledge and the larger public good should be the key idea of a university.

Today, universities have drifted from their core mandate, and the faculty are

called upon by the state and regulators to play roles for which they were never trained. These include the policing of students. Requiring the faculty to perform such roles leads to what Fleming calls the bureaucratisation of universities. Dealing with such matters taxes the energy of faculty members. Failure to perform such tasks can lead to a fair amount of backlash against faculty members, especially from

Today, universities have drifted from their core mandate, and the faculty are called upon by the state and regulators to play roles for which they were never trained

parents. At times, institutions that judge universities lack insight into how universities work now.

The social milieu today is exerting pressure on students, and, indeed, academic environments often exacerbate mental health issues. While universities generally have a basic infrastructure to deal with such issues, they do not yet have specialised arrangements. They become easy scapegoats for student stress.

At the same time, regulators expect universities to follow an ambitious curriculum. Continued classes, assignments, and an effective evaluation system are needed for academic rigour. For a variety of reasons, some students are often unable to cope with this schedule. The choice between universities, then, is to either lower the bar or push students to meet the

requirements. Neither option is ideal. The university, then, becomes an easy target for what is a systemic and social problem. In several institutions, this takes a toll on academic rigour.

The Delhi High Court's latest verdict removes obligations to attend classes. Classroom teaching is essential to academic rigour. Teaching today faces a challenge from AI — the majority of whom come with rich histories and vibrant civilisational and cultural experiences — must offer a new vision and play a critical role in shaping the new order.

The online mode will especially be insufficient for students of highly technical subjects like law. The attendance relaxation mandated by the HC will, however, encourage the online mode.

The writer is vice chancellor, National Law University Delhi. Views are personal





## Unenviable choice

Growth-generating capital expenditure can affect fiscal targets

The Goods and Services Tax (GST) revenue of ₹1.74 lakh crore in December 2025 confirms just how narrow the government's fiscal policy space is. The December data reflect the economic activity in November, the second month under the new, reduced GST rates. December's revenues were marginally higher than the ₹1.7 lakh crore collected in November. This was expected. Any belief that the rate reductions would lead to an immediate and sustained increase in demand, and hence GST collections, was pure optimism. In reality, people are more likely to use that extra money to pad up savings or pare down debt, with increased consumption a more medium-term outcome. This happened following the income-tax rejig in Budget 2025 too, when the government effectively exempted people earning up to ₹12 lakh a year from income-tax. The GST and income-tax decisions were both welcome relaxations. However, at least for this year, they are going to cause the government more pain than gain. The most recent data on the government's accounts reflect this. Total tax revenue stood at ₹13.9 lakh crore at the end of November 2025, 3.4% lower than in the same period of 2024-25. On the other hand, the Centre's capital expenditure stood at ₹6.58 lakh crore in the April-November 2025 period, 28% higher than in the same period of the previous year. This jump in capital expenditure was balanced out by a much slower growth in revenue expenditure of 2.1%. However, of the two types of spending, the government has much less discretion over revenue expenditure, which comprises expenses such as salaries, pensions and interest on loans. These cannot be kept subdued for long.

The government has valiantly tried to bolster its earnings through the new excise and GST rates on tobacco products, not to mention the health and security cess on the manufacture of pan masala. However, since all these new rates and cesses will come into effect only on February 1, their full benefit will be felt only in the next financial year. Yet, the troubles for the government's finances do not end there. The remarkably low levels of wholesale inflation this year – averaging -0.08% so far – have also meant that the size of the nominal GDP would likely be smaller than in its budgeted. This means that several ratios pegged to it, most pertinently the fiscal deficit and debt-GDP, would automatically come in larger than earlier estimated. The Centre has displayed commendable fiscal discipline over the last few years. However, this year, it has placed before itself the unenviable choice of either pulling back on growth-generating capital expenditure, or risking missing its fiscal targets.

## Dangerous turn

Moscow and Kyiv must step back from escalation and push for peace

Russia's allegation that Ukraine launched a massive drone attack on President Vladimir Putin's country residence in the Novgorod region marks a deepening of the conflict in the nearly four-year-long war. Moscow claims that 91 long-range drones targeted the heavily fortified protected residence in northwestern Russia, a site previously used by Soviet leaders Joseph Stalin and Nikita Khrushchev. Russia has released a video of what it says is a downed drone and handed drone data to the U.S. claiming that it "proves" that Ukraine targeted Mr. Putin's home. Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has dismissed the allegation as fabricated. American media have reported, citing CIA officials, that Ukraine did not target the residence. But the CIA is an ally of Ukraine in the war and its assessment may not be viewed as entirely impartial. Ukraine has previously carried out sabotage operations within and outside Russia. Take, for example, the bombing of the Nord Stream pipelines in September 2022. It was initially blamed on Russia but led to the arrest of Ukrainian nationals in Poland and Italy last year. At the same time, it is Russia's responsibility to present credible evidence that Ukraine targeted the residence. But regardless of where the truth lies, the damage is already done. The fact that such accusations are being made – and believed by some world leaders – signals that the war has entered an alarmingly volatile phase.

The timing of these allegations is also significant. Russia's claim came close on the heels of Mr. Zelenskyy's meeting with U.S. President Donald Trump in Florida during which Washington reportedly offered security guarantees to Ukraine as part of a peace agreement. Mr. Trump had initially proposed a 28-point plan to which Ukraine responded with a 20-point plan. There were marathon talks involving U.S., Russian, European and Ukrainian officials. The alleged Ukrainian attack in Novgorod has dealt a blow to the fragile peace effort. Moscow has already said it will harden its negotiating position. Meanwhile, on New Year's eve, three Ukrainian drones struck a cafe and a hotel in Kharkiv in the Russian-held Kherson region, killing at least 27 people, including a child, and injuring over 50 others. Russia has intensified its strikes on Ukraine in recent months, leaving the country facing severe power shortages at the peak of winter. Taken together, the escalating attacks and the controversy surrounding Mr. Putin's residence should serve as urgent reminders to all parties that de-escalation cannot be delayed. If the war spirals, it poses grave risks to Europe and the world given the involvement of nuclear powers on both sides. The U.S., which is driving the peace talks, must redouble diplomatic efforts while maintaining pressure on Moscow and Kyiv to step back.

At the 30th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP30), at Belem, in November 2025, host Brazil quite fittingly placed waste at the heart of the climate agenda. Sizeable funds were committed to a new global initiative, No Organic Waste, NOW, to cut methane emissions. The Conference noted Circularity as the way to inclusive growth, cleaner air, and healthier populations. COP30 called upon cities to accelerate circularity initiatives where waste is recognised as a resource. Mission LIFE (Lifestyle for Environment), espoused by India at COP26, in Glasgow in 2021, calling for "deliberate utilisation, instead of mindless and destructive consumption" was strongly premised on the idea of circularity as well.

### Urban India, its growing problem of waste

Expanding cities and towns are an irreversible reality in growing India. The choice is between good and bad cities. Often, this choice gets translated into clean and pollution-free cities or waste-ridden, ugly urban areas. A number of studies suggest that Indian cities do not match up to global standards in providing a clean and healthy environment. Pollution is the talk of the town, posing questions to an aspirational India.

The National Capital Region (NCR) as well as many other cities in the country are also among the world's most polluted. Governments and regulators are at work, with courts also stepping in, but with limited effect. Citizen grievance is at its peak. The Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM), that ended open defecation in India within a specific timeframe, has the active goal of making the cities clean and garbage free.

It is estimated that cities in India will generate 165 million tonnes of waste annually by 2030, and emit over 41 million tonnes of greenhouse gases. By 2050, as the urban population grows to about 814 million, the waste burden could rise to 436 million tonnes. Without early solutions, these will result in grave levels of emissions, and creating havoc with peoples' health, the economy and the overall climate. The goal of Garbage Free Cities (GFC) by 2026 is an existential necessity, not a matter of aesthetics.

Under SBM Urban 2.0, about 1,100 cities and towns have been rated free of dumpsites, if not exactly free of garbage. Complete freedom from garbage, fortified by sustainable waste management and resource optimisation, is possible when all 5,000 cities and towns adopt the circular economy model, which underlines waste as a resource. India needs to move away from a linear to circular mode of waste management, with the twin objectives of



Ashvay Raut

is former Director General, Swachh Bharat Mission

minimising waste and recovering energy and other resources.

### Plastic, construction and demolition waste

The good thing is that more than half of Municipal waste is organic that can be managed through composting from a house to large bio-methanation plants. Compressed Biogas Plants (CBG) have created possibilities of generating green fuel from municipal wet waste, whereas complete combustion of this also yields power. More than a third of the waste piled in cities is dry, all of which is not recyclable. The demon in this category is plastic, posing a threat to the ecosystem and human health.

Plastic waste also poses the toughest challenge to waste management. Dry waste is dependent on the critical habit of efficient segregation at households before recycling is done through material recovery facilities, which need to be constantly augmented with the rise in the waste burden. Refuse derived fuel from dry waste, as a source of energy for cement and other industries, is still under consolidation. But there is much distance to cover for entrepreneurship and market linkages in these modes of circularity.

Construction and demolition waste – about 12 million tonnes is generated in a year – is a major city spoiler, as it causes pollution in urban centres. It is collateral damage from relentless construction, at times unplanned, in India's fast-growing economy. Unauthorised dumping of construction discards wherever there is space, by the roadside, or even city lanes, is a common sight in India.

Much of this waste can be reused or recycled as cost-efficient raw materials of substantial value. This will also cause less damage to the environment. Minor construction and demolition waste mixed up with other unsegregated household waste and dumped in waste bins do not help processing. The recycling capacity in India is rising but is not sufficient to match the rate of construction and demolition waste being generated.

What could help is ensuring more serious compliance with the Construction and Demolition Waste Management Rules, 2016, which seek to levy a charge on generators of high volumes of construction and demolition waste, besides setting out other parameters. The Environment (Construction and Demolition) Waste Management Rules, 2025 are to come into effect from April 1, 2026.

Wastewater is the other thread in waste management and circularity. Water and sanitation are state subjects and States need to take proactive steps to recycle wastewater and reuse it in agriculture, horticulture, and for

India needs to move away from a linear to a circular mode of waste management, minimising waste and also recovering energy and other resources

# Recasting sanitation with urban-rural partnerships

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The model in Satara district in Maharashtra is an innovative experiment

experimenting with innovative approaches to address this gap. The State has invested in more than 200 faecal sludge treatment plants in urban areas and encouraged co-treatment in 41 sewage treatment plants. These facilities are a backbone of treatment infrastructure to cities, but the challenge lies in extending their benefits to the villages that surround them. It is here that urban-rural partnerships show great promise.

### At the gram panchayat level

In Satara district, Maharashtra, such a partnership was put into practice. Satara city's faecal sludge treatment plant, with a capacity of 65 kilo litres a day (KLD), was operating below full capacity. Recognising this, four villages, Jakatwadi, Songaon, Kodoli, and Degaon, have been brought under an arrangement that will allow them to access the city's treatment plant.

Their septic tanks, often never desludged or emptied only at exorbitant rates by informal operators, will be serviced at regular intervals and in a safe way. A private service provider is to be engaged by the gram panchayats, under a contract, to provide scheduled desludging services every five years.

The costs will be recovered through a modest sanitation tax levied by the gram panchayats, ensuring affordability and accountability. A formal agreement between the Satara Panchayat Samiti and the Satara Municipal Council will allow authorised desludging vehicles from the gram panchayats to access the faecal sludge treatment plant and treat the sludge at no cost, making the arrangement sustainable and mutually beneficial.

But not every village can be linked to a treatment system of a city. Some will have to treat

industrial purposes. Water security in cities has a causal link with complex used water and faecal sludge management, as outlined under urban missions such as Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation (AMRUT) and SBM. With India's water stock inadequate to meet the needs of its population, recycling and reuse are the only ways out to meet increasing water demand.

### Hurdles before circularity

The path to achieving circularity is not an easy one, considering the multiplicity of actors. The smooth functioning of segregation of waste at source, collection logistics and processing, and aggregation and distribution are far from ideal. Recycled products face quality issues, marketing challenges and consequential financial feasibility.

Besides infrastructure, there are shortfalls in testing and monitoring. Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) has yet to extend to all categories of dry waste. Construction and demolition waste has issues of identification, tracing and tracking of its origin. This is an issue that has not been integrated in an ideal way with construction and building laws to ensure proper accountability. Inter-departmental coordination, stakeholder awareness, and incentive and penalty systems must vastly improve, with sharper focus to make meaningful circularity possible in city societies.

Resource shortfalls with municipalities for taking up circularity projects require early resolution. It is heartening that policymakers, experts and industrial houses deliberated on these issues at a national urban conclave in New Delhi recently while working out an agenda for urban rejuvenation. Last year, Asia-Pacific nations, at their meeting in Jaipur endorsed an Indian initiative of 'Cities Coalition for Circularity (C3)' for efficient knowledge and expertise sharing among cities and institutions of the region.

Citizens need to get a clear sense of profit and a true cause in order to be partners in the circularity movement. In a society that is becoming increasingly consumerist, the first R of the three Rs – 'Reduce, Reuse, Recycle' – looks a difficult proposition to achieve. With products and consumable items arriving in new incarnations each day, 'reuse' may become a tall order too. 'Recycling,' aided by technology and private enterprise and with sound policy backup, could emerge as a pillar of circularity. It could also be an assured way of helping India's cities and towns move away from swamps of waste while adding to national resources.

The views expressed are personal

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Learning and attendance

I am a professor and found the article, "Mandating student presence, erasing learning" (Editorial page, January 2), thought-provoking. The refusal of stasis is the most point to judge whether we are facilitating discovery or merely disseminating information. The question of curiosity versus compliance, quality of teaching and surveillance, coercion and dialogic encounters are bound to stir the mind. Ensure engagement of the mind. **Udai Bhan Singh,** Rae Bareilly, Uttar Pradesh

As a college student, I found the reflections on transforming student attendance rules to be accurate and a refreshing take. I would not miss a day if classes were engaging and worth the time they take. The experience of my friends in other institutes echoes how physical presence seems to be the priority for the administration in colleges while learning takes a back seat and critical thinking is forgotten. My peers and I often spend lecture time studying from YouTube or finishing pending assignments. It would be

transformative if more time was spent teaching students how to think, and not what to. **Avvishi Saxena,** Agra, Uttar Pradesh

### Contamination, right to life

A state that fails to protect its water sources from contamination cannot credibly claim to uphold the right to life under Article 21. The Supreme Court of India has repeatedly held that this right includes access to clean water and a healthy environment. When these are compromised, the constitutional guarantee becomes illusory. The

incident in Indore exposes the fragility of our executive machinery and the persistent disconnect between policy announcements and ground-level implementation. Flagship programmes such as the Jal Shakti Abhiyan, Swachh Bharat Mission and the National Water Mission risk being reduced to slogans in the absence of monitoring and accountability. **Suchhanda Banerjee,** Chandannagar, West Bengal

### Women's emancipation

The judgment of the Supreme Court, in *Belide*

*Swagath Kumar vs. State of Telangana & Another*, stating that financial dominance of a husband over his wife will not amount to cruelty and certain other findings will leave women in despair. Describing the situation of the wife, an engineer who was asked to resign and remain a housewife, and who had to plead with her husband to meet her daily needs, as a reflection of the "daily wear and tear of marriage", fails to recognise women's rights and constitutional guarantees. Further, to describe a man's total financial control of the

wife as a mirror reflection of Indian society is refusing to see ground realities. The Court seems to be oblivious to the plight of the women and its refusal to come out of the past reinforces male chauvinism. To describe the actions of the wife seeking action against the husband as "a gateway or a tool to settle scores" is refusing to see the helpless nature of women whose emancipation the Constitution seeks. **N.G.R. Prasad,** Chennai

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



# GROUND ZERO



Villagers stage a protest demanding that the Aravallis be saved, at Kotputli in Rajasthan. R.V. MOORTHY

## The hills are shaken with the sound of machinery

A 2-billion-year-old range has been battered and bruised by mining, waste dumping, and encroachment, say environmentalists and those who live in its shadow. The Supreme Court order accepting the changed definition of the Aravalli hills caused further worry, though it has since been stayed. **Ishita Mishra** reports on the people living in the foothills, who believe that decisions about the Aravallis should involve and benefit communities

In December 2025, to cope with the bitter cold in Haryana's Nuh district, a group of young men tried to light a bonfire outside an Aadhar service centre in Jimrawat village. Nuh is part of the Mewat region, which is characterised by the rugged Aravalli hills, agrarian plains, and rural landscapes.

It was a windy day. Trucks carrying stones hurtled by every five minutes, kicking up clouds of dust. The men were unable to light the fire. One of them yelled at a driver to slow down; another immediately shutted him.

"They belong to the mining mafia who are busy cutting the Aravallis day and night," said Kasim Khan, a septuagenarian.

The Aravallis stretch about 650 kilometres across Delhi, Haryana, Rajasthan, and Gujarat. In 2009, the Supreme Court had ordered a blanket ban on mining and quarrying in the Aravalli hills of Haryana's Faridabad, Gurugram, and Nuh (Mewat) districts. "Despite the ban, these trucks fearlessly make the rounds here," Khan said.



Khan remembered the time when the Aravallis were surrounded by green forests, housing diverse fauna. He said he has witnessed how human greed has exploited the hills.

This 2-billion-year-old geological formation is endowed with sandstone, limestone, marble, granite, and minerals such as lead, zinc, copper, gold, and tungsten. Mining and quarrying in these hills is not new. Since the 1990s, the Union government has laid down restrictions on these practices on several occasions.

The same issue made it to the headlines once again after the Supreme Court of India, on November 20, 2025, upheld a definition of an expert panel constituted by the Union Ministry of Environment, Forest, and Climate Change. The panel said that an Aravalli hill had to rise at least 100 metres above local relief, while a range comprised hills, slopes, and hillocks that are within 500 metres of each other.

Environmentalists criticised the order and expressed worry. They alleged that the lower ranges would no longer have the environmental protection they currently enjoy. They said that the new rule would leave the doors open for reckless exploitation of the hills, which regulate the climate of the region; support the recharging of groundwater; and serve as the "lungs" for the Delhi-National Capital Region (NCR) by preventing sand and hot winds from the Thar Desert from spreading eastward. After widespread protests, the Supreme Court stayed its November order on December 29.

### Life and livelihood in the foothills

Mohd. Habib, 63, from Ghaghas village in Nuh, is passionate about writing. "I Dilli ki Agra...Nuh, Jaipur aur Baitar...kalo pahad suhavo jao ke saath base Mewat (It's Delhi, then Agra...Nuh, Jaipur, and Baitar...Mewat lies along the foothills of the dark mountains)," he said, reciting the first poem he had penned about the Aravallis, his home and his source of living.

Rajuddin Meo, chairperson of the Mewat Right to Information (RTI) Manch, a citizen group that uses the RTI Act, 2005, to promote transparency in governance, said that most people in Nuh are

**MEO**  
Mining has lowered the water level in the area and climate change has adversely impacted rains. Due to this, agricultural produce has reduced.

**RAJUDDIN**  
MEO  
Chairperson, Mewat Right to Information Manch

either employed in agriculture or cattle farming. Niti Aayog has classified Nuh as one of the most backward districts of India.

"Mining has lowered the water level in the area and climate change has adversely impacted rains. Due to this, agricultural produce has reduced considerably in the region," he said.

Meo, who is part of one of the most rampant quarrying groups in the area, added that rampant quarrying has left the hills deserted. He said no plant grows on it. This deprives animals of their grazing space and burdens the pockets of their masters. "If the Aravallis are not saved, over 100 villages in Mewat will have nothing to do for their survival," said Meo, who has written a letter to the Prime Minister, the President, and the Home Minister, to put a blanket ban on mining in the Aravallis.

Following the Supreme Court order of 2009, Mufisa, a resident of Nuh who is a mother of five, said her husband began working at an illegal mining unit, a practice that continues due to strong local lobbies and administrative apathy. He died during the COVID-19 pandemic.

With no farming land, Mufisa has revamped the backyard of her house, to make coal out of wood. She places wood inside 10-12 feet tall, round structures covered with mud. The wood is burnt under controlled temperatures until it turns into coal which is sold at ₹25-20 to hotels on the Haryana-Rajasthan highway. In December, the Delhi government banned the use of coal and wood in tandoors, to curb pollution.

"We are uneducated people," Mufisa said. "If there are no animals and no farming, what can we do to survive?"

Nuh, a region dominated by Meo Muslims, has seen communal clashes recently. The people of this area are afraid of sending their men to work in neighbouring NCR and Western Uttar Pradesh or even Rajasthan.

"No one can ensure the security of our chil-

dren in the current environment. We have to keep them with us," said Shamima. Her son works as a daily wage and another takes animals to graze in the hills.

Arshad, from Baniyabaas Chaupra, is upset with the recent hue and cry over mining in the Aravallis. For years, he has been employed in a job that requires him to cut through the hills. Now, the forest department administration and the police remain on strict vigil after the matter became sub judice in the Supreme Court.

"I feel that the government should not give big tenders for mining in the Aravallis," Arshad said. "However, poor people like me should be allowed to cut stone. I sell one tractor of stones a day and earn merely ₹400-500. This is after the tractor rent, diesel charge, and labour charge are deducted. Most of my stone is either used by my own villagers or goes to the neighbourhood. It is our hill, why can't we use it."

Arshad added, "If we are not allowed to cut the hills, our children will either become thieves or commit petty crime to earn their living."

Rajni Saini, from Sammanwala in Nagaon, a cluster of nine villages which is emerging as a farmhouse hub due to its proximity to Delhi and Gurugram, disagreed. "The men of my village always did just one job and that was to break the Aravalli hills and sell stone. That risky job has left many dead, while several others have suffered permanent disabilities. All this was for a daily income of just ₹400-500. When we created awareness to stop mining in the hill, young men started studying. Many of them have recently got government jobs," he said.

**Covered in dust**

The residents of Ajitpura Kalan and Kujota village in Kotputli district of Rajasthan had been sitting on an indefinite strike to save the Aravallis. Their protest had lasted 145 days.

Ajitpura Kalan is home to one of the biggest cement manufacturing companies in Rajasthan. Though spread over several acres, the factory appears dwarfed by the deep pits carved into hills.

"In some places, they have dug so deep that the pits are now filled with groundwater. They use heavy motors to empty the pits and let out the water in our fields, flooding them and rendering them useless. Most pits are of the height of 4-5 storey buildings. People are afraid to even go near these pits," said Netram Takhar, head of Ajitpura Kalan village.

Takhar alleged that the company blasts the hills, which leaves the entire area, with over 500 homes, shaken. At many places, he said the company asks people to vacate their homes before the blasting, which mostly occurs at night. "The houses which are close to the mining area have developed cracks. But if we complain to the com-



A protest at Kotputli in Rajasthan. The poster reads, "The Aravallis are our heritage and our breath." R.V. MOORTHY



India's oldest mountain range does not need 'sustainable mining' plans. It needs to be protected and conserved. No mining is sustainable.

**NEELAM AHLUWALIA**  
Environmentalist

pany officials or administrative officials, they slap cases on us for 'disturbing law and order'," he said.

Amusha Kumari, a student of Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya in Pawana Ahir village of Kotputli, said students remain awake through the night fearing that the school might collapse due to the continuous blasts. Her school was part of the government's initiative to provide free residential education, boarding, and lodging for adolescent girls from disadvantaged communities in rural and educationally backward areas.

In Alwar's Lalawandi village, the trees, which look snow clad but are actually covered in dust, bear testimony to the ordeal of the people. Tejwan Kumar, whose house is next to the village temple, said half the villagers were either suffering from respiratory diseases or skin allergies.

Rajasthan produces 70% of the country's sandstone. It has a high burden of silicosis cases, particularly in mining areas. In the State, more than 1,000 mining leases have been given in the Aravallis, according to government data. Environmentalists say if the new definition of the hills, as initially approved by the Court, is allowed to stay, only 1,048 Aravalli hills out of a total 12,081 in Rajasthan would meet the 100-metre elevation criteria, leaving the entire range exposed to miners.

"Many people have left their homes as there is no solution to our problems. Those who decided to stay only spend their days at doctors' clinics. No one here dares wear white as clothes turn grey from the dust within minutes," said Panni Lal from Lalawandi. He claimed that his phone sometimes shows an AQI of 800, nearly double that of the AQI in Delhi.

Sandhya, whose porch cracked after a recent blast, said that administrative officials blamed her for it, alleging that her home was made up of poor construction material. "Poor people's houses are built like this. If you destroy that as well, where will we go," she asked.

The villagers also said that mining units never help them in any way. They argued that the units simply exploit natural endowments, which belong to the people living around them.

"They never hire villagers to work in the factories of these mining units. They think locals will form unions and stop them from over-exploiting their resources," said Vineet.

### Fighting for rights

On December 29, due to a public outcry, the Court paused its order. It proposed the constitution of a high-powered committee to analyse whether "sustainable mining" or "regulated mining" within the newly demarcated Aravallis, notwithstanding regulatory oversight, would result in any adverse ecological consequences.

After its decision, members of the Aravalli Virasat Jan Abhiyan, a citizen-driven campaign aimed to protect the range, issued a statement. They said that whatever is left of the Aravallis must be declared an ecologically sensitive region and that no destructive activities should be allowed any more.

"India's oldest mountain range does not need 'sustainable mining' plans. It needs to be protected and conserved. No mining is sustainable. Plus, all the definitions which seek to limit the Aravallis need to be scrapped," said Neelam Ahluwalia, an environmentalist who is part of the people's movement to save the Aravallis.

The Aravalli Virasat Jan Abhiyan also demanded that the Supreme Court direct an independent, cumulative social and environmental impact study of the entire Aravalli range across four States to ascertain the damage caused by mining, real estate, encroachments, and waste dumping, and to evaluate its role as a critical water recharge zone, climate regulator, pollution sink, and wildlife habitat. They said that the study should also assess the extent of damage inflicted on the people's health and livelihoods across the range.

On December 30, the Aravalli Virasat Jan Abhiyan continued with its protests to save the hills. At Ambedkar ground in Kotputli, women held up placards demanding that the Aravallis be declared as Kashitriya Dharohar (a national asset). Some of them held the death certificates of their loved ones, who had succumbed to silicosis or accidents while mining. The People's Union for Civil Liberties and Rajendra Singh, known as the 'water man of India', also attended the protest.

"You all have seen how the Supreme Court stayed the Delhi High Court order granting bail to Kuldeep Singh Sengar in the Unnao rape case. The woman had protested for her rights. When all of you protest for your rights, the Court will meet our demands to save the hills," said Mahesh Yadav, a retired veterinary doctor, affiliated with the Congress, the Opposition party in Rajasthan.

**Preserving resources**

Kailash Meena, 60, an environmentalist who led the protest in Kotputli, said India needs to learn how to protect its natural resources. "Only countries that have preserved their natural resources and found alternative construction methods, which are now considered synonymous with development, have truly become developed. In India, we are exploiting all our natural resources just for the pleasure of the 5% of rich people, while the rest of the country is struggling to survive," said Meena.

In his three-decades-long fight to save the environment, Meena said he has never felt so restless. "Mai chahta hu Dilli ka jina dum ghute...tabhi Dilli ko samajh aayega humara dard (I think only if Delhi gasps for breath will they understand our condition)," he said.





## Telangana Today

FOR LOCAL TO GLOBAL NEWS

# 08

# VIEWPOINT

HYDERABAD, Saturday, January 3, 2026



**DEREK O'BRIEN**  
Tirumool Congress leader

“No, this is not the Christmas we know. Harassing those earning a living selling Santa Claus caps on the roadside. Beating up those wearing them. Tearing down Christmas trees



**MALLIKARJUN KHARGE**  
Congress president

This is the same Indore city that has clinched the 'Cleanest City' title for the 8th consecutive time. It's shameful that, due to the BJP's incompetence, people here are desperate for clean water



**DEEPIINDER GOYAL**  
Eternal Founder

Our 10-minute delivery is enabled by density of stores around your homes. It's not enabled by asking delivery partners to drive fast. Partners don't even have a timer on their app”

## Socialist voice from citadel of Capitalism

The New Year has heralded a defining moment for New York, as the citadel of America's celebrated capitalism has been stormed by a socialist of South Asian descent. Zohran Mamdani, who has taken over as mayor, has vowed to implement audacious plans to govern the city with a focus on the welfare of the working class. The historic significance of the occasion was not lost on observers; it marked several firsts for America's largest city of eight million residents. The 34-year-old Mamdani is the first Muslim of South Asian origin to be elected to the top post, the first to use a Quran to take oath and the youngest mayor in over a century. The inauguration ceremony in Manhattan captured the generational, political, ethnic and religious magnitude of Mamdani's ascent. He was unapologetic about his democratic socialist credentials. In his public speech after the swearing-in ceremony, he underscored the city's diversity, vowed to protect the underprivileged and reiterated his pledge to attempt to tax the wealthy and corporations to fund his proposals, which include universal childcare and free buses. He placed himself in a lineage of New York mayors who focused their tenures on uplifting the city's most vulnerable. Many New Yorkers — some with hope, some with trepidation — expect Mamdani to be a disruptive political force as reflected by his address that promoted core campaign promises of universal childcare, affordable rents and free bus service. Now the countdown begins as he sets out to fulfil his lofty promises to deliver an agenda of safety, affordability and abundance — where the government “looks and lives like the people it represents”.

**Mamdani's rise as New York's Mayor underscores the inclusiveness of American democracy**

The occasion also sent out a message to Democratic Party leaders struggling to regain footing at the national level: The excitement surrounding Mamdani's ascension may suggest a path forward. Significantly, Mamdani declared that he would govern the way he campaigned — as a democratic socialist — and said that meant he would focus on working-class New Yorkers, regardless of criticism from naysayers. The highlight of the spectacular inauguration was the presence of Senator Bernie Sanders, a democratic socialist at the vanguard of the Democratic Party's liberal wing. Sanders, whom Mamdani calls his inspiration, defended the new Mayor's agenda, saying affordable housing is not a radical policy but is the right and decent thing to do. Apart from highlighting his core campaign issues, Mamdani mentioned a few ideas that could have broader appeal beyond his traditional support base, including reforms in the property tax system, an issue that has frustrated New Yorkers across the ideological spectrum. Mamdani's elevation is a testament to the vibrancy of American democracy, in which a seven-year-old immigrant from an African nation can come to the city to realise his dream of becoming its mayor at 34. In the process, he demolishes ethnic stereotypes, overcomes entrenched bureaucracy and ideological status quoism of his own party.

## America turns inward

**Trump's National Security Strategy sends a clear message: power is transactional, commitments are conditional**



**BRIG ADVITYA MADAN (RETD)**

I just finished reading all 33 pages of America's latest National Security Strategy, published on December 4 and formally submitted to the US Congress. This annual document is not just a routine bureaucratic exercise; it is a window into how Washington sees the world and how it intends to engage with it. Read against the backdrop of the intense geopolitical churn of the past year, the document clearly signals a recalibration — if not a quiet retreat — of American global ambitions under the Trump administration.

At the outset, one striking conclusion emerges: the United States appears to have adjusted itself to a transformed geopolitical environment. The tone is pragmatic, transactional, and inward-looking, markedly different from earlier strategies that spoke the language of global leadership, a rule-based order, and collective responsibility.

A region-wise reading of the document — covering the Western Hemisphere, Europe, Africa, the Middle East, and Asia — reveals how Washington's priorities have shifted.

### The Western Hemisphere: Security Begins at Home

The most pronounced focus of the strategy is the Western Hemisphere, particularly Latin America. Here, the US identifies three primary threats: illegal migration, drug trafficking and transnational crime. This emphasis aligns closely with President Trump's domestic political narrative and explains his recent remark, on December 19, that he does not rule out the possibility of war with Venezuela.

The document also sends a clear warning to “non-hemispheric competitors” — a thinly veiled reference to

China — to stay out of the region. In invoking this stance, the US appears to be dusting off an old doctrine with modern intent: Latin America is once again being defined as America's exclusive strategic backyard. This reassertion suggests that Washington's global engagement will now be selective, beginning with the protection of its immediate neighbourhood rather than distant theatres.

### Europe: Burden-Sharing and a Nod to Russia

Europe occupies an interesting and somewhat unexpected space in the strategy. The document makes an explicit reference to the Monroe Doctrine, first articulated in 1823 by President James Monroe, which warned European powers against interference in the Americas while promising reciprocal restraint by the US in European colonies. The historical recall is telling: it signals a desire to redraw boundaries of responsibility.

Equally significant is Washington's acknowledgment that lasting peace in Europe requires addressing Russia's security concerns. This realism explains President Trump's apparent willingness to accommodate some of President Vladimir Putin's demands in the ongoing Ukraine negotiations. The message to Europe is unmistakable: the US wants European nations to stand on their own feet and assume primary responsibility for their defence.

Notably — and perhaps surprisingly — the strategy makes no territorial claims on Greenland or Canada, despite earlier rhetoric suggesting otherwise. This restraint reinforces the impression that Washington is narrowing its strategic focus rather than expanding it.

### Africa: From Aid to Trade

In Africa, the shift is conceptual but consequential. The new strategy advocates moving away from an aid-centric relationship to one driven by trade and investment. Africa's rich reserves of natural resources and critical minerals are explicitly highlighted, indicating that American engagement will be guided by economic utility rather than developmental idealism.

This approach reflects a broader pattern in the document: partnerships will be pursued only where tangible economic benefits accrue to the United States. Moral leadership and capacity-building — hallmarks of earlier US engagement — find little mention.

### The Middle East: Stability Over Transformation

The Middle East section is relatively restrained and focused on core interests. The US prioritises keeping the Strait of Hormuz and the Red Sea open and navigable — critical arteries for global energy and trade. Ensuring Israel's security remains non-negotiable, as does preventing a resurgence of terrorist groups, most of which the document claims have been weakened or neutralised following recent Israel-Iran hostilities. Gone is the rhetoric of democracy promotion or large-scale military intervention. Stability, not transformation, is the guiding principle.

### Asia: Strategic Stability, Not Strategic Competition

Asia marks one of the most notable departures from earlier US national security strategies. Previously, China and Russia were explicitly framed as primary strategic competitors. This time, the language shifts towards “restoring strategic stability” with both powers. This change helps explain President Trump's recent conciliatory gestures towards Beijing and Moscow.

While the US reiterates its commitment to a “free and open Indo-Pacific” to safeguard American economic interests, it also signals reluctance to play an expansive strategic role in the region. The Quad — comprising the US, India, Japan and Australia — is acknowledged

**New Delhi will have to continue its tightrope walk between Europe and Russia, while simultaneously making efforts to stabilise relationship with China**

as important, but Washington is equally keen to preserve mutually beneficial economic ties with China.

On Taiwan, the document strikes a careful balance. It asserts that US military superiority will deter conflict, but quickly adds that Washington will not support any unilateral change to the status quo. Importantly, China is not portrayed as a military threat but as an economic challenge — an interpretation that fundamentally reshapes the strategic calculus.

Yet, there is a crucial contradiction. On December 19, President Trump signed the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), authorising a staggering \$900 billion in defence spending to maintain a free and open Indo-Pacific. The Act hints at expanded engagement with India through the Quad from 2026 onwards, suggesting a desire to maintain equilibrium — or contain China — in contested waters, such as the South China Sea. This duality underscores the tension between strategic restraint and security hedging.

### A Transactional America — and Lessons for India

Perhaps the most telling aspect of the strategy is what it omits. There is no reference to a rules-based international order, nor any emphasis on international law. Compared with the 2022 National Security Strategy, the difference is stark. The US no longer presents itself as the guarantor of global order or the principal financial supporter of international institutions. The burden, it seems, is no longer worth carrying.

Instead, the strategy is unapologetically transactional. Partnerships will be forged — or sustained — only if they deliver clear economic advantages. Geopolitics without profit holds little appeal. For India, this evolving American worldview carries several important takeaways. New Delhi will have to continue its delicate tightrope walk between Europe and Russia, especially as US-Europe relations become more conditional. Simultaneously, India must make earnest efforts to stabilise its relationship with China, even while maintaining its strategic partnership with the US amid ongoing tariff turbulence.

Above all, India must recognise that the US military is likely to remain focused primarily on the Western Hemisphere, play a limited role in Asia, and engage globally only when core American interests are directly threatened. Strategic autonomy, diversified partnerships and economic resilience will therefore be essential for India in this new, inward-looking American era. The message from Washington is clear: the age of America as the world's default security provider is fading. Nations must now prepare to navigate a world where power is transactional, commitments are conditional, and global leadership is no longer guaranteed.

(The author is a retired Army Officer)

### Letters to the

Editor

### Wake up

The claim of India as “mother of all democracies” rings hollow today. The Election Commission of India stands accused of a blatant nexus with the BJP, orchestrating special revision of electoral rolls, to purge opposition voters, especially minorities and marginalised. Today, millions face disenfranchisement, yet no authority stirs: neither the government, ECI, nor Parliament and courts respond to these grave allegations. Thus, the assault on the ballot box mocks our Constitution. Voters, the true sovereign, are abandoned. Wake up, India.

**PH HEMA SAGAR,**  
Secunderabad

### ISRO's milestones

ISRO's heavy-lift launch vehicle LVM3, popularly called *Bahubali*, successfully placed a 6,100 kg US communications satellite into orbit, marking one of India's heaviest commercial payload missions. The launch demonstrated ISRO's growing capability in the global heavy-lift launch market and strengthened India's position as a reliable space partner. The mission was undertaken through NewSpace India Limited under a commercial arrangement with the US customer, reflecting deepening space cooperation between the two countries. The precise orbital insertion and smooth mission profile highlighted the maturity of India's launch technology and the expanding role of ISRO in international satellite launches.

**N SADHASIVA REDDY,** Bengaluru

### Vital ecosystem

The Supreme Court's concerns over mining in the Aravalli Hills highlight the need for stricter enforcement of ecological protections. The Environment Ministry's directives to States must be implemented rigorously to preserve this vital ecosystem and prevent irreversible damage from unchecked development.

**TS KARTHIK,** Chennai

### Careless acts

The New Year's Eve blaze at ‘Le Constellation’, killing over 40 and injuring 100, ranks among Switzerland's worst disasters. Evidence and possibilities point to lit celebratory candles held near a wooden ceiling in a packed bar, triggering the fire. The tragedy underscores how minor, careless acts, even if unintended, in crowded spaces can make an avoidable fatal.

**PV PRAKASH,** Mumbai

### What a downfall!

It only took just a few days for Indore to tumble down from the chart of the best city to the worst, because of the contaminated water crisis, causing deaths and hundreds hospitalised due to gastrointestinal issues. The leakage occurred in the densely populated Bhagirathpura area, where sewage seeped into the water supply. The horrifying incident has raised serious concerns about drinking water safety, not only in this city, which was ranked the cleanest for eight consecutive years, but in other Indian towns and cities as well. It highlights the urgent need for regular monitoring of drinking water pipelines and faultless design. Also, it is shocking to note that when the residents of the affected locality repeatedly complained about water quality, no effective measures were taken by the authorities. Laxity, neglect and dereliction on the part of the civil authorities have paved the way for this crisis. The incident is a lesson for all local body administrations — to be alert, accountable, responsible, efficient and prompt in serving the public.

**M PRADYU,** Kanpur

### India in the

hotspot

■ Khaleej Times

### Why Indian millionaire flow to UAE keeps growing

As global wealth mobility accelerates, the UAE — the undisputed magnet for migrating Indian millionaires — is set to further strengthen its position in 2026, according to wealth management experts. The country is expected to attract more high-net-worth individuals than any other destination this year.

■ The Guardian

### Sewage blamed for deaths in India's 'cleanest city'

Sewage-contaminated drinking water is being blamed for killing at least 10 people, including a baby boy, and sending more than 270 others to hospital in Indore, ranked India's “cleanest city” for the last eight years. Residents of a congested, lower-income neighbourhood had been warning authorities for months.

■ Dhaka Tribune

### Jaishankar's visit should not be seen politically

Indian External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar's visit to Dhaka should not be viewed through the prism of bilateral relations or politics, Foreign Affairs Adviser Md Touhid Hossain has said, adding that whether the visit would ease tensions between the two countries would be clear in the future.



# OPINION

The  
**Hinduistan Times**  
ESTABLISHED IN 1924

{ OUR TAKE }

## Taking on Trump, from the Big Apple

Zohran Mamdani's mayoral stint will have a resonance beyond New York

**Z**ohran Kwame Mamdani, 34, took the oath as the mayor of New York as the old year made way for the new. Later on New Year's Day, he attended a second public ceremony, watched by thousands of New Yorkers braving the winter chill, and announced that he would govern as a democratic socialist and "will not abandon my principles for fear of being deemed radical". When read with his promise to "deliver an agenda of safety, affordability and abundance — where government looks and lives like the people it represents", it becomes clear why the mayor of an American city — not just another city but the world's financial capital — has emerged as a leader whose election attracted global attention. Mamdani's rise as a politician has been extraordinary. But the world is passing through a period of extraordinary changes, and Mamdani's rise signifies the entry of a rank outsider — a socialist of South Asian descent and Muslim faith in the US at the height of the Make America Great Again (MAGA) movement — into the establishment or the arrival of a new voice that promises to force a course correction in the ongoing political discourse across many world capitals. Which is why Mamdani's tenure in office will be keenly watched in the US and beyond.

The NY mayoral vote had become an ideological contest, not just because President Donald Trump made it personal. Mamdani introduced a radical civic agenda around public utilities and social inclusion, which is in sharp contrast to Trump's transactional politics and anti-immigration agendas that have captured the imagination of America, and even many European nations. During his campaign, Mamdani spoke for the city's working class and promised free childcare, free buses, a rent freeze for about one million households, and free-run grocery stores. In his inaugural speech as mayor, he spoke about New York's diversity, food, and culture in the midst of a polarising climate that villainises immigrants and prefers social exclusion even at the cost of hurting the economy. He also reiterated his intent to tax the wealthy and corporations to fund his welfare proposals. For sure, his politics will test multiple fault lines — immigration, ethnicity, faith, role of the State, ownership of resources — and how he stands up for what he deems right will have a bearing not just on the rising tide of conservatism but also shape the political resistance to it. Considering that the tide of political conservatism is not restricted to the US and the global Left now sees a potential icon in Mamdani, the latter's tenure in office will have implications beyond the shores of America. His success could give a lift to democratic socialist ideas in the US and elsewhere.

Can Mamdani live up to these expectations? Mamdani is a political outlier with little experience in government. That has so far helped him win new voters, especially the young or Gen Z crowd, who identify with Mamdani's criticism of the rich and the backing for the underdog. In the short period since he shot into the limelight, Mamdani has shown the skill set to negotiate with his adversaries. His December meeting with Trump ended on a pleasant note with an approving President saying, "I want him to do a great job and will help him do a great job". Mamdani will need a lot of this charm to navigate the tricky terrain of American politics, and find the funds to implement his civic agenda.

{ THIRD EYE }

Barkha Dutt



## India must speak out against the fringe's attack on Christmas

The only way to stop bullies is to look them in the eye. Our condemnation should be unequivocal and immediate

**A**s India celebrated the onset of a new year, a bunch of videos on social media platforms showed a group of men brandishing swords and machetes in a residential colony in Ghaziabad, Uttar Pradesh — no more than an hour from the national Capital. The group, which calls itself the Hindu Raksha Dal (HRD), posed happily for photographs behind a long wooden table on which the swords were displayed. The purported video then shows the men going from house to house handing out swords, claiming that what happened in Bangladesh could happen in India too, and, therefore, Hindus must protect themselves.

The police arrested 10 members of the HRD, but its chief, Pinky Chaudhary, was able to flee and is evidently absconding. That did not stop him from releasing a video on X.com, from a verified, blue-tick handle, in which he declared with brazen impunity and lack of fear that the group had achieved what it wished for. This was one in a series of such chilling incidents this past week. Vandalism and mob attacks are being normalised. And silence or even subtle distancing is hardly an effective, or even appropriate, response anymore.

Christmas and New Year's celebrations were the specific target of Right-wing vandals and mobs. In Rajpur, a mob of 40-50 men carrying sticks forced its way into a prominent shopping mall and went on the rampage, pulling down balloons, decorations, Christmas trees, and even a Santa Claus prop. The mall says that property worth at least ₹15,00,000 was damaged or destroyed altogether. The ugly assault coincided with a Chhattisgarh Bandh called for on Christmas Eve by the Sarv Hindu Samaj and other Hindutva groups, to protest alleged reli-

gious conversions. The bandh is said to have been triggered by community clashes over the burial of a person from a family that had converted.

Ironically, the Rajpur mall was also closed to the public because of the bandh. But testimonies from mall employees reveal that the mob came charging at the staff, overpowering the security guards and demanding to be identified. They asked people to prove if they were Hindu or Christian. One employee is quoted by newspapers as saying that the men kept shouting that they did not want to see Santa. Seven men reportedly linked to the Bajrang Dal were arrested and denied bail by a Rajpur court. In response, 300 men blocked an arterial road outside the police station and reportedly blocked traffic for nine hours.

In Delhi's popular Lajpat Nagar market, a mob accused a group of women wearing Santa caps and started heckling and threatening them. The video shows the women shocked as a bunch of men order them to "go straight home". They objected to the public display of the security guards demanding to be identified.

Earlier the same week, a district vice-president of the BJP, Anju Bhargava, stormed into a church and charged at a visually impaired woman. The video shows her leaning over and grabbing the woman by her face.

Bhargava is heard telling her that she is blind in this life and will be blind in the next one too. Once again, the mob assault was justified in the name of protests against alleged forced conversions.

**THE PROBLEM WITH MOB VIOLENCE IS PRECISELY ITS NUISANCE VALUE. MANY PEOPLE CHOOSE TO REMAIN QUIET AND SIDESTEP THE EXCHANGE WITH MOBSTER-MEN WHOSE RESPONSE IS NOT WORDS, BUT STICKS**

## Between strategic autonomy and global opportunity

**I**ndia stands at an inflection point — a country aspiring all-round growth navigating stormy global currents while staying true to an increasingly self-defined vision of national purpose. The year gone by has been marked by turbulence. Shifting US policy priorities, recalibrated global alliances, and economic headwinds forced India to rely less on old assumptions and more on its own resilience and agency. As we step into 2026, India's ascent is neither linear nor assured. It is being rewritten in real time in trade corridors, diplomatic parleys, and strategic sea lanes and shaped by a pragmatic pursuit of national interests that goes beyond the comforts of old partnerships.

One of the clearest shifts has been in India's relationship with the US. What once appeared to be a steadily deepening strategic embrace rooted in shared democratic values and a mutual interest in countering regional hegemonism in the Indo-Pacific has become more transactional and, at times, fraught. Under the second Trump administration, the framework that underscored two decades of growing cooperation has given way to a harder-edged, commerce-first calculus. Trade sanctions, punitive tariffs, and a US foreign policy that now prioritises domestic industry have unsettled India's strategic calculus. The 2025 US National Security Strategy departs from decades of outward-looking engagement and recasts alliances as "investments whose returns are constantly re-evaluated." This posture has weakened the implicit umbilical security cord, which was increasingly being

taken for granted in India not as an allied strategy but as an insurance from a like-minded partner.

From the Indian perspective, the drift in bilateral relations from strategic alignment to transactional tie-ups is a sobering reality check. After decades of Washington viewing India as a cornerstone of its Indo-Pacific strategy, recent developments suggest that the US may be recalibrating its priorities toward internal economic challenges and away from global commitments.

The root cause seems to be US anxiety over its declining capabilities. India's response has been to double down on multi-alignment by broadening its diplomatic portfolio rather than hinging too heavily on any single great power. New Delhi's engagements with the European Union, Russia, ASEAN, Gulf States, and even nuanced dialogue with Beijing signal a more complex, diversified diplomacy. This approach leans into India's long-held commitment to strategic autonomy, an idea that rejects strict alignment

and embraces flexible partnerships calibrated to national interests.

Economic and trade diplomacy too has evolved against a backdrop of unpredictability. The imposition of steep US tariffs on Indian exports, alongside broader global tariff wars, tested India's export competitiveness. In 2025, But India's exporters responded with remarkable adaptability by diversifying markets and product lines.

India has also finalised free trade agreements with the UK, Oman and New Zealand. Negotiations with the EU, Australia, Canada, Chile and Israel are promising. At macro, robust domestic demand and sound macroeconomic management have kept growth on track, with strong consumption and uptick in manufacturing activity signalling resilience even as the world economy faces turbulence and unpredictability.

Indeed, Indian industry watchers now forecast dynamic expansion in sectors ranging from warehousing and logistics to high-tech manufacturing. If sustained, this could hasten India's emergence as a global industrial hub, aligning with government incentives such as Production Linked Incentive (PLI) schemes and a focus of developing its infrastructure for the future.

But economic vigour is only part of the larger narrative reshaping India's global role. The architecture of Indian power — not just military, but technological and diplomatic — continues to expand. Domestically driven initiatives in defence modernisation, advanced technology, and space exploration are increasingly emblematic of this trend.

Concerted investments in naval expansion, air force upgrades, and indigenous defence systems are more than hedges against insecurity; they are statements of strategic intent

and need not be tagged by their religion, we would need to extend the same logic and exemption when criminals of other faiths behave similarly.

Besides, several of these criminal assaults are being done in the name of "saving" Hinduism. And so, more and more people need to speak up and say — not in our name.

I always believe that a majority of Indians recognise that our pluralism and our diversity are our strengths. We celebrate these just as we celebrate all our festivals. We also know that such incidents only diminish us.

But the problem with mob violence is precisely its nuisance value. Many people choose to remain quiet and sidestep the exchange with mobster-men whose response is not words, but sticks. I understand that instinct for personal safety. But the only way to stop bullies is to look them in the eye.

We should not duck the argument anymore. Our condemnation should be unequivocal. Remember, the next time it could be us, or our children, out for a stroll at a Christmas Bazaar when the mob comes with threats and sticks.

Barkha Dutt is an award-winning journalist and author. The views expressed are personal

that resonate well beyond South Asia. While new alignments with old adversaries may surprise traditional analysts, they reflect an India that perceives opportunity in complexity rather than in binary boxes. A diversified foreign policy, combined with an ever-expanding economic base and demographic dividend which needs to be tapped prudently, situates India well for sustained growth even amid global turbulence. As one 2026 economic outlook suggests, India could remain the world's fastest-growing major economy, benefiting from structured reforms, digital innovation, and its expanding consumption-driven market.

That said, challenges loom. The spectre of geopolitical friction in the Indian subcontinent due to internal turmoil in some of these countries, the continued need to deploy troops on the border, the unpredictability of US policy shifts, and global economic uncertainty underscore how much remains in flux. Yet it is precisely in navigating volatility that India's strategic identity is being refined. India should no longer be a supporting act in others' theatres, it needs to assert itself as both an autonomous actor and a bridge across competing global blocs.

In 2026, India's rise will not be measured solely by quarterly growth figures or diplomatic communications. It will be charted in the country's ability to align ambition with action. It will need to transform constraints into leverage and uncertainty into strategic opportunity. This is the nuanced ascent of a nation no longer waiting for favourable winds, but building its sails to chart its own course in the global wind.

Anil Wadhwa was secretary (East) in the ministry of external affairs and ambassador to Italy, Oman, Thailand, and Poland. The views expressed are personal

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Concerted investments in naval expansion, air force upgrades, and indigenous defence systems are more than hedges against insecurity; they are statements of strategic intent

## Israel seeks to harvest Iran's domestic unrest

**O**n December 29, Israeli Prime Minister (PM) Benjamin Netanyahu visited the US to brief President Donald Trump on Iran's rebuilding of its missile capabilities after June 2025. Given that Trump has repeatedly declared the Iranian nuclear issue a "closed case", Netanyahu is seeking US support for an offensive against Iran's ballistic missile capabilities. This comes at a time when the sharp depreciation of the Iranian rial sparked protests among merchants, which quickly turned into broader protests reflecting widespread frustration with the economic crisis after the snapback of the previously lifted UN sanctions in August 2025. From a defensive posture aimed at containing threats, Israel has used the politics of insecurity, its superior military and intelligence capabilities, and US backing to maintain a sus-

tained offensive initiative to eliminate the threat posed by Iran and its network of allies. Having demonstrated near-complete freedom to operate militarily over Iran, Israeli leaders seek to realise its long-term objective of structurally dismantling Iran's military capabilities through military operations. Israeli leaders are keen to use the unrest in Iran to bring about internal collapse or regime change. At a time when popular perceptions of Israel in the West are deeply polarised, a sympathetic administration in the White House is seen by the Israeli leadership as offering a limited window of opportunity to realise long-term objectives on Iran.

Iran, the only country to develop a 2,000-km missile without first having nuclear weapons

capability, maintains that its missile programme, led by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), is "aimed at deterring aggressors from any idea of attacking Iran". Given Israel has decimated Iran's "axis of resistance" and the US-Israeli attacks on Iranian nuclear facilities have denied the deterrence of a near-threshold state, ballistic missiles are at the very core of Iran's deterrence and defence. Tehran believes that the performance of its domestically produced ballistic missiles validated Iran's doctrine of deterrence by punishment.

During the June war, Iran's defensive strategy relied on launching salvoes of over 500 missiles and drones, saturating Israeli air defences, and forcing them to exhaust their interceptors, which are not only more expensive but also have longer production timelines. The asymmetry in battlefield economics and vulnerabilities arising from Israel's relatively small size limit its ability to sustain an offensive against Iran. Iran also relies on its much larger cruise missile arsenal to pose a credible threat of escalation against US interests in the region in the event of US aggression against Iran.

Facing renewed pressure to limit the range of its missiles, Tehran has maintained that it will not negotiate on its defensive capabilities.

Washington's coercive diplomacy and Israel's maximalist approach to security have made Iran's response more determined to preserve and strengthen its deterrence capabilities. Iranian President Masoud Peshkian has signalled a conciliatory approach to the protests by instructing his interior minister to address their "legitimate demands" and by appointing a new Central Bank governor. However, the appointment of Ahmad Vahidi, who was the interior minister during the Mahsa Amini protests, as deputy commander-in-chief of the IRGC also signals the resolve of the security apparatus. Israel's over-reliance on military solutions will only deepen regional States' view of Israel as a destabilising actor.

Deepika Saraswat is an associate fellow at Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses. The views expressed are personal

{ EDITOR'S PICK }

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

### TOBACCO VERSUS PUBLIC HEALTH

**T**he steep hikes in excise duties applicable to a range of tobacco products — the new rates will be applicable from February 1 — go beyond revenue calculations. They are a public health tool, as well, to fight tobacco-related diseases. The WHO's Framework Convention on Tobacco Control. The book details how an unlikely proposal from civil society organisations acquired enough momentum to become a global public health treaty.

Heather Wipfli, a US-based political scientist, explores the movement against tobacco consumption in *The Global War on Tobacco*, with a focus on the WHO's Framework Convention on Tobacco Control. The book details how an unlikely proposal from civil society organisations acquired enough momentum to become a global public health treaty. It also discusses globalisation's impact, in terms of liberalisation of laws, FDI, etc. on the tobacco industry and the FCTC's interaction with politics, legislation and economics of ratifying countries, through country case studies.

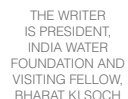


The Global War on Tobacco  
Heather Wipfli  
2015



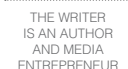
# A JOYLESS DAWN

Crans-Montana will return one day to being a place of ski slopes, pine forests and global sporting glamour. The World Cup downhill runs will again draw elite athletes; the golf greens will welcome professionals and tourists. But this community — and Switzerland more generally — has been changed by the like this strip away abstraction. They remind us that behind every safety manual are real people whose lives depend on vigilance. They also remind us of something more fragile: the thin line separating joy from devastation. Across the first half, people who have spent years with their lives counted down, laughter and careless abandon. In this Swiss valley, the year began instead with grief, ash and a silence that will echo for a long time. The task now is twofold: to mourn honestly and fully, and to suffer relentlessly. That means asking the difficult questions: how can we exist, capacity control, flame safety, nightclub regulations and crowd management — and answering them without defensiveness or delay. Because no community, however affluent or organised, is immune to disaster. And no life should ever be lost simply because it was built for celebration became a trap.



As climate shocks intensify and hydrology collapses, the region must rediscover its oldest wisdom: agreements anchor stability, and shared water demands shared responsibility

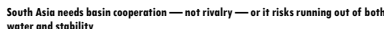
**AT  
VANTAGE**



A new year is a symbolic reboot because frankly, nothing really changes at the stroke of midnight except maybe our perspectives that are strengthened by liquid courage

# Shared Waters, Shared Fate

*The Himalayan melt, collapsing aquifers and fragile governance demand a new regional water ethic grounded in basin cooperation, ecosystem restoration and negotiated trust*



Basin-wide management offers the institutional mechanism through which such integration can be realised in trans-boundary contexts. Unlike bilateral treaties centred on volumetric allocations, basin-wide approaches recognise hydrological interdependence and prioritise shared risk management, ecosystem health, and benefit-sharing. Initiatives such as the Ganga–Brahmaputra–Meghna basin cooperation under the T2:3R programme demonstrate how multi-country

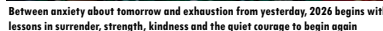
Decoupling strategies supported by water footprint analysis and efficiency-driven agricultural transitions enable economic growth without proportionate increases in water consumption, a necessity in a region where agriculture accounts for nearly 80% of water use under intensifying scarcity. Restoration and re-wilding initiatives expand these benefits by regenerating degraded watersheds and restoring natural hydrological processes. By enhancing groundwater recharge, moderating floods, and improving soil fertility, ecosystem restoration simultaneously strengthens climate resilience and livelihood security. Source-region cooperation further extends this logic upstream. Recent Nepal-China collaboration on glacial lake outburst flood monitoring highlights how shared early warning systems can transform glacial hazards into col-

This exactly is what ancient Indian political thought mentions—treating agreements not as signs of weakness, but as instruments of stability and continuity. Texts like the *Arthaśāstra* and inscriptions recording land grants, trade privileges, or shared water management show a preference for negotiated order over perpetual conflict. In modern times, this wisdom is relevant in reminding us that agreements work best when they focus on mutual benefit, predictability, and shared resources—be it trade corridors, rivers, or climate systems. Ancient practices could inform problem-solving through dialogue, respect for obligations, and continuity across regimes—principles that remain essential for sustainable international cooperation today.

*Views expressed are personal*

# The 2026 Playbook

*The past year has imbued us with important lessons that pave the path for our rejuvenated, refreshed, and resolute selves in the new year*



A new year is a symbolic rebirth because frankly, nothing really changes at the stroke of midnight, except maybe our perspectives that are strengthened by liquid courage. Life is an unpredictable mess that keeps surprising us. I remember the students in this school of hard knocks. And every year, at the end or in the beginning, life reiterates this to us. When I look back at the year gone by, I can't help but accept that I learned more in 2025 than in the past year. I'm predicting that for various reasons, 2026 will be a watershed moment for me. It taught me that I could be strong, weak, and strong again, and drilled in me the power to get up after a fall. If one prospect in the past year, it presents a blueprint for how to proceed. If you don't want to, to help us along the way.

The last year fanned and fed my ambitions with professional highs but kept me humbled with sudden crises; ensuring that my feet stay firmly on the ground. Frustrations, setbacks, and challenges. Some moments were numerous as my classmates to accept that we cannot

The world around us may become difficult to recognise, your mind may be drawn in opposite directions, any and every thing may seem joyless, and always never enough. This year could be an opportunity for you to get closer to spirituality (not religion, though it can mentor you). As you'll seek the true meaning of life, practise self-wellness that includes distancing yourself from situations and people who drained your energy, you will have finally put yourself first. We live in an age of hyper religious-

The new year can be arduous; but remember, that when you feel lost or particularly knackered, we already have the playbook for 2026. I've been feeling anxious and I'm sure you have as well. A new year is just a change of the calendar, which psychologically can mean so much more. It can mark new beginnings or the continuation of old patterns. It contains mystery and hope as fate plans its machinations. Just keep repeating to yourself that we have the will; we can make a difference. Even though my heart flutters, I can't wait for the lessons that 2026 will bring. And I know there will be many.

*Views expressed are personal*

## WHO SAID WHAT



In Indore, there was no water—just poison being distributed, while the administration slumbered like *kumbhakarna*. Mourning has spread from home to home, the poor are helpless and to top it off, arrogant politicians are blaming the widows. Those whose hearths have gone cold needed solace; the government served up hubris instead. People repeatedly complained about the dirty, foul-smelling water—yet why worry about the water if the sewage mix into the drinking water? Why wasn't the supply shut off in time? When will action be taken against the responsible officers and leaders? These aren't "freebie" questions—they're real questions for the poor. Clean water isn't a favor; it's a right to life. And for the murder of this right, the BJP's double-engine government, its negligent administration, and its callous leadership are responsible. In the hands of the BJP, the *Pradesh* has now become the epicenter of misgovernance—deaths from cough syrup in one place, rats in government hospitals claiming children's lives in another, and now deaths from drinking sewage-water in yet another place. The poor die. *Mod ji*, as always, remains silent.



## When 'fair' is tone-deaf

Zomato founder's remarks expose widening gap between platform rhetoric and lived reality of delivery partners

**Z**OMATO AND BLINKIT Founder Deepinder Goyal's comments suggesting that the quick-commerce ecosystem operates in a "fair" manner come across as condescending and reveal a troubling lack of sensitivity towards delivery partners. They were made against the backdrop of a strike called by gig and platform workers on December 31, demanding better compensation and working conditions—context that makes the remarks particularly jarring. While claiming that the gig economy is "one of India's biggest organised job-creating engines", Goyal would do well to recognise that these jobs are anything but organised. Delivery partners are not on company rolls, their incomes are not fixed, and their pay is flexible in the most precarious sense of the word—subject to unilateral cuts. Data from staffing firms shows that base pay per order in high-density zones has fallen sharply: from ₹22-30 in September to ₹15-27 in November, and now to as little as ₹10-15.

Nor are the estimated 12.7 million gig workers entitled to the benefits available to blue-collar employees in conventional firms. Yet, even these are not the demands being made. The workers' asks are modest and reasonable—compensation and benefits as envisaged under the Wage Code, safer working conditions, and a ban on 10-minute deliveries. Each of these deserves serious consideration. It may be true that q-commerce deliveries often originate from nearby dark stores, making a 10-minute window theoretically feasible at modest speeds. But the same logic does not apply to food delivery, where restaurants may be located at a considerable distance, often nudging riders into taking risks to meet unrealistic time-limits. It is also true that these platforms employ large numbers of gig workers. But it bears remembering that the system attracts and retains workers not because it is "fair", but because alternatives are scarce.

That reality also explains why many delivery partners likely reported for work on December 31 despite the strike call—missing a day's income is simply not an option for many. Add to this the reports that some platforms offered payouts of ₹120-150 per order between 6 pm and midnight on New Year's Eve, and the pressure to log in becomes obvious. Few workers can afford to pass up such earnings, however temporary. None can dispute the importance of e-commerce or quick commerce to the economy, the opportunities they have created for small merchants or the scale of direct and indirect employment they generate. The capital invested and the entrepreneurial effort involved deserve recognition. But that cannot come at the cost of losing sight of the welfare of those who keep the system running.

Delivery partners must be treated as partners, not as expendable inputs in the pursuit of growth, market share, and valuation. The new labour codes, to their credit, recognise this reality. They mandate welfare, accident and health benefits and require aggregators to contribute 1-2% of annual turnover to a dedicated social security fund. It is also true that entrepreneurship in India has long been burdened by red tape and regulatory friction. But flexibility granted to business must be exercised with responsibility. Fairness, in the end, is what workers experience on the road, order after order. Even if Goyal's intent was to defend a business model or clarify operational realities, the tone and framing risked sounding dismissive of genuine concerns. This is not a question of free speech. It is a question of corporate responsibility.

## The World Cup is Nike's to lose versus Adidas

**WHEN THE FIFA World Cup** kicks off in North America in June, the trophy won't be the only prize up for grabs. Nike Inc and Adidas AG will be battling on and off the pitch to win sales and to raise the profile of their brands in the US and around the world. With the games hosted in its home markets, and with Elliott Hill in place as chief executive officer for long enough to make a difference, the tournament is Nike's to lose.

But Hill must see off the challenge from Adidas, led by Bjorn Gulden, who'll be looking to cement the German firm's position as a leader in sports-inspired fashion and using the brand's buzz to capture a bigger slice of the market for products that help footballers kick more powerfully.

With the World Cup spread across the US, Canada and Mexico, Nike has the natural advantage. North America is its biggest market, contributing more than 40% of sales in its most recent fiscal year. While the company is still struggling in China, helpfully Nike sales in North America are growing again. The company also sponsors the US and Canada teams. But it's not just the sporting nations that matter these days.

Sport has undergone a "Kardashianisation", where individual star power overshines club or national loyalties, and Nike has a strong roster here too.

Hill became Nike CEO in October 2024. It takes about 18 months for new products to go from design room to store. So the timing is perfect for a suite of new cleats and kits. For example, Nike's teams will be wearing its Aero-Fit cooling fabric for the first time, which Hill likened to "air conditioning for the body", to help athletes cope with what experts fear may be extreme temperatures.

And in a shot across Gulden's three-striped bow, Nike is stepping up its efforts when it comes to football gear that can be worn off the pitch. It recently unveiled Hollywood Keepers, a streetwear collection based on the bold styles of 1990s and early 2000s goalkeepers. Versions to be worn by on-pitch goalkeepers will be unveiled closer to the World Cup, giving a strong hint of what Nike's team uniforms will look like.

The fresh kits and kits will be backed by Nike's muscular marketing budget, estimated at about \$5 billion annually by RBC. Given the home crowd and such a high-profile opportunity to win with sport, as Hill describes his strategy, we can expect the full force of the Nike machine to be applied in June. It's warmed up with a youth-level street football tournament called Toma d'Juego, which means 'Take the Game', taken place in Los Angeles and most recently Miami, and will arrive in another 20 cities around the world in 2026.

But Nike won't have things all its own way. Adidas typically outperforms in football, given its rich heritage with the game. It is also providing the official ball for the tournament.

Gulden's strategy is to take its success in shoes and clothing worn every day into performance wear, where Hill is also majoring. But Gulden isn't neglecting Adidas's style credentials. While some fans will want replica jerseys, others may prefer a pair of sneakers in team colours. Jamaica, which will Adidas sponsors, lends itself well to just that kind of collection. Gulden has talked in the past about making the clothes that sportsmen and women wear more stylish. Rather than that fashion being a distraction, he wants the teams Adidas sponsors, including host nation Mexico, to be excited about wearing its gear.

Hill must see off both Adidas and upstarts to make the most of the World Cup opportunity. Crucially, he must also avoid any self-inflicted wounds, such as Nike being criticised for making the women's track-and-field kit too revealing ahead of the 2024 Olympics. And the Kardashianisation of sport poses its own risks, as individual players can be unpredictable. Remember Cristiano Ronaldo rejecting Coca-Cola at the delayed UEFA Euro 2020 games in 2021?

But Hill can deliver some killer kits without any known goals, there is all to play for in the summer tournament.



ANDREA FELSTED  
Bloomberg

## THE EAGLE AND THE DRAGON

AS LONG AS TRUMP REMAINS IN POWER, THERE IS LITTLE CHANCE OF A RESOLUTION TO THE SINO-AMERICAN CONFLICT

# The US' post-Trump China strategy

**W**ITH THE UNITED States in the hands of an unstable president, diplomacy is not the answer for a conflict-prone US-China relationship. The striking contrast between US President Donald Trump's intrinsic volatility and Chinese President Xi Jinping's strategic resolve plays to China's great advantage—and means that effective conflict resolution is a task for the post-Trump era.

It wasn't always this way. Diplomacy was at the forefront of Sino-American engagement in the early 1970s. Well-practised in the art of grand strategy, Henry Kissinger and Zhou Enlai, answering to President Richard Nixon and Chairman Mao Zedong, masterfully crafted a Cold War triangulation that redefined great-power relations. In the intervening years, leader-to-leader summits became the template for maintaining bilateral ties.

But the rise of politically constrained, egocentric leaders—often deluded into believing that they possessed superior skills of personal persuasion—made disputes between the two superpowers exceedingly difficult to avoid, let alone resolve. Neither side could afford to be seen as weak, and Sino-American conflict resolution became an exercise in saving face.

The emergence of new strains of nationalism in the US and China has also hampered diplomacy, which derives its legitimacy from domestic politics. The US is in the grip of a destructive Sino-phobia. Notwithstanding America's corrosive polarization, anti-China sentiment enjoys broad bipartisan support. The US diplomatic agenda reflects this increasingly strident bias.

Despite its one-party system, politi-

**STEPHEN S ROACH**  
Faculty member, Yale University and former chairman of Morgan Stanley Asia



cal considerations are equally important in China. Xi's power rests on his promise to achieve the Chinese Dream, or "the great renewal of the Chinese nation." But without sustained economic growth, Xi risks failing to keep that promise and facing a wave of public and party anger. That makes China's growth shortfall, which partly stems from its ongoing conflict with the US, especially concerning. The economic ramifications of a mounting "rejuvenation deficit" have undoubtedly constrained Chinese politics.

Fragile egos exacerbate the problem. Rhetorical misuses are blown out of proportion. When leaders lack the self-confidence to shrug off criticism, the hair-trigger reactions of personalised diplomacy backfire. Still, many cling to the belief that leader-to-leader summits—the pinnacle of such diplomacy—hold the key to US-China conflict resolution. Nothing could be further from the truth.

There have been 22 such summits since the breakthrough Nixon-Mao meetings in 1972. Most of them, apart from the 1979 summit between Deng Xiaoping and Jimmy Carter that established formal diplomatic relations, have accomplished very little. Two glitzy summits between Xi and Trump in 2017—a formal dinner at Mara-

Lago and a ceremonial gathering in Beijing's Forbidden City—were followed quickly by the onset of tariffs and the first wave of the US-China trade war in 2018-19.

Trump and Xi risk repeating the same cycle in 2026. After a brief meeting in October on the sidelines of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum in Busan, South Korea, they have tentatively agreed to hold two leader-to-leader summits in 2026. Yet

without clearly defined agendas, these summits are unlikely to reshape bilateral relations. The best that can be hoped for is status on the contentious issues of trade, technology, people-to-people exchange, and Taiwan. But even that might be optimistic: The Trump administration's new \$11 billion arms package for Taiwan could be a fresh source of Sino-American instability.

As long as a belligerent Trump, or one of his acolytes, remains in power in the US, there is very little chance of a sustained resolution to the Sino-American conflict. On-again, off-again "deals" offer no hope for lasting stability, not least because of their reliance on the conflicts they purportedly aim to resolve—without conflict, there can be no deals. At the same time, China is far from a white knight providing sta-

On-again, off-again "deals" offer no hope for lasting stability, not least because of their reliance on the conflicts they purportedly aim to resolve

# Adam Smith and American independence



**AMOL AGRAWAL**

The author teaches at the National Institute of Securities Markets

The US' independence and Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* both complete 250 years in 2026, and hold fascinating insights on the progression of modern economy

**2026 MARKS THE** 250th anniversary of American independence and Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* (WoN). It is really interesting how these two landmark moments in world have shaped our past, present, and future. While WoN gave birth to modern economic thinking, the US' independence established a modern economy.

Adam Smith's WoN was truly a *tour de force* work. Its full wordy title is *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*. It suggests that Smith was seeking answers to what determines certain countries to become rich. Smith argued that the wealth of a nation is determined by the productivity of a nation's resources. The productivity, in turn, depends on factors like the division of labour, capital accumulation, specialisation, freer markets and trade, lesser government, role of institutions, and so on. The initial questions and answers by Smith continues to inspire and influence economists even 250 years later. The Nobel Prize in economics for 2025 was also given to three economists who pointed that it is technology which determines growth of a nation. Most economists (if not all) will argue that their quest to understand economic development eventually takes them to the pages of WoN.

American independence was driven by years of struggle against British colonial rule. The 13 colonies on the US' east coast were under British rule from 1607 onwards. From 1756 to 1763, the British incurred heavy costs

fighting a seven-year war with the French. To recover the costs, British imposed heavy taxes on the local Americans, leading to huge protests and boycotts. The protests eventually turned into the American War of Independence from 1775 to 1783. However, to unify the people, American nationalists declared independence on July 4, 1776, which is now celebrated as American Independence Day.

Smith's classic was published on March 9, 1776, four months before the declaration of American Independence. Smith discussed the US extensively (258 times) in his tome. He stated that even though the US was not as prosperous as Great Britain, it was expanding rapidly. He added how the population would double in the US in 20-25 years compared to Great Britain and Europe, which would take 500 years! The wages and interest rates were higher in the US compared to Great Britain due to high fertility of land. He also writes extensively on how silver mining in the US led to lower prices of silver.

Smith even wrote that the US should not transition from being an agricultural nation to an industrial country. He said that "the principal cause of the rapid progress of our American colonies" is because "their whole capitals have hitherto been employed in agriculture", and that the

US had "no manufactures" except for some household goods driven by agriculture. The British merchants also traded in the American agricultural goods. He cautioned that if Americans switched strategies and granted a "monopoly to such of their own countrymen as could manufacture the like goods", and "divert any considerable part of their capital into this employment", then "they would retard, instead of accelerating".

Adam Smith was highly popular amidst the US' founding fathers not just for WoN but also for his another classic *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Thomas Jefferson and James Madison read and referred to Adam Smith. Jefferson even recommended books to his fellow colleagues saying that "in political economy I think Smith's WoN the best book extant..."

The most interesting connection between the US' founders and Adam Smith comes via Alexander Hamilton, the first Treasury Secretary. Hamilton wrote "Report on Manufactures", where he disagreed with Smith's advice and laid down a path for the US' industrial progress. Without directly mentioning Smith, Hamilton writes, "There still are, nevertheless, respectable patrons of opinion unfriendly to the encouragement of manufactures." To usher industrialisa-

tion, Hamilton wrote about the need to give bounties (subsidies) to industry, implement tariffs, restrict exports, and so on. In other words, Hamilton broadly disagreed with Smith on almost all fronts. This silent debate between Smith and Hamilton on the US' future continues to be constant fodder for economic historians. Few suggest that there were strong disagreements between the two, whereas others say it is overstated.

Whatever be the nature of these debates, Smith would be amused about how his name is associated with American progress on two opposite views. The first view is that of Hamilton disagreeing with Smith and paving the path for an industrial nation. This view states that state-driven industrial policy leads to economic progress. The second view is Smith being associated with the US becoming a liberal and free market economy. Glory Liu of Georgetown University in her book *Adam Smith's America* traces how generations of Americans have read and reinterpreted his ideas to champion the cause of free markets. Adam Smith was central to Ronald Reagan's Presidential campaign, with supporters remarking Smith neckties.

It is quite a remarkable coincidence that American independence and WoN will be celebrating 250 years in 2026. The irony cannot be lost as President Donald Trump will be ushering in the celebration of the country's founding much of what the US and Smith have stood for in the past 250 years.

While Smith is the father of modern economic thinking, the US' independence established a modern economy

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Repairing global trade

A free-trade agreement (FTA) is a hedge against uncertainty in the garb of bilateralism. US President Donald Trump's trade interventions jettisoned multilateral rules. They undercut the World Trade Organization's (WTO) ability to arbitrate fairly and swiftly. In response, nations did what traders have always done in turbulent seas—cut side-deals, diversify routes to bypass singular dependence. US

isolationism must fade, but it will not disappear. The world is not WTO-centric order. The deeper damage lies in precedent. Major powers can no longer be relied upon. And trust, the WTO's true glue, has lost the bind. Reviving it would require reform and earnestness from big economies. That said, bilateral and plurilateral agreements are unlikely to retreat. Speed, specificity, and geopolitical signalling is their USP, which the WTO cannot replicate. The feasible hybrid

thus becomes the WTO being a base for arms and FTAs as fashioned superstructures.

—R Narayanan, Navi Mumbai

### Protecting gig workers

There is an urgent need for the legal protection of gig workers who, through online platforms, are facilitating delivery of goods and services of both small businesses as well as corporates while helping consumers. The central government

must enact a special law of 'social security' for such workers. It matters of insurance cover, health benefits, disability benefits besides minimum allowances for the day. A separate fund should be in-built, and costs be borne by businesses and consumers, with both deductions reflected in each computer-generated bill. They deserve to work with dignity.

—Brij B Goyal, Ludhiana

Write to us at [letters@expressindia.com](mailto:letters@expressindia.com)



The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Indore tragedy

Diarrhoea deaths a blot on India's cleanest city

IT'S a tragic irony that India's cleanest city, Indore, has witnessed at least 10 deaths due to a diarrhoea outbreak caused by contaminated water. Leakage in the main drinking water supply pipeline has exposed thousands of residents in the Bhagirathpura area to a public health hazard. This is clearly the outcome of administrative negligence, and the Madhya Pradesh government should not shy away from taking strict action against officials at all levels. The sorry state of affairs has compelled the National Human Rights Commission and the MP High Court to intervene. The troubling truth is that the authorities tasked with protecting the health of citizens swung into action only after lives were lost. This malaise, however, is not confined to Indore; it's a nationwide phenomenon. Formation of inquiry committees, announcement of compensation and suspension of junior officials have become all-too-familiar exercises in damage control.

It was on New Year's Eve that Prime Minister Narendra Modi laid stress on the mantra of 'reform, perform and transform'. He highlighted the need to simplify procedures and make systems more friendly for ease of living. But how can ease of living be ensured when citizens are deprived of basic needs such as clean air and water? The 'double-engine' governments in Delhi and MP have woefully failed on this front.

Viksit Bharat@2047 is a distant goal. It's the here and now that matters more to the people. Fancy acronyms like PRAGATI (Pro-Active Governance and Timely Implementation) and SWAGAT (State Wide Attention on Grievances by Application of Technology) would mean nothing if they are not backed by concrete action on the ground. The Supreme Court has repeatedly asserted that the right to a healthy environment is part of the fundamental right to life under Article 21. The Indore tragedy shows how easily this right can be violated when urban infrastructure is poorly maintained. The bottom line: cleanliness rankings, smart city labels and governance slogans cannot mask systemic neglect.

Nimesulide ban

A necessary check on unsafe medicines

THE Centre's decision to ban the manufacture, sale and distribution of oral formulations of nimesulide above 100 mg is a long-overdue corrective in India's drug regulation regime. Widely prescribed and easily available across the country, nimesulide has long occupied a grey zone between clinical utility and well-documented health risks, particularly liver toxicity. The ban, issued under the Drugs and Cosmetics Act after expert review, reflects a growing willingness of regulators to prioritise patient safety over market convenience. Scientific evidence has consistently shown that higher doses of nimesulide significantly increase the risk of hepatotoxicity, sometimes with fatal consequences. That there are safer alternatives for pain and inflammation management only strengthens the case for withdrawing high-dose formulations.

What makes this decision significant is the context in which nimesulide has been consumed in India. The drug has often been sold over the counter, prescribed casually for fever, body ache and even cough-related symptoms, sometimes in combination formulations of dubious therapeutic value. The move to curb high-dose oral forms sends an important signal against irrational drug use. Many countries have either restricted or never approved nimesulide precisely because of these safety concerns. Yet, the ban also exposes deeper systemic issues: weak enforcement, poor prescription discipline and the persistence of combination drugs that escape rigorous scrutiny.

The challenge now lies in implementation. State drug controllers must ensure swift withdrawal of banned stocks and strict monitoring of pharmacies. Doctors need clear advisories on alternative treatments and patients must be informed that higher doses do not mean faster or better relief. More broadly, this episode underscores the need for a proactive, evidence-driven drug policy rather than reactive bans after years of widespread use. Public health cannot afford to lag behind commercial momentum.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, SUNDAY, JANUARY 3, 1926

**Ground tax in Lyallpur**

A GREAT deal of excitement has been caused in Lyallpur by the proposal of the government to enhance what is called the ground tax, which is levied on building sites in the town. While, on the one hand, the extremely scanty and faulty publication and the complex nature of the subject matter of the notices inviting objections within two weeks is a source of genuine and widespread dissatisfaction, on the other, grave exception is taken to the very assumptions on which the proposed assessment is sought to be made and the arbitrary classification of building sites. In the first place, in the matter of computing returns for sites alone, ridiculously small deductions are made in the proposed plan of assessment for returns for the amounts invested in the building structure. It appears as though in this respect, the desire to bring in larger revenue has stood in the way of proper account being taken either of the cost of building or the prevailing or even average rates of interest. The manner of estimating the price of building sites, too, is stated to be anything but correct or just. Instead of taking the average of land prices over a sufficiently long period, what is said to have been done is that the prices in 1919-20 — which was admittedly a period of extraordinary boom in building site prices — have been taken to serve as a basis for the proposed assessment. Thirdly, the classification of building sites in the town as proposed in the reassessment plan is facing serious objections.

Free speech and media control

Freedom of speech and its consequent dissent-and-control argument just took a whole new turn



JYOTI MALHOTRA

AS we all wish each other a joyous new year, 2026, two bits of information cannot have escaped the mind's eye. The first, that India has overtaken Japan to become the fourth largest economy in the world, a fact that should certainly push each of us towards a self-congratulatory pat on the shoulder even as we sing, in unison, all the stanzas of Vande Mataram — no matter the uneven data glares at you as you look a bit deeper, for example the rising coefficient of inequality.

The second bit of news, somewhat more worrying, is the staggering 14,875 instances of free speech violations recorded through 2025, including nine killings (eight journalists and one social media influencer), 117 arrests, including eight journalists, and 11,385 instances of Internet censorship.

This report, compiled by the Mumbai-based Free Speech Collective, is a sobering description of India's free speech landscape. I've written about this in these columns before — which is, that Article 19, a fundamental right in the Constitution which guarantees freedom of speech and expression, gives with one hand but takes away with the other. So, for example, while Article 19(1a) grants citizens the right to freely express their thoughts, opinions and ideas via speech, writing, printing, visual representations or any other means, "reasonable restrictions can be imposed on this right" in the interest of sovereignty and integrity of India, public order, decency or morality etc. Question is, who is to decide what is "public order"?

We know why these restric-



DISSENT: There is a direct relationship between freedom of speech and democracy. FILE PHOTO

tions were placed in 1950 when the Constitution was born, when India was still emerging from the fires of the Partition. Over these past decades, some of those fires have been replaced by others, both real and make-believe. That's why journalists have always been at the frontlines of courage, pushing establishments to reveal more and more information in the interest of the people. Isn't that what democracy is about, anyway. Even Napoleon — and especially, Napoleon — knew that information is power.

Closer home, ruling parties have never shied away from controlling the narrative. The BJP is clearly the master of this universe. The Free Speech Collective in its report went on to add that in May 2025, the Centre asked X, the social media giant, to withhold over 8,000 accounts and another 2,354 in July. X also told the Karnataka High Court that it had received 29,118 requests from the government to remove content from January-June 2025 and had complied with 26,641.

Blocking orders from the Union Ministry of Information Technology, shutdowns and bans on apps have been rampant. Nor are ruling parties in non-

The World Press Freedom Index

illustrates why India's press freedoms teeter between the devil and the deep blue sea.

BJP-ruled states exempt from the temptation. The Ludhiana police have filed an FIR against 10 persons, of which nine are journalists, for posting "distorted and unverified content" about stories that Punjab Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann's helicopter was being used when he was on an official visit to Japan and South Korea from December 1-10. It is not known who was using the official chopper. Instead of clarifying what is going on, the sledgehammer has fallen on social media influencers and YouTube news channels.

And then of course there was the unusual threat last year by Telugu Desam MLA Gummanur Jayaram who said he would make reporters sleep on train tracks if they published "false information" on him.

In fact, 2025 began with the news that the body of an independent journalist from Chhatisgarh, Mukesh Chandrakar, 33, was found in a septic tank in Bijapur. Mukesh would often report on the "violence from the Naxal heartland", the *Indian Express* said, an indication of the threat from both sides of the fence.

Punjab's journalists are familiar with that situation, during the terrorism years and after. The World Press Freedom Index that is put together by the international NGO Reporters Without Borders (RWB) illustrates why India's press freedoms teeter between the devil and the deep blue sea. The good news is that India's media freedom rank has fallen from 159 (out of 180 countries) in 2024 to 151 in 2025. In South Asia, only Pakistan and Afghanistan fare worse. India, the world's largest democracy, finds itself in the company of Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Sudan, Syria and North Korea — as well as Russia. (India's fast

friend, Vladimir Putin, has been in power in one way or another for the last 26 years.)

The RWB makes two points about media freedoms, both of them obvious, but which bear repeating. The first is that there is a direct relationship between freedom of speech and democracy. A feisty press flourishes around the cut and thrust of argument between the ruling party and the Opposition and especially revels in a David-Goliath situation, when a small but plucky Opposition won't let a majoritarian ruling party rest.

The RWB's second finding is that there is a direct relationship between media censorship and funding. That "serious funding cuts" are a real blow to the media economy, already grappling with the expansion of influence of tech giants like Facebook and Google — and now AI. It's a no-brainer that the media is far freer in a market economy, which allows the diversification of its funding.

And then there's AI. The X handle of the Punjab unit of the Aam Aadmi Party @AAPPunjab has broken new party with an AI video that mimics — and criticises — Opposition leaders, ending with Chief Minister Mann's real persona "speaking for Punjab". It's not a cartoon. Congress leaders Charanjit Channi and Amrinder Raja Warring as well as Akali Dal leader Sukhbir Badal — almost — look like the way they do in real life. Worse, there are no disclaimers.

This deepfake mixing of truth with fiction is already familiar in the non-political space — we saw its use in media stories during Op Sindoor last year. But if political parties are also going to start employing AI video in the pursuit of influence, then it's clear that not just the rules, the nature of the game is being fundamentally changed.

The task to separate truth from fiction in the free speech *laxksman rekha* just became tougher. The freedom of speech and its consequent dissent-and-control argument just took a whole new turn.

“ A free press is one of the pillars of democracy. — Nelson Mandela ”

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Erratic memory, awkward moments

SY QURAISHI

ANYONE who has known me for more than a week will tell you that I have a terrible memory for faces and names. I meet people, share long conversations — even meals — and then fail to recognise them the next time we meet. This has led to more than a few awkward moments.

When I protest that my memory has always been poor, people assume it's an excuse. But it's a lifelong condition, and I have evidence going back to the age of 10.

One day, my elder brother asked me to post a letter on my way to school. Those were the days when bright red letterboxes still dotted every neighbourhood. I protested, "You know I forget things!" He smiled and said, "Don't worry. I'll teach you a technique. The letterbox is 186 steps from here. Just count your steps and you won't forget."

It sounded scientific enough. So off I went, counting carefully: 10, 20, 50, 100... Soon the number became more interesting than the task. I crossed 500, then 1,000, then 2,000. By the time I reached 7,000 — and the school — I suddenly realised my folly. The letter was still in my hand. The letterbox, wherever it was, had been left far behind.

Some people accuse me of having "selective memory" — conveniently forgetting what doesn't suit me. I insist mine is different: it's erratic memory. It remembers some things in absurd detail (like 7,000 steps) and discards others entirely (like the purpose of those steps).

The pattern continued into my professional life. Years later, as an Assistant Commissioner under training in Karnal, I stayed for two months in the house of Deputy Commissioner HV Goswami, as was the British-era practice. One evening, he hosted a small dinner, inviting the Superintendent of Police, the District Judge, the Superintending Engineer of the electricity board — and a poultry-farm owner (whose name, of course, I've forgotten).

They enjoyed their drinks. I, a teetotaler, played the guitar — one reason Mr Goswami had got me posted under him. It was a long, intimate and memorable evening.

About 10 days later, I was at the milk booth of the National Dairy Research Institute when a big Impala — the ultimate luxury car then — pulled up. A Sikh gentleman stepped out, smiled, and asked, "How is your music going?"

I stared blankly. "How do you know I play music?" I asked. He was offended. "Never mind," he said curtly, and walked away. Only later did I realise he was the poultry-farm owner from the dinner. Mortified, I went to his house to apologise. He laughed it off, but the embarrassment stayed with me.

Often wonder how I went through all those exams and reached where I did. Over the years, I have learnt to pretend. When asked, "Do you remember me?" I confidently say, "Of course. How can I forget you?" Some wise guys see through the lie and ask, "All right, then tell me my name." I feel stunned.

But that's not a question — that's an ambush.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Safety lapses cost lives

The tragic fire at a Swiss ski resort during New Year celebrations is a sobering reminder of how swiftly joy can turn into catastrophe. Reports suggesting the blaze was triggered by a lit candle igniting a wooden ceiling highlight the dangers of lax safety norms at crowded public events. Accounts of blocked exits and desperate attempts to escape show how panic multiplies casualties when emergency preparedness fails. The incident underscores the urgent need for strict enforcement of fire safety regulations at entertainment venues.

RUKMA SHARMA, JALANDHAR

Ensure gig workers' safety

Refer to 'Gig workers'; it is a matter of concern that gig workers face numerous hardships to earn a meagre payment of Rs 700 after working for 14 hours a day. They are often required to complete each delivery within just 10 minutes. In this relentless routine, many gig workers become victims of accidents. Several news reports have highlighted instances where gig workers are misbehaved with by customers. The Central and state governments must address the genuine demands of gig workers and ensure their safety and dignity.

RAVINDER KUMAR JAIN, LUDHIANA

India under global scrutiny

Refer to 'US lawmakers urge India to free riot accused Khalid'; without commenting on the prolonged pre-trial detention of Umar Khalid, as the matter is sub judice, the letter sent to the Indian Ambassador in Washington by a group of US lawmakers expressing concern underscores a simple truth: events in any part of the world are subject to global scrutiny. Violation of human rights or attacks on minorities by majority groups or vice versa cannot be kept under wraps in today's interconnected world. A large number of Indians living abroad reside in Christian- or Muslim-majority countries. Any attack on minorities in India, it must be recognised, has the potential to affect Indians overseas as well, making them vulnerable to backlash.

HIRA SHARMA, BY MAIL

Fix aviation governance

Apologies of Air India pilot offended as Canada flags alcohol use; the unfortunate incident has severely damaged the international repu-

tation of the Indian civil aviation industry, which is already passing through turbulence at home. The Civil Aviation Ministry has failed to adequately streamline the sector, while the DGCA has fallen short of meeting the expectations of both air travellers and aviation stakeholders. The Centre must intervene urgently to safeguard the future of civil aviation, a sector that holds immense potential for the country's growth and development.

JAGDISH CHANDER, JALANDHAR

Explore new markets

Apologies of 'Reforms must go the distance'; the Indian economy has emerged as the world's fourth largest and may become the third largest within the next three years. However, the distribution of per capita income remains highly unequal, with nearly 40 per cent of the country's income concentrated among just 1 per cent of the population. GDP growth of over 7 per cent in the last three quarters is encouraging, but the 50 per cent increase in US tariffs has hurt India's exports. A decline in exports will reduce domestic production. The porous situation along India's borders with Pakistan, China and Bangladesh has further complicated export prospects. There is an urgent need to explore new markets and boost exports to sustain current growth.

WG CDR JS MINHAS (RETD), MOHALI

The enduring legacy of Macaulay

Apologies of 'Macaulay in the cradle'; the impact of Lord Macaulay's advice continues to be felt nearly two centuries later, starting from early education. His 'Minute on Education' (February 2, 1835) proposed English as the medium of instruction in higher education, replacing Indian languages. This directive was implemented across colleges and universities with little resistance. The effects of this landmark decision remain visible today. Advances by Indian scientists in basic sciences, engineering, medical sciences, robotics and artificial intelligence have been aided by widespread proficiency in English, which enabled access to global knowledge and collaboration. A significant share of India's scientific progress can be traced to the far-sighted nature of Macaulay's educational policy.

VK ANAND, CHANDIGARH

# When fiscal policy is preventive medicine



PIYUSH SINGLA  
IT SECRETARY, J&K

THE downstream costs of a small packet of cigarettes, a gutkha sachet and a chilled sugary drink are big: hospital beds, lost wages, chronic disability and families pushed into medical debt. India's tax system has begun to reflect that reality by quietly turning fiscal policy into a tool of prevention.

This is the economic logic behind the 'sin taxes'. Taxes on harmful products are a classic Pigouvian response to market failure since they help internalise the wider social costs associated with tobacco, alcohol and junk food that prices ignore. When the consumer price fails to reflect these wider social costs, over-consumption becomes economically 'rational' for the individual but inefficient for society. A Pigouvian tax corrects the price signal by making unhealthy goods more expensive, nudging consumption downward. A 10 per

cent rise in cigarette prices is estimated to lower consumption by 4-5 per cent, especially among the youth.

India's "nudge" has largely taken shape since the rollout of GST in 2017, whereby demerit goods have remained in the highest tax category, supported by a compensation cess that helped protect state revenues during the transition. What is new is how openly the tax architecture has started to separate "essential consumption" from "harmful or luxury consumption" in the redesigned rate structure.

In September 2025, GST was rationalised into two main slabs — 5 per cent and 18 per cent — while carving out a 40 per cent rate for luxury and sin goods.

Aerated sugary drinks were moved into this highest bracket. For tobacco and pan masala, the transition has been more carefully managed; the policy intent has been to preserve high effective taxation as older cess-linked arrangements are phased down, rather than allowing harmful products to become cheaper by default. India chose to make the tax system gentler for the everyday basket while keeping a sharp edge for products worsening the disease burden. It is a public policy, even though not framed as one.

This matters because India's



TAXING HARM: Pricing tobacco, sugar and risk. SANDEEP JOSHI

tobacco burden alone is staggering. Official reporting notes 1.35 million deaths annually attributable to tobacco use, along with an enormous economic burden — over Rs 1.77 lakh crore (2017-18 estimates), around 1 per cent of GDP. These costs show up in public hospitals, insurance outlays, household borrowing and the everyday economics of labour and productivity.

India has room to increase deterrence. Recent policy analysis suggests that its total tobacco tax incidence is about 53 per cent of the retail price — still below the WHO benchmark. That is why the next phase of policy has moved beyond simply keeping taxes high, to redesigning them so

A sin tax corrects the price signal by making unhealthy goods more expensive.

they stay high — even as instruments change and legacy cess arrangements wind down.

On December 12, 2025, the Centre notified the Central Excise (Amendment) Act, 2025, sharply raising excise duty bands across tobacco products — including a jump in the cigarette duty range (to about Rs 2,700-Rs 11,000 per 1,000 sticks) — to curb consumption and ensure tobacco does not become more affordable as older cess-linked arrangements wind down. Alongside, the government has moved a companion framework to levy a "Health Security and National Security" cess on demerit goods such as pan masala — signalling that these levies are not meant to

dilute into the general tax pool of everyday items.

This shift also anticipates predictable objections. The first concern is regressivity: that higher taxes punish the poor. The risk is real in spending terms, but the health burden is also disproportionately borne by poorer households, for whom one NCD hospitalisation can wipe out savings. The right response is not to dilute deterrence, but to pair it with accessible cessation support, stronger primary-care screening and financial protection. Second is substitution. If cigarettes become cheaper, users may switch to bidis or smokeless tobacco; if sugary drinks get pricier, consumption may shift to other high-sugar foods. This is an argument for coordinated, category-wide taxation — not piecemeal rate spikes that leave "cheap escape routes" open. Third is compliance and illicit trade. Higher rates can raise incentives for evasion, but that is why enforcement, track-and-trace and better surveillance of under-reporting must accompany taxation. Finally, there is the silent underminer: affordability. If incomes rise faster than prices, harmful products become easier to buy over time. This is why a prevention-oriented tax policy needs predictable, periodic increases — indexation

to inflation and income growth — rather than sporadic hikes.

India is also confronting a fast-growing diet-related disease burden. The decision to place aerated and other sugar-based drinks in the highest GST bracket is a deterrence step. India should learn from other countries' experience: price signals can shift consumption patterns when combined with information, access to healthier substitutes and consistent implementation.

So what would make the "nudge" a prevention agenda? One, treat sin taxes as health policy in public. The message should be visible: the tax is not a "cash grab", it is a corrective tool. Two, pair taxation with a prevention spend plan — funding cessation services, media campaigns, school nutrition programmes and NCD screening. Three, build a category-wide approach to avoid substitution so taxes do not create "cheaper" harmful pathways. Four, invest in compliance technology and enforcement so higher rates translate into higher prices, not higher evasion. Five, make increases predictable through indexation, so affordability does not return.

None of this is anti-business. It is pro-productivity. A healthier workforce is macroeconomic common sense.

## Illusion of reform in universities



SHELLEY WALIA  
EX-PROFESSOR, PANJAB UNIVERSITY, CHANDIGARH

THE Higher Education Regulatory Bill, presented as a decisive break from the failures of the UGC, is being offered as a solution to institutional stagnation, bureaucratic inaccessibility and authoritarian intrusion. Aligned with the goals of NEP 2020, the Bill speaks the language of reform, autonomy, transparency and rationalisation. Yet, a dispassionate analysis is necessary.

The Bill emerged in 2025, a year when test-driven pedagogies along with AI-induced anxiety and the reduction of learning to employability results have diminished the intellectual culture of universities. At its heart lies a rejection of the UGC model. Over time, universities had begun to be governed less through academic judgment and more through disciplinary monitoring structures, metrics-driven systems and documentation-heavy accountability. The regulation of higher education became an end in itself, detached from the free and lived realities of teaching and critical inquiry.

The Bill sets out to correct this failure. By separating funding, accreditation, regulation and academic oversight into distinct functions, it claims to eliminate overlap, reduce arbitrariness and introduce transparency. Regulation, we are told, will be "light but tight"; governance will be simplified; institutions will be freed from micromanagement.

However, the Bill's rhetoric belies a narrower truth in its proposal for technocratic recalibration, wherein universities are reimagined as mechanisms within a performance-oriented system, detached from the complex social, caste-based and linguistic realities that shape academia. Its emphasis on "rationalisation" and "efficiency" reflects a continuity with past approaches, recasting autonomy as com-

pliance-dependent allowance rather than a reappraisal of the university's position within a stratified society.

A paradox lies in the Bill's embrace of performance-based regulation. While presented as a neutral mechanism for quality assurance, outcomes are never self-evident. The concerns that arise are: who defines them? The pedagogical gaze is conditioned by the tyranny of measurability, wherein learning is rendered legible only insofar as it conforms to quantifiable outcomes and intellectual labour is valorised solely through its alignment with pre-ordained metrics, thereby eclipsing the possibility of alternative assumptions about truth and the space for non-utilitarian forms of knowledge.

This contradiction is stark when read alongside the NEP's commitment to creativity, critical thinking and multidisciplinary exploration. These values require intellectual risk, institutional trust and the freedom to fail. The Bill's vision of efficiency thus sits uneasily with the university's deeper vocation as a space of slow, critical and often irreverent thought in the marketplace of ideas.

Plus, the Bill invokes institutional freedom, yet autonomy without material security and academic self-governance is illusory. If funding is contingent on compliance with central frameworks, if accreditation becomes the mode of control and if regulatory bodies answer more readily to policy imperatives than to academic communities, then autonomy becomes merely rhetorical. The danger is a subtler form of control exercised through norms, metrics and incentives.

The Bill also assumes a level of institution-

al capacity and ethical governance that does not uniformly exist. Higher education is marked by disparities in infrastructure, faculty strength, regional access and historical privilege. A uniform regulatory vision risks reproducing inequality under the guise of standardisation. What appears as reform from above may translate into inequities and exclusion in institutional functioning.

This is where the Bill's euphoric tone becomes problematic. It assumes that restructuring governance will automatically revitalise intellectual life. But universities are dynamic social institutions shaped by power, ideology and history. Without confronting these structural virtues, reform threatens to degenerate into a simulacrum of change, a rebranding exercise that masks stagnation beneath a veneer of novelty.

Consequently, the failure of the UGC should necessarily serve as a cautionary tale. Its decline was not merely structural but philosophical. It gradually abandoned the idea of the university as a site of critical autonomy and embraced a bureaucratic conception of control. If the new Bill does not explicitly safeguard intellectual freedom and academic self-determination, it may reproduce the same failures in a more efficient, technocratic form.

Reform, therefore, must transcend mere administrative rationalisation, embracing instead a democratic vision of education as a public good, a site of contestation and a locus of ethical responsibility. When institutional transparency is detached from relations of trust, it risks functioning primarily as an apparatus of surveillance; similarly, efficiency pursued in the absence of freedom tends to encourage conformity rather than creativity, while claims of institutional autonomy remain largely illusory if they are not accompanied by genuine academic authority.

The Bill, therefore, represents a vision of a streamlined system. Its trajectory hinges on whether it engages with the messy realities of universities and the intellectual labour they nurture. The future of education will be secured through the courage to defend the university as a bastion of critical thought in an era increasingly inimical to it. Reform without intellectual seriousness, humility and a commitment to freedom risks perpetuating a hollowed-out shell, bereft of purpose.

Efficiency pursued in the absence of freedom encourages conformity, not creativity.

## Nepal's future uncertain



MAJ GEN ASHOK K MEHTA (RETD)  
EX-FOUNDING MEMBER, DEFENCE PLANNING STAFF

THE outcome of Nepal's fifth revolution (Jan Andolan) in September was the announcement of elections on March 5, 2026. Cadres of the ousted KP Oli-CPN (UML) government had clashed with Genji (Z) revolutionaries. The vandalism during the protests cost \$5 billion (the government's estimate puts the figure at \$572 million). On September 9, all state institutions had collapsed, forcing Oli to resign; in the vacuum that ensued, the army was unable to protect government property. In its response to an inquiry, the army said it had to make a choice between protecting people (leaders and officials) and property. The Genji protests were 'not all that spontaneous'. There is evidence that the US had stirred the pot. Further, doubt lingers over whether elections will be held; or, held on time.

The Genji protests were ostensibly against the Internet ban, which escalated after police firing killed 17 protesters. That figure shot up to 77 martyrs. The people's uprising that piggybacked Genji protests expanded the latter's demands — from good governance, elimination of corruption and job creation to constitutional amendments restoring political stability.

ty and voting from abroad. About 2,000 youth leave the country every day for employment. Genji is a collective of 49 disparate groups, whose leader is Sudan Gurung, a musician-turned-head of a humanitarian organisation. He signed at least three agreements with Karki, most notably the 10-point agreement in December. It includes amendments, which, according to advocate Radhesham Adhikari, will be difficult to implement and become a hurdle to timely elections.

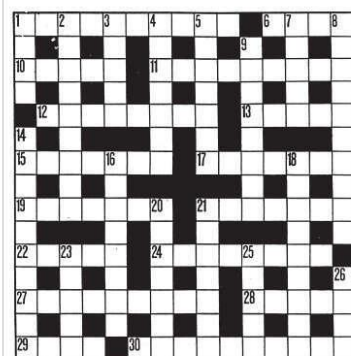
Through the Nepal Congress and CPN (UML) have filed petitions for the restoration of Parliament, they will fight the elections. Some Genji members are joining the Bibekshel, Ujyalao Nepal and Rastriya Swatantra parties. The RSP president, Rabi Lamichhane, jailed for fraud cases, has been released. Ujyalao Nepal was led by the dynamic Kulman Ghising, who led Kathmandu of load-shedding. The Mayor of Kathmandu, Balen Shah, struck a no-surprise deal as the PM face of the RSP with Ghising also merging Ujyalao with the RSP to become its vice-president. Genji leaders Gurung and Purushottam Yadav are backing the RSP, making it formidable. Pre-poll alliance is the new normal. Even the NC and UML are considering it after the boost of the RSP — precisely the virus of political instability that Genji wants to remove.

Despite being ousted from the government, four-time PM Oli won a landslide third-term chairmanship of the UML. And to this, his party's strong grassroots organisation and most government officials being his appointees. Oli may spring a surprise. While five-time PM NC leader Deuba will step down as party president, he will fight elections for an unprecedented eighth time. The party is factionalised into three groups, led by India-backed Shekhar Kohrala, US-supported Gagan Thapa and with motley-backers Bimalendra Nidhi/KP Sitaula. Four-time PM Prachanda, minus the Maoist tag, is a survivor and coordinator of the remnant Nepal Communist Party, consisting of 10 Left parties. The new crop of political parties will not make much dent on grassroots parties, which are likely to come back but with smaller vote share and seats. The Left's majority in Parliament is expected to reduce to less than 50 per cent.

The elections will be held in March, but could go into phases. 2026 promises some surprise and plenty of uncertainty for Nepal.

Pre-poll alliances are now the norm in Nepal — precisely the instability Gen Z sought to undo.

### QUICK CROSSWORD



#### ACROSS

- Not up to date (3,2,5)
- Charitable donations (4)
- Irritated (5)
- Potentially explosive situation (9)
- Consist of (8)
- Rubbishy writing (5)
- Capable of being heard (7)
- A bishop's jurisdiction (7)
- Decorative wreath of flowers (7)
- Dominant (7)
- In connection with (8)
- Deduction from pay (8)
- Indispensable (9)
- On many occasions (5)
- Detest (4)
- From a first impression (5,5)

#### DOWN

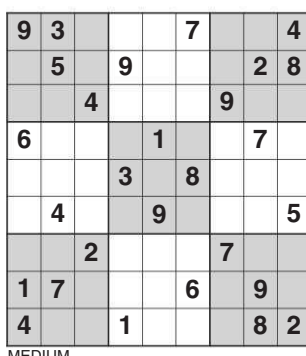
- Terrifying person (4)
- Unreasonable demand (4,5)
- Disgruntled (3,2)
- Rough draft of plan (7)
- Assert (7)
- North African country (5)
- A supposed intuitive power (5,5)
- Adroit (8)
- Country of southern Asia (10)
- Braggadocio (8)
- Strenuously active (9)
- File of papers on subject (7)
- Perplexing question (7)
- Beginning (5)
- Impervious to ill effects (5)
- Prefix for before (4)

#### Yesterday's Solution

Across: 1 Develop, 5 Spree, 8 Better off, 9 Pug, 10 Rove, 12 Five-star, 14 Mahler, 15 Heyday, 17 Remedial, 18 Myth, 21 Can, 22 Hold water, 24 Overt, 25 Runaway.

Down: 1 Debar, 2 Vet, 3 Lees, 4 Prolix, 5 Suffered, 6 Reputedly, 7 Eagerly, 11 Vehemence, 13 Dead shot, 14 Morocco, 16 Caller, 19 Hardy, 20 Twin, 23 Tow.

### SU DO KU



#### YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

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

#### CALENDAR

##### JANUARY 3, 2026, SATURDAY

- Shaka Samvat 1947
- Posh Shaka 13
- Posh Purnvashit 20
- Hijri 1447
- Shukla Paksha Tithi 15, up to 3:33 pm
- Brahma Yoga up to 9:08 am
- Indra Yoga up to 5:16 am
- Aardra Nakshatra up to 5:28 pm
- Moon in Gemini sign
- Posh Purnima

### FORECAST

| CITY       | SUNSHINE | SATURDAY | 17:35 HRS | 07:30 HRS |
|------------|----------|----------|-----------|-----------|
|            |          |          | MAX       | MIN       |
| Chandigarh |          |          | 14        | 08        |
| New Delhi  |          |          | 18        | 07        |
| Amritsar   |          |          | 14        | 07        |
| Bathinda   |          |          | 14        | 05        |
| Jalandhar  |          |          | 14        | 07        |
| Ludhiana   |          |          | 14        | 09        |
| Bhiwani    |          |          | 15        | 05        |
| Hisar      |          |          | 14        | 10        |
| Sirsa      |          |          | 17        | 10        |
| Dharamsala |          |          | 17        | 06        |
| Manali     |          |          | 14        | 00        |
| Shimla     |          |          | 18        | 04        |
| Srinagar   |          |          | 09        | 00        |
| Jammu      |          |          | 17        | 10        |
| Kargil     |          |          | 01        | -09       |
| Leh        |          |          | 01        | -09       |
| Dehradun   |          |          | 18        | 07        |
| Mussoorie  |          |          | 15        | 04        |



certain to resurface, given their deep policy disagreements, particularly over immigration. He needs to engage with the federal government pragmatically.

*Gregory Fernandes*



**A thought for today**  
One machine can do the work of 50 ordinary men. No machine can do the work of one extraordinary man  
**ELBERT HUBARD**

# Burning Question

Are fires always thanks to carelessness? Yes

Hong Kong, Goa, and now a Swiss resort. The common thread in these tragedies is human carelessness. What happened in Crans-Montana in the early hours of Jan 1 is still not clear, but survivors have mentioned a wooden ceiling, and waitresses bearing champagne bottles with fireworks and candles stuck on them. On sober reflection, this was an inadvisable mix. Just as fireworks should never have been lit under the wooden ceiling of Birch By Romeo Lane in Goa last month.

These "mistakes" extract a heavy toll of human life. Some 40 dead in the Swiss bar, 25 in Goa, and 161 in Hong Kong's Wong Fuk Court in Nov 2025. The culprit in that case was bamboo scaffolding and green netting installed for renovation. Both are commonly used in India, too, and who could imagine they would prove a tinderbox? Not residents, perhaps, but isn't it the job of inspectors who grant approvals? London's Grenfell Tower fire in 2017 killed 72. It started in a refrigerator on the fourth floor but covered all 24 floors because the building was wrapped in cheap inflammable cladding – the same aluminium composite you see on many Indian commercial buildings today.

Common sense dictates fire and combustible materials must meet only in designated places, like a stove's burner, cylinders of an engine, the inside of a furnace, but we've seen festive lights hung across cloth curtains. There are also electrical fires resulting from overloading. None of these is an accident. And no building is proof once a fire goes critical. The Twin Towers melted and buckled. Chicago's "indestructible" Iroquois Theatre was only a month old when fire in a stage curtain destroyed it in 1903, leaving behind 600 bodies. Here's hoping that establishment owners, and govt inspectors, around the globe will take fire safety seriously in 2026.

# Water, Water...

Indore's tragedy a familiar story of apathy pan-India

In India when something seems too good to be true, mostly and unfortunately it is. The tragedy unfolding in Indore – repeatedly ranked as India's cleanest city – due to contaminated tap water exposes the huge gap between rankings and civic realities. As of going to print, 10 people have died, 272 have been hospitalised, and over 2,000 have fallen ill in Indore's Bhagirthapura area over the past 10 days. The culprit? Leakage from a toilet built at a local police check post. The outlet from the toilet emptied into a pit constructed directly above the main water supply pipeline in the area – the point of contamination.

Of course, MP govt has said the guilty won't be spared. But explain that to the mother of a six-month-old who succumbed to contaminated water. Safe, potable water ought to be a basic utility across the country. That even the cleanest city can't ensure this exemplifies glibness and lack of accountability. Plus, safe drinking water simply isn't an election issue. NITI Aayog's Composite Water Management Index in 2018 highlighted that India ranked 120 out of 122 countries on the water quality index with nearly 70% of water being contaminated.

And not only is the problem always at source. A huge proportion of tapped water is actually transported through old pipes running next to sewerage lines. This not only increases chances of contamination, but also sees groundwater seepage into supply pipes due to lack of pressure in them. Societies like Indore that may appear clean actually have a lot of problems just beneath the surface. Recall that in Nov, Indore's 75-year-old Shastri Bridge had seen a section cave in due to rat infestation that hollowed out the foundation. Maybe Indore's doing a *Ratatouille* and embracing its vermin problem. But unlike the Pixar-Disney production, real lives are at stake.

# Why Shrink Bots Spell Trouble

Psychiatric AI entrenches its shortcomings at scale

AIn psychiatry is expected to deliver big – "whatever ails psychiatry. AI promises a cure", writes Daniel Oberhaus in *The Silicon Shrink, How Artificial Intelligence Made The World An Asylum*. Bigtech, not just startups, has been developing digital phenotypes – using AI to parse how people interact with their phones and devices to reveal clues about their mental health. AI is expected to be the "wonder drug" with its access to immense data that'll help various types of AI apps improve diagnosis, treatment and patient outcomes.

But this is flawed, argues Oberhaus whose central claim is that contemporary approaches to AI in psychiatry cannot deliver because they'll operate on the basis of "unreliable and invalid conceptions of mental disorder." Little is known about "biological origins of mental disorders. We know the *what* and *how* in psychiatry, but not the *why*. So, Oberhaus says, how can psychiatric AI (PAI) diagnose and treatment disorders better than doctors by analysing big data created from flawed criteria? PAI won't improve psychiatry – it'll just automate and amplify its existing problems on a massive scale. The book warns this'll lead to widespread overdiagnosis, causing millions to receive medication/therapy for conditions they may not actually have. You may well ask, but how is psychiatry "unreliable"?

Oberhaus has dug deep, starting with his sister. The happy little girl's behaviour changed after a school-related traumatic incident. Several psychiatrists "treated" her, but nothing helped. Multiple diagnoses/treatments later, she had asked the

# AI Software Is Eating The World

Aimless tech is gobbling billions of dollars. The justification for AI cash binge is strange: it's the future because so much money is invested in it. Tech for tech's sake won't make us better off

Arindam Goswami



When Kennedy said America would put a man on the moon, the goal had a finish line. The whole thing cost about \$280bn in today's money and employed 400,000 people at its peak, but everyone knew that once Armstrong took his small step, that particular race would be over. Likewise, the mission of annihilation set limits for nuclear weapons. Once you had enough bombs to obliterate your enemy several times over, building more became pointless.

Today, however, technology has become an end in itself. Microsoft, Google, Amazon and Meta collectively spent over \$200bn on AI infrastructure last year, without knowing what they'll do with it. The justification for AI is circular – we need it because it's the future, and it's the future because we're investing in it. Sam Altman floated \$7tn as the cost of artificial general intelligence (AGI), not because he'd done the math but because he wanted to signal the sheer scale of commitment he thinks we need.

This denotes a basic change in the way societies relate to technological development. Schumpeter talked about creative destruction, but the assumption was that the old industries that got destroyed made way for newer ones that could improve people's lives. Destruction now is aimless. Marc Andreessen said, "Software is eating the world", and instead of treating that as a problem, we've made it our economic strategy. If you question the need for all this technology, you're labelled a dinosaur. Ask AI evangelists what problems their systems will actually solve and you get mystical hand-waving about "transformation" and "paradigm shifts", which is the kind of language that substitutes for thinking.

Look at defence spending. Pentagon sought \$143bn for R&D in 2024, much of it for autonomous weapons, AI warfare systems, and hypersonic missiles technologies whose actual military value remains mostly theoretical. China's spending over \$200bn on its military, pouring money into autonomous drone fleets and quantum tech. Each side points to what the other's doing to justify its own spending. Unlike the Cold War, when you could count missiles and bombers, this involves capabilities nobody can verify or even define. How do you measure progress

towards AGI? How many killer drones are enough? There are no answers.

Robert Jervis wrote about security dilemmas in the 1970s – how countries end up in conflicts with nobody wants because one side's defensive moves look offensive to the other. But now we're not even responding to real threats. We're responding to imagined futures in which the enemy might possess impossible capabilities. And because there's no ceiling to imagination, there's no ceiling to spending.

What makes all this obscene is that 783mn people went hungry in 2022, and that number's rising. Malaria still kills over 600,000 people a year, mostly



kids, even though we know how to prevent and treat it. WHO says achieving universal health coverage would cost an additional \$176bn annually, which is a small amount compared with the spending on speculative tech. Clean water, sanitation and basic education aren't exactly problems difficult to solve, but we just choose not to fix them, because funding flows towards whatever seems technologically sophisticated rather than what's most useful.

# Exit Impossible? Go For Emotional Equilibrium

Getting out isn't an option in some truly difficult relationships, like with a parent or a child. The way out there is to first accept, then adjust

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Sometimes the question before us is simple: should I stay or leave? Some relationships – romantic partnerships, friendships, even certain professional equations – have an exit door. It may take courage to open, but the option exists. In *The Falling Aayog* (Nov 22, 2025) we explored how holding on can become self-harm, when the dignified choice to step away rather than bleed from a bond that's collapsed in spite.

But there are relationships that allow no departure. Ties we're born into or obligated by hardly offer the relief of an exit – relationships framed not by choice but circumstance, such as aging parents navigating their later years, children spiralling through emotional storms, siblings locked in each other's histories, partners tied by responsibility, and certain family bonds intertwined with culture, duty and time. "Honourable exit" loses its meaning here, because exit is neither honourable nor possible. And yet, the emotional terrain of these relationships can be as stormy, as draining, and sometimes more confounding than toxic ties we can walk away from.

But all suffering isn't the same. When a relationship is toxic but escapable, the dilemma is moral and emotional, but its mechanics straightforward – leave, heal, rebuild. But when a relationship is painful but inextricable, the mechanics shift. You cannot leave a parent in emotional wilderness because the years have turned them brittle. You cannot abandon a child because their choices frighten you. You cannot rewrite decades of family entanglement by slamming a symbolic door.

In such relationships, the choice is not exit, but equilibrium. But not in dramatic gestures or in sudden clarity. It begins almost imperceptibly, once we accept the relationship will not change. A parent's temperament won't soften because we wish it. A sibling's worldview won't align with ours with time. A child's choices won't instantly make sense because we prayed

for wisdom. Such acceptance is a recognition of seeing the relationship for what it is, not what our imagination of an ideal world wants it to be.

Acceptance, yet, is only the first layer. Beyond it lies adjustment, rearranging our inner world so another's behaviour doesn't bruise us. Adjustment is often mistaken for compromise, but the two are entirely different. Compromise is diminishment of self; adjustment is refinement of perception. Compromise demands we shrink; adjustment seeks we see. Adjustment becomes not a choice but a form of emotional intelligence when it comes to relationships we can't exit.

A reader put it beautifully: "Some relationships cannot be surgically removed. They are too deeply woven,



and they rebound with time." Family ties do not respond to metaphors of finance or surgery; the way romantic relationships at times do. You cannot 'cut losses' with a parent, nor can you 'amputate' a child's presence in your life. What you can do, however, is recognise that certain emotional wounds require empathy more than solution, patience more than logic, spaciousness more than correction.

What about the pain of an exit without one's consent? When the other person leaves, the aftermath is not merely heartbreak but disorientation – a future and they rebound with time." Family ties do not respond to metaphors of finance or surgery; the way romantic relationships at times do. You cannot 'cut losses' with a parent, nor can you 'amputate' a child's presence in your life. What you can do, however, is recognise that certain emotional wounds require empathy more than solution, patience more than logic, spaciousness more than correction.

What about the pain of an exit without one's consent? When the other person leaves, the aftermath is not merely heartbreak but disorientation – a future

## Calvin & Hobbes



## Dance In The Storm. Don't Wait For Rain To Be Over

Sumit Paul

A New Year begins with a gush of resolutions. Aren't New Year's resolutions like dewdrops on grass, destined to fizzle out on the very first week of a new year? They sure are. New Year resolutions are like a lover's outlandish promises or a politician's assurances. Neither is ever fulfilled. They are like eggs so easily breakable. Yet many of us make grandiose resolutions to leave them behind, as if to forget the past to them. Why do we fail to adhere to them?

Behavioural psychologists believe procrastination is the main reason for people not sticking to New Year's resolutions because it's an ingrained human behaviour. The reason is exciting. We'll know that after 12 months, there'll be yet another New Year. The common refrain is *Na kar sake iss saal toh kar lenge aage saal* – if not this year 'We shall do it next year. And though next year certainly comes, our collective tendency to procrastinate never lets us remain faithful to our resolutions. Kabir said, "*Kaal kare so aaj kar, aaj hare so ab / Pal mein pralaya hogayi, bahuri karoge kab*", – finish tomorrow's tasks today, and today's tasks right now, when would you finish them, if the world were to end in the next moment. To procrastinate is to be entitled. To be arrogant. It assumes there will be a later. It assumes you'll have the discipline to get to it later.

St Augustine of Hippo said, "God has promised forgiveness to your repentance, but He has not promised tomorrow to your procrastination." Time is an equal-opportunity employer. Each human being has the same number of hours and minutes every day. Rich people can't buy more hours. Scientists can't invent more minutes. And you can't save time to spend it on another day. Even so, time is amazingly fair and forgiving. No matter how much time you've wasted in the past, you still have an entire tomorrow. Yet, we keep procrastinating. A day can really slip by when you're deliberately avoiding what you're supposed to do. Success is not obtained overnight. It comes in instalments; you get a little bit today, a little bit tomorrow, until the whole package is delivered. The day you procrastinate, you lose that day's success. You can dance

in the storm. Don't wait for the rain to be over before because it might take too long. You can do it now. Wherever you are, right now, you can start, right now. This moment, this minute, this second, sometimes alternating with unrealistic dreams of heroic success, often leads to procrastination. Charles Dickens wrote in *A Tale of Two Cities*, "That glorious vision of doing good often the sanguine mirage of so many good minds." Sahir Ludhianvi said, "*Ik pal ki palak par hai tahari hui ye duniya / Ik pal ke jhapakte tak har khal suhana hai*" – "the world rests on the eyelid of time / Till it blinks, everything is sublime. Don't procrastinate or stare off because time is a circus, always packing up and moving away. Last-minute effort does not make up for years of neglect. Adhere to your resolutions, if you've made any

## mindfield

SHORT TAKES ON BIG IDEAS



## Sacred Space

Don't waste what remains of your life in speculating about your neighbours... To wonder what so-and-so is doing and why, or what he is saying, or thinking, or scheming – means a loss of opportunity for some other task.

Marcus Aurelius





THE GOAN EVERYDAY

A people free to choose will always choose peace  
Ronald Reagan

# Like Birch, negligence fanned flames of death in Swiss Alps

New Year's Day turned out to be a day of orror at the Swiss Alps ski resort of Grans-Montana when a devastating fire broke out during the celebrations. The blaze resulted in approximately 40 deaths and over 115 injuries, many of them teenagers and young adults. For Goa, it brought back memories of the Birch nightclub fire that claimed 25 lives on December 7, because the situations were similar. The Swiss Alps resort is a high-end destination known for its extensive skiing, year-round activities, luxury amenities, and regular host for international sporting events.

Preliminary reports indicated a series of factors that led to the fire — possibly an electrical short-circuit, flammable materials, or human error. There were also claims that the electrical wiring was outdated, while a few speculated on human negligence. The likely ignition trigger was the sparklers, also called "fountain candles," used on the champagne bottle, flames of which came in contact with the flammable wooden ceiling, instantly setting it on fire.

Authorities stated that the intense heat generated inside the room caused combustible materials inside to ignite simultaneously, leading to a massive fire-driven explosion. Also expediting the spread of fire were the sound-absorbing panels inside and the wooden interior. Furthermore, evacuation became problematic because of the narrow exit and a lack of emergency exits in the basement where the fire started. The subsequent stampede to exit the room further added to the chaos.

**Whether it is the pristine Swiss Alps or the bustling coastal clubs of Goa, the lesson is clear: safety has to be a top priority**

incidents exposed systemic shortcomings, lax safety protocols, and lack of oversight; and both showed us that profit-motives overshadowed safety.

The most notable difference is the fact that Birch stood on a footing of "illegality". Investigations revealed that Birch lacked fire safety clearances and did not have adequate fire-fighting mechanisms, operated with expired licenses and forged documents, and had lax enforcement. The Magisterial Inquiry probe pointed to a collusion among multiple departments in allowing illegalities. Alpine resorts, on the other hand, failed to prioritise the safety of people and is reported to have sometimes cut corners to maximize revenue, cutting down on fire safety equipment and staff training.

While an investigation is launched to identify the exact circumstances, it is important to check whether the bar met safety standards. Again, the question would be how fireworks were allowed inside the premises, which had flammable material. Did it meet the safety standards? Also, how did the establishment get a clearance despite the fact that it had a very narrow exit?

Fire safety measures are not mere bureaucratic formalities but vital lifelines. These incidents highlight a universal point that safety cannot be compromised at parties or entertainment venues, in any part of the world. Whether it is the pristine Swiss Alps or the bustling coastal clubs of Goa, the lesson is clear: safety has to be a top priority. Tragedies, though devastating, have often been catalysts for change — reminding us that lives are irreplaceable and that safeguarding them is the highest duty of governments and societies alike.

## OPEN SPACE >>

### Names of important places should be on Goan ethos

What prompted me to write this letter was the recent shortlisting of names for Goa's proposed third district. The inclusion of "Atal," a name not rooted in Goan ethos, was concerning, though it was a relief when it was eventually replaced by "Kushavati." That said, with Goa facing record debt, creating a third district itself seems questionable. More importantly, the naming of districts, hospitals, stadiums, and government buildings after non-Goan figures has become routine since central, Delhi-based parties began governing Goa. The Congress named the Bambolim Medical Complex after Rajiv Gandhi and Fatorda Stadium after Nehru. The BJP has continued this trend with names such as Dr Shyam Prasad Mukherjee Indoor Stadium and Atal Setu Bridge.

This is not about support or opposition to these individuals. Goa, like many regions in India, has a distinct language, culture, and identity. Imposing names rooted in non-Goan, largely North Indian ethos contributes to what is increasingly termed the "Delification of Goa."

Do we not have our own freedom fighters, sports icons, and eminent Goans? Naming public institutions after Goan personalities is something Goans — and especially Goan politicians — must seriously reflect upon.

ARWIN MESQUITA, Colva

# New Year tourism: Holistic approach needed

New Year parties are over, but the choices made in the coming weeks will determine whether next year's celebrations repeat the same cycle



DR (PROF) PRASHANT KADAM

>Veteran management scholar, economist & legal expert

Goa's just-concluded New Year revelry has once again exposed the widening cracks in the State's tourism model. The beaches have emptied, and the music has faded, but the after-effects remain visible in traffic fatigue, mounds of waste, safety worries and growing local resentment that far outlast the party nights. With another peak season behind it, Goa must ask whether the short-lived surge in arrivals is worth the long-term strain on infrastructure, residents and the State's brand as a relaxed, high-quality destination.

This New Year period saw a massive influx of tourists into coastal belts such as Calangute, Baga, Anjuna and Palolem, compressing visitor numbers into a few days of intense activity.

The result was familiar: long traffic jams, overflowing parking lots, crowded beaches and restaurants operating beyond comfortable capacity, turning basic movement and services into a daily struggle for both visitors and locals. For residents, the end of the celebrations has brought some relief from sleepless nights and incessant noise, but also a sense of being left to "clean up" after a party they did not entirely invite. Roads and beaches now bear the marks of heavy usage — litter, damaged public assets and stressed civic systems that will take weeks to recover fully.

During the celebrations, authorities were forced into a high-alert mode, stretching policing, traffic management and emergency services to keep up with the rush of parties and events.

With the season now over, many of the temporary barricades, checkpoints and special deployments have been dismantled, but the pattern remains one of reaction rather than prevention: each year's experience triggers last-minute controls, only for the cycle to repeat the next December.

This reactive posture also affects perceptions. Post-season conversations among residents and repeat visitors often focus on near-miss incidents, overcrowded venues, and the sense that safety depends as much on luck as on planning — an image that can quietly erode Goa's attractiveness for families and higher-value, safety-conscious tourists.

Local communities and environment-



**During the celebrations, authorities were forced into a high-alert mode, stretching policing, traffic management and emergency services**



tal fatigue: In the immediate aftermath of the festivities, village roads, coastal stretches and market areas are left with a surge of solid waste — plastic cups, bottles, food packaging and party decorations — that local bodies must clear under tight resource constraints. While some areas see organised clean-up efforts, others struggle with delayed collection, leading to overflowing bins and makeshift dumping that harms both aesthetics and the environment.

Residents also speak of a deeper fatigue: The feeling that their neighbourhoods become "zones of exception" during New Year, where normal norms on noise, behaviour and public decency are suspended for the sake of tourism revenues. When the crowds leave, this emotional residue persists, feeding a narrative that the benefits of tourism are unevenly distributed while the costs are broadly socialised.

For many businesses, the New Year week has delivered a crucial boost: high occupancy, premium pricing, and brisk sales in hospitality and nightlife. Yet, once the rush subsides, operators return to a more modest demand curve, underlining how risky it is to hinge profitability on a few "bumper" days instead of a stable, year-round flow of visitors. This dependence on a single festival window can discourage investment in differentiated products — heritage, culture, wellness, eco-tourism — that attract visitors beyond the party calendar. In the long run, Goa risks being typecast narrowly as a party hub, making it vulnerable to reputational shocks, stricter regulations or shifts in tourist preferences.

Recommendations for the post-season policy agenda: With the New Year rush now behind it, Goa has a crucial window to review and reform before the next peak.

Post-season audits and data use: Conduct systematic post-event assessments on traffic patterns, waste volumes, enforcement gaps and incident reports, and use these findings to set caps and operational rules for the next season.

Involve local panchayats, resident groups and small businesses in structured consultations to capture ground-level experiences and grievances.

Stronger event licensing for the next cycle: Refine licensing conditions for New Year parties based on this year's learnings, clearer crowd limits, mandatory safety plans, and enforceable noise and timing norms.

Link future permissions to demonstrated compliance this season, rewarding responsible organisers and penalising repeat violators.

Year-round, not one-night, tourism: Use the off-peak months to promote non-party segments — heritage walks, hinterland trails, culinary and cultural festivals — that distribute tourism benefits more evenly over time and geography.

Support local entrepreneurs who invest in low-impact, high-value offerings, reducing dependence on alcohol-centric, high-decibel events as the primary draw.

Community and environmental recovery plans: Institutionalise immediate post-season clean-up operations with adequate budgets, clear accountability and visible timelines, so that beaches and public spaces are restored quickly.

Create mechanisms for residents to report damage or persistent nuisance arising from the festive period, with follow-up action and feedback built into official processes.

Goa now stands at a reflective moment: the parties are over, but the choices made in the coming weeks will determine whether next year's celebrations repeat the same cycle of strain, or mark the beginning of a more balanced, respectful and sustainable tourism culture.

Aligning policy and practice with this year's experience is essential if the State wishes to remain not just India's favourite New Year destination, but also a livable home for its people and a quality destination for visitors across the calendar.

## THE INBOX >>

### Time to clean the system, lawfully

The people of Arambol/Harmal, along with like-minded Goenkar, staged a protest against land conversion approved by the TCP. Sensing strong opposition, the TCP Minister cancelled the conversion after meeting the affected people.

This pressure has amplified, forcing the tragic deaths of 25 innocent people who were burnt or suffocated at Birch by Romeo Lane, Aprora. The ongoing inquiry has begun exposing serious illegalities, and some heads are expected to roll. So far, the VP Secretary and Samparch have been made scapegoats, while the real culprits — senior officials allegedly controlled by ministers — remain untouched.

If the Chief Minister genuinely probes these illegalities, many officials would be exposed, forcing the government to resign in shame. It is time people stand up, demand accountability, and clean the system within the law.

GREGORY D'SOUZA, Siolim

### G RAM G Act needs to address ground realities

The proposed reforms to MGNREGA under the VB-G RAM G Act, 2025 seek to strengthen rural employment and enhance transparency.

Although initiatives such as digitisation, asset creation, and improved accountability are positive steps, long-standing challenges — including delayed wage payments, limited availability of work, and digital exclusion — continue to undermine the scheme's effectiveness for rural workers.

Technology-led reforms must therefore be complemented by robust institutional capacity and greater awareness at the local level. Unless these ground realities are addressed, policy objectives may fail

### Goa: A paradise lost

Reviewing developments in Goa over the past year reveals a deeply troubling decline in what was once a beautiful and peaceful paradise. Despite attempts to downplay the situation, open defiance of the law and widespread corruption have severely weakened governance.

The tragic fire at the Aprora nightclub, which claimed 25 tourist lives, exposed a larger problem — hundreds of nightclubs and restaurants operating without licences or with forged NOCs. Corruption within panchayats and government offices has peaked, with even illegal constructions being regularised in defiance of High Court demolition orders. Law and order has deteriorated sharply, marked by daylight robberies, housebreaks, kidnappings, gang violence, and shootings — crimes previously unknown in Goa.

Public transport has become unaffordable as taxi unions block app-based services. Vast stretches of forest land and hills are being converted into settlement zones to benefit builders and outsiders, destroying local livelihoods. Overall, the situation is grim, especially for those who chose Goa for a peaceful life. Truly, a paradise lost.

A F NAZARETH, Alto Porvorim

to deliver tangible benefits. A people-centric approach, supported by timely and effective grievance redressal, is crucial to ensure that MGNREGA continues to function as a reliable safety net for rural India.

KR GAGAN, Vasco

### Stop political patronage to illegal activities

The Aprora tragedy, which claimed 25 lives, stands as a grim reminder of systemic failures in India's social security and regulatory enforcement. Inquiry reports have confirmed lapses across multiple departments, exposing the severe crisis of worker safety in unregulated private establishments. Safety management is often treated as a low priority, reflecting a broader failure of



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governance.

An illegal club operated openly for over a year despite warnings, something impossible without political patronage. Such violations spread when the rule of law collapses. While some public servants have been suspended, many are likely to return to duty, reinforcing a culture of impunity. Weak enforcement makes disasters inevitable rather than exceptional. Corruption plays a central role. Lives are knowingly put at risk by those responsible for oversight. Allegations of systemic corruption continue to dominate public debate, fueling outrage and persistent demands from citizens, activists, and political groups for credible investigations and lasting reform.

KG VILOP, Choroa

### Irregular postal services in Chandor, Cavorim

I wish to draw attention to the growing problem of irregular postal services at the Chandor Post Office, which serves the villages of Chandor, Cavorim, and Gurdolim.

A newly appointed postman appears to be unfamiliar with the local wards, house numbers, and residents' names. As a result, letters, newspapers, bank correspondence, and important documents such as court notices are frequently delivered to incorrect addresses or go missing altogether.

Timely and accurate postal delivery is an essential public service. The Postal Department is urged to address this issue urgently by providing proper supervision, local orientation, or by assigning experienced staff who are familiar with the area. For smooth and efficient operations, couples should not be assigned to work together.

I hope the concerned authorities will take immediate corrective action.

RONNIE D'SOUZA, Chandor

## Cold Wave Grips North India

The new year began in the northern states with biting cold and scattered light rain. The rain was short-lived, but the cold intensified after the rainfall. Meteorologists say that the cold wave will continue to wreak havoc. There is no possibility of respite from the fog. This time, frost and dry cold are showing their full force. Clearly, this is affecting the newly sown crops. Farmers are worried. The weather is such that there is no difference between the weather in the hills and the plains at this time. Weather observers say that 9 districts of Punjab, including Amritsar, are currently colder than Shimla. All government and private schools in Punjab have been closed until January 7th. Currently, 9 districts of Punjab, including Amritsar, Gurdaspur, Pathankot, Ludhiana, and Patiala, are colder than Shimla, Dharmsala, Kangra, and Mandi in Himachal Pradesh. This is the first time this season that the maximum temperature in so many districts simultaneously has been below 14 degrees Celsius. On New Year's Eve, there was snowfall in Rohtang Pass in Himachal Pradesh and in the Kashmir Valley. Himachal received up to half a foot of snowfall. The snowfall started on Wednesday evening, Rohtang Pass and the Shinku La area had to be closed to tourists. There was a huge crowd of tourists in the mountains to celebrate the new year, and tourists going to Rohtang were greeted by snowdrifts midway at Marhi.

Intermittent snowfall continued in the high mountainous regions of Kashmir. After this snowfall, the snow glaciers are the source of water, but due to environmental pollution and the ill effects of global warming, these glaciers have started melting prematurely. The natural flow of rivers is turning into devastating floods. At this time, the severe cold is adversely affecting normal life. The deteriorating weather has resulted in train cancellations and disruptions to air travel. 148 flights have been canceled, and passengers are facing the same difficulties they experienced earlier due to the cancellation of IndiGo flights. People appear frustrated by the uncertainty of transportation.

Clearly, the anger and frustration of air travelers are being expressed at the airports. Weather experts are predicting dense fog in Punjab, Haryana, and Delhi until January 5th and in Rajasthan until January 3rd. Passengers are advised not to drive or travel unnecessarily during this weather. Many accidents and tragic deaths have been reported these days due to the dense fog. The reason is not only the dense fog but also the disregard for traffic rules by drivers and the reckless speeding of large vehicles. The minimum temperature in Amritsar was 6.1 degrees Celsius, and in Ludhiana, it was recorded at 6.8 degrees Celsius. In Ambala, Haryana, the minimum temperature is 9.6 degrees Celsius. It is strange that the minimum temperature is three degrees higher than the normal temperature for this season, yet the cold is severe. The same situation is being observed in the mountains and in Rajasthan. The maximum temperature has dropped rapidly, but the minimum temperature is slightly higher than normal. These unusual weather patterns are undoubtedly due to environmental pollution and global warming, but it seems that the government has only announced its intention to combat this misfortune. No meaningful steps are being taken because developed countries are refusing to participate in the fight against environmental pollution, and developing countries of the third world do not have the capacity to fight environmental pollution on their own. This fight can also be waged by bringing about a change in people's mindset. By not burning stubble and by not using vehicles that cause excessive pollution. Nowhere do citizens appear to be coming forward with commitment to combat pollution. That's why nowadays every season goes to its extreme. But it's the common man who suffers the most from this weather uncertainty. Therefore, the sooner we can find these missing seasons and bring them back, the better.

-Abhishek Vij

## Indian Women are Changing with the New Era

Nowadays, to showcase modernity, we often talk about women's empowerment. We proudly declare that women are in no way inferior to men in any field. But despite this, it is also an undeniable truth that even after saying all this, not only in India or other developing countries, but throughout the world, women are considered the weaker sex and attempts are made to portray them as inferior to male dominance. The truth is evident: whether it's competitive exams or academic exams, girls always excel. Recent news reports indicate that during Operation Sindoor, female soldiers in the military units on the Punjab border performed exceptionally well. The women's units demonstrated the skill to identify drones and either destroy them or force them back into Pakistan. Last year, the decision was made to include women in the front lines of the army. Furthermore, while they previously received only temporary commissions, they are now allowed to receive permanent commissions. Previously, women were not allowed proper promotions in the army, but now they have been granted this permission. In the Air Force too, although the number of female pilots is small, the process has begun. It is believed worldwide that in matters of espionage, male soldiers lag far behind their female counterparts. It is also clear that the contribution of women scientists at ISRO, a source of pride for India, is in no way less than that of men.

# Why students need AI learning now, not later

Artificial Intelligence is no longer a futuristic concept reserved for research labs or technology companies. It is already shaping how we work, communicate, learn, and make decisions. From recommendation algorithms on social media to automated customer support, facial recognition, medical diagnostics, and language translation, AI is embedded in everyday life. In this reality, denying students structured AI learning is not just an educational gap—it is a social and economic risk. Students today do not simply need access to AI tools; they need the knowledge to understand, question, and responsibly use them.

One of the strongest arguments for AI learning is employability. The global job market is undergoing a fundamental shift, with automation and AI changing the nature of work across sectors. Traditional roles are being redefined, while entirely new professions—data analysts, AI ethicists, prompt engineers, machine learning technicians—are emerging. Even careers that appear unrelated to technology, such as journalism, law, agriculture, healthcare, and public administration, are increasingly influenced by AI systems. If students are not trained to understand these tools, they risk being reduced to passive users or, worse, being displaced by those who are better prepared.

AI education also promotes creativity rather than replacing it. There is a widespread fear that AI will make human skills redundant, especially in writing, art, and problem-solving. In reality, when used responsibly, AI can become a powerful assistant to question results rather than accept them as neutral or infallible. AI education also promotes creativity rather than replacing it. There is a widespread fear that AI will make human skills redundant, especially in writing, art, and problem-solving. In reality, when used responsibly, AI can become a powerful assistant



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that enhances human creativity. Students who understand AI can use it to brainstorm ideas, analyze large datasets, simulate complex systems, and explore new forms of expression. The key difference lies in guidance. Without education, AI becomes a shortcut; with education, it becomes a tool for deeper learning. Another critical reason

students need AI learning is ethical awareness. AI raises serious questions about privacy, surveillance, consent, authorship, and accountability. Students are already interacting with AI-driven platforms that collect personal data, shape opinions, and influence behavior. Teaching AI ethics helps students understand their rights and responsibilities in a digital world. It encourages them to think about who benefits from AI systems, who is excluded, and who is held accountable when things go wrong. This ethical grounding is essential for building a generation that uses technology in ways that serve society rather than exploit it.

In countries like India, AI education also has implications for equity. If AI learning remains limited to elite institutions or private schools, it will widen existing educational and economic divides. Students from rural areas or underfunded schools risk being left behind in an AI-driven economy. Integrating AI learning into public education systems—through age-appropriate curricula, teacher training, and accessible resources—can help democratize opportunity. AI should not become another gatekeeping tool; it should be a bridge to inclusion.

Importantly, AI learning does not mean turning every student into a programmer. At the school level, it can begin with basic concepts: what AI is, how algorithms work, how data is collected,

and how automated decisions affect daily life. At higher levels, students can explore practical applications, interdisciplinary projects, and ethical debates. This approach ensures that AI education is relevant to students of all backgrounds, interests, and career paths.

Teachers play a crucial role in this transition, and they too need support. Expecting educators to teach AI without training or resources is unrealistic. Governments and institutions must invest in teacher upskilling, curriculum development, and infrastructure. Collaboration between educators, technologists, and policymakers is essential to ensure that AI learning is accurate, inclusive, and socially responsible. Ultimately, teaching students about AI is not about preparing them for a distant future; it is about equipping them to navigate the present. AI already influences how students learn, how they are assessed, and how they access information. Without proper education, they remain users shaped by systems they do not understand. With AI learning, they become informed participants capable of shaping technology to meet human needs. The choice is clear. Ignoring AI in education risks producing a generation that is technologically dependent but intellectually unprepared. Embracing AI learning, on the other hand, offers students the skills, awareness, and confidence to thrive in a rapidly changing world.

“

### THOUGHT OF THE DAY

*The best way to predict the future is to create it.*  
-Peter Drucker

”

## The growing need to protect mental health in a fast-paced society

Modern life is moving faster than ever before. Technology has shortened distances, work hours have stretched beyond offices, and social expectations have multiplied. While these changes have improved convenience and connectivity, they have also placed unprecedented pressure on mental well-being. Mental health, once treated as a private or secondary issue, has become a central challenge of our time. Protecting it is no longer optional—it is essential for individuals, families, and society as a whole. One of the biggest problems is the normalization of constant stress. Long working hours, job insecurity, academic pressure, and social comparison—often intensified by social media—have made anxiety feel routine. Many people accept exhaustion and emotional strain as part of success, ignoring early signs of mental distress. This culture of silence discourages people from seeking help until their condition becomes severe, leading to burnout, depression, or more serious mental disorders. Young people are particularly vulnerable. Students face intense academic competition, uncertain career prospects, and the pressure to meet unrealistic standards. At the same time, digital platforms expose them to constant comparison and online judgment. Without proper emotional support, many struggle with low self-esteem, anxiety, and loneliness. Ignoring mental health in youth not only harms individuals but also weakens future generations.

## Why clean air should be treated as a basic human right

Clean air is often taken for granted, yet it is one of the most essential requirements for human survival. Unlike food or water, air cannot be chosen, filtered, or avoided by individuals on a daily basis. Everyone breathes what surrounds them. In many parts of the world, especially in developing countries, polluted air has become a silent public health emergency. Treating clean air as a basic human right is no longer an idealistic demand—it is a practical and moral necessity.

Air pollution affects people across all age groups, but its impact is most severe on children, the elderly, and those with pre-existing health conditions. Exposure to polluted air is linked to respiratory diseases, heart conditions, strokes, and even cognitive impairment. Children growing up in polluted environments often suffer from reduced lung capacity and learning difficulties, affecting them for life. Despite this, air pollution rarely receives the urgency it deserves in policy-making, often overshadowed by economic and political priorities. One reason air pollution persists is that its damage is gradual and largely invisible. Unlike natural disasters, polluted air does not create immediate headlines. People fall sick slowly, productivity declines quietly, and healthcare costs rise steadily. This



delayed impact allows governments and industries to postpone action. However, the economic argument for inaction is flawed. The cost of treating pollution-related illnesses, lost workdays, and premature deaths far outweighs the cost of investing in cleaner technologies and stricter regulations.

Treating clean air as a right would fundamentally change how governments approach development. It would require policymakers to assess projects not only on economic output but also on health and environmental impact. Industries would be held accountable for emissions, urban planning would prioritize public transport and green spaces, and energy policies would shift toward cleaner alternatives. Recognizing clean air as a right would place citizens' health at the center of development, rather than treating it as collateral damage. There is also a deep inequality in how air pollution affects society. Poor and marginalized communities often live closer to highways, factories, landfills, and construction zones, exposing them to higher levels of pollution.



# Why self-medication harms humans

Self-medication—the practice of using medicines without proper medical advice—has become increasingly common across the world. Easy access to drugs, internet health information, and the pressure to find quick relief have encouraged people to treat themselves rather than consult trained professionals. While self-medication may appear convenient and cost-effective, it carries serious risks. From delayed diagnosis to drug resistance and life-threatening complications, self-medication harms individuals and public health in ways that are often underestimated. One of the most serious dangers of self-medication is misdiagnosis. Symptoms such as fever, headache, stomach pain, or fatigue can be signs of minor illnesses or indicators of serious underlying conditions. When people diagnose themselves, they often rely on guesswork, previous experiences, or online searches rather than clinical evaluation. Treating symptoms without identifying the root cause can mask diseases, allowing them to worsen over time. For example, persistent stomach pain treated repeatedly with painkillers may hide ulcers, infections, or even cancer, leading to delayed treatment and poorer outcomes. Incorrect drug choice and

dosage is another major risk. Medicines are designed to be taken in specific doses, for specific durations, and for

Self-medication also increases the risk of adverse drug reactions and allergies. Even commonly used medicines such as painkillers, cough syrups, or anti-allergy tablets can cause side effects ranging from nausea and dizziness to severe allergic reactions and internal bleeding.

specific conditions. Without medical guidance, people may take the wrong drug, combine incompatible medicines, or consume incorrect doses. Overdosing can damage vital organs such as the liver and



kidneys, while underdosing may fail to treat the illness and encourage recurrence. Children, the elderly, and pregnant women are especially vulnerable because their bodies process medicines differently, making unsupervised medication particularly dangerous. Self-medication also increases the risk of adverse drug reactions and allergies. Even commonly used medicines such as painkillers, cough syrups, or anti-allergy tablets can cause side effects ranging from nausea and dizziness to severe allergic reactions and internal bleeding. Without a doctor's assessment, people may not recognize early warning signs or may continue taking a drug

despite harmful effects. In some cases, combining multiple over-the-counter medicines can lead to dangerous interactions that the user is unaware of. One of the most alarming consequences of self-medication is antibiotic resistance. Many people take antibiotics without prescriptions to treat colds, flu, or minor infections—conditions often caused by viruses, against which antibiotics are ineffective. Others stop taking antibiotics as soon as they feel better, rather than completing the full course. These practices allow bacteria to survive and adapt, making future infections harder to treat. Antibiotic resistance is now a

global public health crisis, and irresponsible self-medication is a major contributing factor. Mental health is another area where self-medication causes significant harm. Some individuals use sleeping pills, anti-anxiety drugs, or substances such as alcohol to cope with stress, anxiety, or depression. Without professional guidance, this can lead to dependency, worsening mental health, and increased risk of self-harm. Masking emotional distress with drugs delays proper diagnosis and treatment, while reinforcing unhealthy coping mechanisms. The widespread availability of medicines without prescriptions further worsens the problem. In many countries, pharmacies sell powerful drugs over the counter, often without proper counseling. Aggressive advertising and online influencers promoting "quick cures" create a false sense of safety around medicines. This commercial environment encourages people to treat drugs as harmless consumer products rather than potent medical substances that require careful use. Self-medication also has broader social and economic consequences. Complications arising from improper drug use increase the burden on healthcare systems, leading to higher treatment costs and longer hospital stays. Preventable drug-related

illnesses divert medical resources that could be used for other critical needs. In low-income households, repeated self-medication can also result in financial loss, as money is spent on ineffective or harmful treatments rather than proper medical care. Education and awareness are key to addressing this issue. People need to understand that medicines are not universally safe and that "common" does not mean "risk-free." Public health campaigns should emphasize the importance of consulting qualified healthcare professionals, completing prescribed treatments, and avoiding the misuse of antibiotics and other drugs. At the same time, governments must enforce regulations on drug sales and ensure pharmacists play an active role in guiding patients responsibly. In conclusion, self-medication may promise quick relief, but it often leads to long-term harm. By encouraging misdiagnosis, drug misuse, resistance, and dependency, it puts individual lives and public health at risk. Medicines are powerful tools that save lives when used correctly, but they become dangerous when taken without knowledge or guidance. Choosing professional medical advice over self-medication is not just a personal decision—it is a responsibility toward one's own health and the well-being of society as a whole.

## The role of urban green spaces in modern cities

As cities grow taller and streets become busier, green spaces often shrink to small parks or narrow sidewalks with trees. Yet urban green spaces are not just decorative; they are essential for the physical, mental, and social well-being of city dwellers. In modern cities, where pollution, noise, and stress are constant, parks, gardens, and tree-lined streets provide a refuge that is increasingly vital. One of the most obvious benefits of urban green spaces is environmental. Trees and plants improve air quality by absorbing carbon dioxide and filtering pollutants. They reduce the urban heat island effect, lowering temperatures in neighborhoods and helping cities cope with heatwaves. Green spaces also manage stormwater, preventing floods



by absorbing rainwater that would otherwise overwhelm drainage systems. In short, urban greenery is critical for climate adaptation and environmental sustainability. Green spaces are equally important for physical health. Parks encourage walking, jogging, cycling, and outdoor exercise, which combat sedentary lifestyles common in city life. Studies show that neighborhoods with more trees and open spaces have lower rates of obesity, heart disease, and stress-related illnesses. Access to greenery can literally extend life expectancy by promoting healthier daily routines.

Mental health benefits are another key reason cities need more green spaces. Nature has a calming effect on the mind, reducing anxiety, depression, and stress. Even a short walk in a park can improve mood, enhance focus, and increase creativity. In densely populated urban areas, where high-rise buildings and concrete dominate the landscape, green spaces serve as a sanctuary for reflection and relaxation. Social cohesion is strengthened through urban parks and community gardens. They become meeting points where people of different ages and backgrounds interact. Children play, families gather, and neighbors form bonds, creating a sense of belonging and community. In an era of urban loneliness, green spaces foster social connections that are otherwise rare in modern cities.

## Early medical care is crucial in heart attack emergencies

Heart attacks are among the leading causes of death worldwide, yet many of these deaths are preventable with timely medical intervention. A heart attack, medically known as a myocardial infarction, occurs when blood flow to a part of the heart is suddenly blocked, usually by a blood clot. When this happens, heart muscle cells begin to die due to lack of oxygen. The faster treatment is provided, the more heart muscle can be saved. Understanding how and why heart attacks must be treated on time can make the difference between life and death. The first and most important reason for urgent treatment is that heart muscle damage begins within minutes. Once blood supply is cut off, heart cells start to suffer irreversible injury in about 20 to 30 minutes. As time passes, the extent of damage increases, weakening the heart's ability to pump blood effectively. Delayed treatment often results in permanent heart damage, heart failure, or fatal complications. Early medical care, on the other hand, can restore blood flow before extensive damage occurs. Recognizing the warning signs of a heart attack is critical to ensuring timely treatment. Common symptoms include chest pain or



discomfort, pressure or tightness in the chest, pain radiating to the arm, neck, jaw, or back, shortness of breath, sweating, nausea, and dizziness. In some cases, especially among women, elderly individuals, and people with diabetes, symptoms may be mild or atypical. Ignoring these signs or waiting for them to pass can be deadly. Seeking immediate medical help at the first sign of trouble is essential. Timely treatment works by quickly reopening blocked arteries and stabilizing the heart. Emergency medical services can begin treatment even before reaching the hospital by administering oxygen, aspirin, or other life-saving measures. In hospitals, doctors use medications such as clot-dissolving drugs or perform procedures like angioplasty to restore blood flow.

## Good parenting and the importance of letting children choose their career

Good parenting is not only about providing food, shelter, and education; it is about nurturing a child's individuality, confidence, and sense of purpose. One of the most critical tests of parenting comes when children reach the stage of choosing a career. In many families, especially in traditional or economically struggling societies, parents feel compelled to decide their children's future paths. While this often stems from concern and sacrifice, forcing children into careers they are not interested in can cause long-term emotional and professional harm. Good parenting requires guidance—but also the wisdom to let go. Every child is born with unique talents, interests, and abilities. Some may be inclined toward science and technology, others toward art, sports, writing, teaching, or entrepreneurship. When parents ignore these natural inclinations and impose their own ambitions, children may struggle to find meaning in their work. A career chosen

under pressure often leads to dissatisfaction, stress, and burnout. Good parents recognize that success is not measured only by income or social status but by fulfillment, growth, and mental well-being. One of the most common reasons parents control career choices is fear—fear of financial insecurity, social judgment, or uncertainty. Parents who have experienced poverty or hardship may believe that "safe" careers such as medicine, engineering, or government service are the only paths to stability. While these concerns are understandable, the world of work has changed dramatically. Today, opportunities exist across diverse fields, and passion combined with skill often leads to better outcomes than reluctant obedience in a so-called secure profession. Good parenting involves adapting to changing realities rather than clinging to outdated notions of success. Allowing children to choose their careers also builds their responsibility and confidence. When children are trusted to



make decisions, they learn accountability and self-belief. Even if they face setbacks, these experiences become valuable lessons rather than sources of resentment. In contrast, children forced into unwanted careers may blame their parents for failures, leading to strained relationships and emotional distance. A supportive parenting approach strengthens trust and communication, which are essential for healthy family bonds. Mental health is

another crucial factor. Children pressured into careers they dislike often experience anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem. They may feel trapped, living someone else's dream rather than their own. Over time, this emotional burden can affect physical health, relationships, and overall happiness. Good parenting prioritizes a child's mental well-being and understands that emotional health is as important as financial security. Letting children choose

does not mean abandoning guidance. Good parenting strikes a balance between freedom and support. Parents can help children explore options, understand their strengths, and learn about different professions. Honest conversations about challenges, income expectations, and long-term prospects are necessary. The goal is not to control but to inform, allowing children to make realistic and thoughtful decisions based on their interests and abilities. Education systems and society also play a role in shaping parental attitudes. In many cultures, limited awareness about career diversity reinforces parental pressure. Fields such as vocational training, creative industries, social work, and sports are often undervalued despite offering meaningful and viable careers. Parents who take the time to learn about evolving career landscapes are better equipped to support their children's aspirations. Good parenting involves continuous learning—not just for children, but for parents

as well. Importantly, children who pursue careers aligned with their interests are more likely to excel. Passion fuels perseverance, creativity, and innovation. People who enjoy their work tend to develop expertise, adapt to change, and contribute positively to society. When parents allow children to follow their interests, they are not weakening discipline or ambition; they are strengthening motivation and purpose. In conclusion, good parenting is rooted in love, trust, and respect for a child's individuality. While parents naturally want the best for their children, true support lies in empowering them to choose their own paths. Letting go of control over career choices does not mean losing influence—it means offering guidance without domination. When children are allowed to pursue careers they are genuinely interested in, they grow into confident, responsible, and fulfilled individuals. Such parenting not only shapes successful careers but also builds happier families and a healthier society.

# THE ASIAN AGE

3 JANUARY 2026

## Big relief for Vodafone, but has it come too late?

In a major relief for Vodafone Idea, the Union Cabinet approved the freezing of the company's adjusted gross revenue (AGR) dues at ₹87,695 crore, the level at which it stood on December 31, 2025, with payment rescheduled over 10 years starting in 2031-32.

The decision — having received approval from the Supreme Court in October 2025 — is a lifesaver for India's third-largest telecom company. It allows the company management to focus on improving its services rather than worrying about repaying the AGR dues and protects the jobs of 10,000 people. The root cause of Vodafone's problems, however, is persistent policy uncertainty.

Under the telecom policy designed by the Atal Behari Vajpayee government in 1999, companies that won telecom licences were supposed to pay a portion of their adjusted gross revenue (AGR) to the government every year in lieu of an upfront payment of licence fees. A dispute, however, arose between telecom companies and the department of telecom (DoT) over the definition and components of AGR.

The DoT insisted that AGR would include core revenue from telecom services as well as non-core income from rents and interest. The telecom companies maintained that AGR would include only core income. They challenged the DoT order before TDSAT in 2003.

**Tushar Mehta backed the plea, stating the government has infused equity in Vodafone and that the government's interest is the public interest. It is prescriptive of the problems that private companies face.**

However, a vibrant telecom sector unravelled because of the policy inconsistency of successive governments. In the late 1990s, India offered GSM and CDMA licences, which were later converted into unified telecom licences — forcing CDMA-focused companies to invest heavily in GSM to survive.

When Vodafone entered India by acquiring Hutchison Whampoa's stake in Hutch Essar, the income tax law was silent on the taxability of overseas transactions if the underlying asset was in India. But in 2012, going against all expected norms, the government gave itself the power to tax transactions retrospectively. The amendment was annulled in 2021 after Vodafone had lost most of its mojo.

Vodafone India finally got relief from the Supreme Court — which had earlier refused to change even clerical errors in calculations — in October 2025 — followed by the Union Cabinet's decision on December 31, 2025.

During a hearing in the Supreme Court on Vodafone's plea for relief, Solicitor General Tushar Mehta supported the petition, stating that the government has infused equity in Vodafone and that the government's interest is the public interest. The statement is prescriptive of the problems that private companies face in India. The government, officials and judiciary must treat both state-run companies and private companies equally if India is to become an economic superpower. Otherwise, it does not augur well for the country.

## Real challenge begins for Mamdani

It felt like a seminal moment when Zohran Mamdani took oath in a decommissioned subway station in America's biggest city, New York. In these jumbled times when winners in politics wish only to take away while justifying everything as winner takes the spoils, here is a winning candidate who vowed to give something to the underserved and underprivileged people.

A social media campaign full of empathy caught the attention of people across the spectrum as Mr Mamdani spoke words like "affordable housing", made promises that were sweet to the ear of lesser earners like lower rents in the Big Apple, making free creche care available and cheaper connectivity to all the people.

As a left-wing politician, the Social Democrat may have his work cut out in a nation that has swung to the polar opposite with Donald Trump as President, the one with the winner-take-all attitude who has thrown away the rulebook because he does not believe there is a need to rewrite it either.

As in reality show episodes, Mr Mamdani must now learn how to work with the White House if he is to deliver big projects besides day-to-day governance to all, including the mostly under-30s generation who made him a spectacular winner. To deliver on promises to 8.5 million people of New York City, it would cost about \$7 billion more a year while coping with the cuts to federal funding that may rise if Mr Trump's mood were to change from the expansive, as it proved surprisingly at their first meeting after the mayoral election.

As an American Democrat with an irresistible inclination to call out human rights violations around the world, Mr Mamdani threw hints to India by expressing solidarity with Umar Khalid, the student activist who is finding real bail more elusive than the supermoon after being jailed for the 2020-21 court ruling. Such situations should not exist in an ideal world and right-thinking people would not support methods that make the process of jailing itself the punishment. However, there may be battles closer home for Mr Mamdani to fight, as in the case of several officials whose right to their jobs has been taken away summarily by the Trump administration while many have been deported or kept out of the country. There is much to do on the human rights front in the US as well.

### THE ASIAN AGE

Kaushik Mishra

Editor

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**Farukh Dhondy  
Cabbages  
& Kings**

## Of the Nigerian Lottery & other scams on Web to clean you out

*"The season's greetings were of warm desire  
And yet around our world the wailing choir  
Rings out in every wind, vibrations thick  
—Of the call of the bombed, displaced and sick  
Misery imposed by some human being  
Devoted of decency, blind to seeing  
Will season's prayers redeem us and bring peace?  
—Yes certainly! — When life on earth will cease."  
— From The Wallflower of the Puzoskalla*

I have won the Nigerian Lottery several times. It has demanded my bank account details and passwords so that they can deposit the millions I have won. I have never bought a ticket but was told that an anonymous friend had bought fifty in my name and one of them won.

I replied only once when my bank account was in severe arrears, so the poor scam-merchants would have accessed an account in the red. (That was long ago... Even so, compassionate contributions are eternally welcome).

The inventions of technology in this lifetime have contributed unbelievable measure to the possibility, amongst other forms of crime and exploitation, of human beings cheating each other.

Last month the BBC aired a programme called *Exploiters* that was presented by my daughter Tr

Subhania



## Reasons for despair & reasons for hope

**Patralekha Chatterjee  
Dev 360**

A s one year gives way to the next, the ledger of despair and hope demands to be read. The savage killing of 24-year-old Anil Chakma, a student from Tripura, in Dehradun for objecting to racial abuse, is a chilling reminder of how fragile India's promise of diversity has become. "I am Indian, what certificate should I show?", were Anil's last words according to multiple news reports. It recalls the killing of Nido Tania in New Delhi a decade ago, mocked for his appearance and beaten to death by shopkeepers in bustling Lajpat Nagar.

At school, children are told to celebrate India's diversity. On the street, diversity is butchered with monotonous regularity.

Anil's murder was not an aberration. His brother's FIR describes drunk men hurling caste-based slurs and attacking him with a knife when he objected. The police arrested five men; one fled across the border. This December, Christmas celebrations across several states have also been disrupted. Police records confirm incidents of vandalism, harassment and intimidation in Assam, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, Rajasthan and Delhi. Even religious leaders have been targeted. These attacks alongside Anil's killing, point to deeper issues of discrimination against perceived "outsiders" in India and a growing unease with pluralism.

The phrase "fringe elements" is often deployed to contain the damage, but when disruptions recur across states, the pattern itself becomes the story. India has sought to draw international attention to heinous attacks on minority Hindus in Bangladesh, including two recent lynchings. Anger over the lynching of garment worker Dipu Chandra Das in Bangladesh's Mymensingh district, But moral consistency requires us to apply the same standard at home. If we

I was also lucky to be in Kolkata end-December. Christmas here transcends clichés — beyond glittering Park Street and plum cake, it becomes a true people's festival, crossing religion and class.

found Delhi's winter air turned toxic once again, with AQI frequently breaching severe to hazardous levels, driven by vehicles, construction, industry, stubble burning and winter inversions trapping pollutants.

I was also lucky to be in Kolkata in late December. Christmas here transcends clichés — beyond glittering Park Street and plum cake, it becomes a true people's festival, crossing religion and class: Parvati, a Hindu domestic helper who celebrates Durga Puja with equal ardour, told me about her Christmas festivities: the family feasting on mutton curry, fish-head dishes, a small cake and a granddaughter delighted with Santa caps and reindeer headbands. In a state scarred by political violence, the platforming of pluralism is not to be sneered at even if there is much to criticise otherwise. Similar failures are visible elsewhere: When space is given, Indians build solutions bridging economic and social divides.

As we kickstart 2026, we must not let loud headlines always obscure slow developments and flashes of joy. We need these small victories to temper darker realities when darkness falls. In hyper-political India, many ordinary citizens continue to practise inclusion and initiative. The urgent question for the new year is whether leaders and citizens will match the examples of inclusion.

Whether it can repair these cracks before they widen will define not just 2026, but India's larger unfinished story.

The writer focuses on development issues in India and emerging economies. She can be reached at patralekha.chatterjee@gmail.com.

SUPERMOON...



### LETTERS AFFORDABLE HOMES

Housing in Indian cities has become unaffordable not because homes are scarce, but because urban land and housing are treated as financial assets rather than social necessities. Large numbers of houses remain vacant while ordinary people are priced out due to speculation, flawed land policies and profit-driven planning. This model deepens inequality, pushes poor to city margins, weakens social mobility and fragments urban life. The crisis demands state intervention through taxing vacant properties, curbing land hoarding, expanding affordable rental housing and reimaging cities as spaces of shared dignity and opportunity, not engines of real estate profit.

**MD ASAD  
Mumbai**

### DMK WILL WIN TN

ELECTIONS to the Tamil Nadu Assembly have to be completed before May 2026. Right now, there is no discernible wave of anti-incumbency in the state against the ruling DMK dispensation contrary to what is being viciously propagated by the Opposition. The mega-alliance stitched by DMK president and chief minister M.K. Stalin intact. Though some of DMK's election promises remain unhonoured, the people can clearly see the stonewalling treatment meted out to TN. And, thanks to his free bus rides to women and stipends to housewives and students, the charismatic CM has earned a name as a leader of the masses. The foothold at the inept Vijay's rallies, too, may not translate into votes. Is Stalin slated for a second term?

**Tharicus S. Fernando  
Chennai**

### WOMEN'S HABIT NOW

THE RECENT TAX RESIST by the government on tobacco products is expected to help bring down smoking, as cigarettes will henceforth be significantly more expensive. Higher taxes are a proven measure recommended by WHO to discourage tobacco consumption, especially among youth and lower-income groups. While its effectiveness will also depend on other factors like controlling illicit trade and implementing comprehensive tobacco control programmes, it is likely to prove to be a powerful move. Although, there is a chance that it will make smoking even more fashionable among women than it has been in the past, which I find disturbing. I must have said I had to tick a box if I didn't want to become a member of the ₹149 price, and that would be charged to my card every two months. I hadn't noticed any box to tick.

I reported it to my bank as a scam. I wrote to ManualFinders saying that I was a journalist and wanted my money back. It took a month of such emails but they agreed to give back my money and cancel the "subscription". Beware the Greeks bearing gifts, yes... but today beware tickers or not ticking boxes which make you subscribers to services as useful to you as a bicycle is to an amoeba.

**R. Sivakumar  
Chennai**

Dhondy. It involved male victims in the United States and Europe who were targeted on the Internet by Nigerian gangs. They would be sent fake introductions to and pictures of young women looking for a relationship. As their interaction progressed, they would exchange phone numbers, email addresses, photographs and intimate messages. Then the Nigerian scammers would move in, blackmailing the victims, threatening to expose their correspondence to parents, friends and work associates. To stop that they would demand blackmail money.

Tr's investigation began with an interview with the parents of a blackmailed young man who had taken his own life. She then very bravely went to speak to the blackmailed "sexploiters" in the slums of Nigeria.

I have, through the years, had several emails telling me that my computer is in grave danger of revealing my bank details or some other hazard, and I should click a link to enable some remote controller who cleans up computers to have complete access to my computer which they would use to clean it out.

Of course, they intended to clean me out by accessing my bank details and my contact list, whom they could then send false exploitative messages to, saying I was in trouble and needed an urgent loan. They might even find some way to blackmail me as in Tr's

doe. I did not out of the scam, but assured the friend who alerted me to it, and now my gentle readers, that I was not vulnerable to any blackmail although, as Jesus said to the men who were throwing stones at an adulteress: "Let him who is without sin..." etc. Should I admit being like one of those stone throwers?

The latest scam I have encountered has been in dispute the last few months. Some time ago, I was given, by another daughter and her partner, an oil painting set consisting of a table easel, the oil paint tube collection and three stretched canvases.

I am as good at painting as a caterpillar would be at reproducing the works of Rembrandt. My babas were perhaps influenced by their cheery school days, the fact that during the Covid pandemic I had been given a watercolour set and had produced in those idle hours several paintings that would not have rivaled Van Gogh, or even the efforts of three-year-olds in local nursery. The present was well meaning, or perhaps a nudge to get me to make a fool of myself?

Here I was with a wooden table easel for oil painting on canvas and I decided to set it up. It was puzzling and I resorted to the Internet to ask how it was done. I was directed to a website called MANU-ALFINDER.COM. I accessed it, followed the instructions by telling it the make etc of the easel. The web-

site said it would charge me \$0.95 for the info and asked for debit card details, which I filled in. Ninety-five pence! A coffee costs three times that!

ManualFinders came back to me saying that they couldn't find the make of that particular easel. Fair enough. I thought I'd ask my painter cousin when he returned to London.

A few days later I checked my bank account on my phone. ManualFinders had used my debit card details to charge me £149 without telling me what that was for.

Genre reader, all you need to know as a warning is that they had, when I paid the \$0.95, perhaps presented me with some obscure text which I skimmed. It must have said I had to tick a box if I didn't want to become a member of the £149 price, and that would be charged to my card every two months. I hadn't noticed any box to tick.



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Friday Focus

Charity: Known & Unknown

Should charity be a matter of public knowledge or not stands answered in the holy Quranic verse (2:271) the verse relates:

"If ye disclose (acts of) charity, even so it is well, but if ye conceal them, and make them reach (really) in need, that is best for you; it will remove from some of your (stains of) evil. And Allah is acquainted with what ye do"

The cardinal rule stands that in charity, left hand may not know, what the right hand provides. An exception is however made for situations, where public knowledge of charity might be for overall societal benefit. Such situations arise, if charity is for public purpose. The purpose could be investment for generating employment and productivity. Or, raising institutions of social welfare, such as an educational institution, or a health care unit. It is made out that in such situations, an obscure show of concealment may itself be a fault. Public knowledge of such a charitable enterprise might stimulate others with means to the welfare and productive activity. In such a public enterprise, motives need to be pure and stay short of ostentation. In any case motive cannot be concealed, as made out in the holy verse—Allah (SwT) is acquainted with what you do.

In a charitable undertaking, where the cause is not public, it may not be made a matter of public knowledge. Those in need should be quietly and judiciously sought. Quietly for the purpose of protecting the honour of one in need. And, judiciously as charity needs to pass into the hand really deserving. Such an act of quiet and judicious seeking of one really in need is bound to wade off evil from your being, the divine promise holds in the given situations.

REFLECTIONS

As 2026 dawns

2025 was a collection of moments lived with friends, colleagues, and companions of circumstance

Moments

Dr. Aasif Ahmad  
aasifdar46@gmail.com

As the New Year begins today, people across towns, cities, offices, and homes pause for a moment of quiet reflection. The calendar has turned, yet the memories of 2025 remain vivid—woven deeply into hearts and minds. Every individual carries a story from the year gone by. Some are filled with pride, some with pain, and many with lessons that time itself cannot erase.

The year 2025 was not merely a sequence of days; it was a collection of moments lived with friends, colleagues, and companions of circumstance. The people we worked with, laughed with, struggled alongside, and sometimes even disagreed with, have left lasting impressions. For many, the New Year also brings change—new workplaces, new roles, or new paths altogether. And with those changes comes a quiet sense of loss. Offices once familiar, desks once occupied, routines once repeated now become memories. Everything a person once enjoyed, simple conversations, shared tea breaks, collective efforts—will be missed.

Time, as always, moves forward without mercy. The days that have gone will never return, and this realization often leaves the human heart in confusion. What remains, then, when everything else changes?

What truly endures is character.

In the end, people remember not positions or titles, but how they were treated... who cared, who stood by them, who acted with kindness when it mattered most. These are the memories that survive beyond years and workplaces. As mentioned, everyone has their own story. I, too, carry my personal story of 2025... a year that passed, never returning, leaving behind experiences that shaped my understanding of people and life.

Working in two different places during the year brought valuable experiences. It revealed the diversity of human nature. There were

moments when those who appeared caring on the surface carried jealousy in their hearts. Such individuals, through their actions, can leave deep and sometimes painful memories. Yet, it must also be said that all are not the same. Many people possess genuinely good hearts. They love, they care, and they make life easier for others. These are the individuals who have the power to make a year truly beautiful for those around them.

Whether in private institutions or government departments, leadership plays a vital role in shaping the experience. When an official respects and supports subordinates, the workplace becomes a space of motivation and growth. Such an environment allows employees to look back and say, "Yes, it was a good year." But when employees are met only with cold paperwork, indifference, or unfair treatment, how can they honestly claim that the year was great? For many, including myself and my colleagues, the year that passed was not extraordinary. It was simply another year of struggle—another chapter of endurance that has finally come to an end.

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As 2026 begins, hope stands before us like a fragile but glowing light. We hope for kindness in leadership, honesty in relationships, peace in workplaces, and compassion in daily life. We hope the coming year will be better—not just in words, but in reality.

May Allah, in His sweet will, erase all sufferings, heal wounded hearts, and grant a life filled with peace, dignity, and happiness. May 2026 be a fantastic year for all, written not with hardship, but with humanity, care, and hope.

Edit

Debating Contemporary Challenges

The brainstorming at Degree College Bijbehara brought to fore some pertinent issues



Academia

Prof. Gull Mohammad Wani  
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December 23, 2025, shall remain etched in my memory for more than one reason. Degree College, Bijbehara organised an academic event on the theme *Artificial Intelligence, Education, and the New Epistemic Order*. Scholars from within and outside the institution presented insightful papers, and, significantly, students participated actively by raising thoughtful and probing questions.

The beauty of the event lay in the fact that scientists and social scientists shared the same podium and deliberated on a common theme. Earlier, the college had also organised an event on the G 20. The principal of the college remained present throughout the day, attentively listening to both speakers and students, despite holding additional charge of two other colleges. A strong spirit of camaraderie was clearly evident. Courage, commitment, and character are the hallmarks of academic leadership—qualities that have become increasingly rare in contemporary times. This write-up formed the subject matter of my address at the function in my capacity as Chief Guest.

**Introduction**  
The sub-themes were carefully chosen. A broad consensus emerged that artificial intelligence (AI) can be viewed both as a movement towards the democratisation of knowledge and, simultaneously, as a potential force for its dehumanisation. If necessary, precautions are not taken at various levels. This dual nature by the way is true of all technologies that have shaped human life across the world. Education remains a powerful instrument, and quality education is, in itself, a vital skill. Nearly eighty per cent of our students are enrolled at the college level; therefore, we must safeguard the classroom as a critical space. We live in times when deliberative spaces—such as the family, community, and civil society—have suffered serious ruptures. Consequently, the

assumption. It is solved by production. Kashmir today requires a shift from scheme based governance to project based economic transformation, anchored firmly in scale.

Kashmir possesses immense hydroelectric potential, yet continues to face power shortages. This contradiction must be addressed through a holistic approach. Projects should be developed to make the region power surplus rather than merely power sufficient. Affordable and reliable electricity is the most critical input for industry, information technology services, healthcare, and education. Power projects should be developed to make the region power surplus rather than merely power sufficient. Affordable and reliable electricity is the most critical input for industry, information technology services, healthcare, and education. Power projects should be developed to make the region power surplus rather than merely power sufficient.

Kashmir's climate provides a natural advantage in dairy, livestock, and high value agriculture. However, current efforts remain scattered and insufficiently capitalised. The region needs large integrated dairy farms and agro processing complexes supported by modern cold chain logistics, processing units, and export infrastructure. Such projects can stabilise rural incomes, reduce imports, and create employment opportunities. Universities are not merely academic spaces. They are engines of innovation, entrepreneurship, and global engagement.

Global class medical colleges, teaching hospitals, and health centres can position Kashmir as a regional healthcare hub. Such institutions generate skilled employment, reduce dependence on facilities outside the region, and open opportunities in medical tourism and research, particularly in high-demand, climate related medicine. Healthcare is both social infrastructure and economic opportunity.

Geography is no longer a limitation. Government backed informal economy, technology parks, innovation hubs, and data centres powered by clean hydro energy can integrate Kashmir's youth into the global digital economy. Technology driven growth offers high value employment without heavy logistics costs. Modern economies move through air corridors. International class airports with cargo

ties may appear energetic and successful from the outside while gradually losing their inner life. They may shine in rankings yet hollow out the very core of what defines them—curiosity, reflection, community, and the cultivation of good human beings. Institutions often immerse themselves in the performance of activity while neglecting the essence of academic life. Some scholars advocate a "mindfulness movement" to reclaim calmness and return to foundational values. After all, a degree is not an endpoint but a beginning. One fears that colleges and universities may one day become mere museums of their past.

**“**  
In Sweden, a bold decision was taken in 2009 to replace traditional textbooks with digital screens. Fifteen years later, this policy was reversed.

Studies revealed that reading on paper promotes better retention and deeper understanding than reading from screens. Parents and teachers observed a decline in students' analytical abilities. Consequently, between 2022 and 2025, textbooks were reintroduced for all children. The real doomsday will arrive when human beings stop thinking and start consuming passively.

Third, Peter Fleming's book *Dark Academia: How Universities Deserve to be Essential* reading for college and university students. It offers a brilliant exposition of contemporary academic realities. Fleming's concept of the "Zombie University" suggests that universi-

ties may appear energetic and successful from the outside while gradually losing their inner life. They may shine in rankings yet hollow out the very core of what defines them—curiosity, reflection, community, and the cultivation of good human beings. Institutions often immerse themselves in the performance of activity while neglecting the essence of academic life. Some scholars advocate a "mindfulness movement" to reclaim calmness and return to foundational values. After all, a degree is not an endpoint but a beginning. One fears that colleges and universities may one day become mere museums of their past.

**Contemporary Challenges in the Classroom**  
First, the student in today's classroom is often a reluctant academic partner, unlike earlier times. Negativity and non-seriousness stem from a multitude of pressures. Students are fed doses of "fast-food education" merely to clear examinations. The high expectations of parents and peers further exhaust them. Teachers, in turn, are compelled to conduct classes like coaching-centre operators, racing against deadlines. Education has become a battlefield, devoid of joy and humour. Colleges have lost their role as inspiring spaces where students have the right to be wrong. We no longer see the college as a continuous talent-promotion platform.

Second, classrooms increasingly face intrusion from machines and digital devices, resulting in excessive distraction. The surging influences of technology are eroding the pastoral innocence of learning. Certain aspects of learning are uniquely human and must be pursued in a humane manner. Albert Einstein valued intuition, deeper and quieter form of knowledge that transcends mere facts and distances itself from a noisy world.

In Sweden, a bold decision was taken in 2009 to replace traditional textbooks with digital screens. Fifteen years later, this policy was reversed.

**Reclaiming Pedagogy**  
In light of the above discussion, it is imperative to reclaim pedagogy for our times. We must adopt a bottom-up approach and ensure the centrality of the student. Today's student must navigate an increasingly complex world. Classrooms have become emotional terrains where students arrive carrying far more than books. The following steps may help, to some extent, in building students' capacities and in making classrooms critical, analytical, and enjoyable spaces for learning and changing times.

First, we must remember that a boat capsizes due to water inside it, not outside. We often blame systems without attempting self-correction. An African proverb reminds us that "it takes a village to raise a child." Unfortunately, the world has grown increasingly unkind and individualistic. The recent suicide of a student in Delhi exposes the fragility and hollowness of our current conduct. *Geistig*—but could not answer my question during the viva voce. She had never been given an opportunity to stand up and speak—from school through university. These essential issues easily escape our attention.

**Conclusion**  
We have reached a point where outcomes have overtaken optics. Colleges and universities will increasingly be judged by graduate readiness and their ability to function in a volatile global environment shaped by artificial intelligence, geopolitics and geoeconomics. The rapid labour-market shifts too cannot be ignored. The writing on the wall is clear: we must abandon ergonomics for a process of academic catharsis.

Prof Gull Wani is Kashmiri base d Political Scientist

Kashmir needs scale, not schemes

Kashmir requires a shift from scheme based governance to project based economic transformation



Entrepreneurship

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Kashmir's economic challenge is often described in terms of unemployment, inequality, or lack of opportunity. In reality, the deeper issue is the absence of scale, systems, and long term thinking. For decades, development policy in the region has relied on fragmented schemes, subsidies, and short term relief measures. While these may offer temporary comfort, they do not create an economy capable of sustaining growth, dignity, and prosperity.

History offers a consistent lesson. Societies do not rise by distributing cash alone. They rise when the state, along with serious private capital, invests in infrastructure, institutions, and productive capacity. These are assets that individuals and small businesses can never build on their own. The foundations of development such as power generation, road and rail connectivity, logistics networks, industrial ecosystems, good class universities, advanced hospitals, international airports, and digital infrastructure are beyond the reach of ordinary citizens and local entrepreneurs. When these systems are missing, inequality persists regardless of how much money is redistributed.

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sumption. It is solved by production. Kashmir today requires a shift from scheme based governance to project based economic transformation, anchored firmly in scale.

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cation, the twenty-first century must prioritise access to lifelong learning. We must prepare students not merely for jobs but for life-long journeys.

Second, while caring about the curriculum is essential, a broader cultural shift is required. Students should graduate not only with degrees but also with portfolios demonstrating real-world problem-solving. Lady Shri Ram College (LSR), University of Delhi, has done commendable work by signing nearly 28 MOUs to bridge the gap between classroom theory and workplace reality. The initiative converts community outreach, fieldwork, internships, and social projects into academic credits. Each credit-linked internship is supported by faculty mentorship, ensuring strong linkages between fieldwork and academic theory. Academic rigour is sharpened when abstract concepts are applied to real-world problems. Such initiatives must be adopted urgently across our colleges.

Third, a teacher may, at least once a week, test students' curiosity by announcing: "Today I am not teaching. I would like you to teach me. Ask as many questions as you want and let me try to find answers together." Such an approach can significantly boost students' confidence. A leading academic was once asked why students exist in universities, to which he replied, "They are there to teach the teachers." This horizontal and bottom-up pedagogy can unlock students' latent potential. I recall a second-semester student who once wrote an excellent term paper titled "Life in a Kashmiri Pandit Migrant Camp at Gurez, Geoguz" but could not answer my question during the viva voce. She had never been given an opportunity to stand up and speak—from school through university. These essential issues easily escape our attention.

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Kashmir needs scale, not schemes

Kashmir requires a shift from scheme based governance to project based economic transformation

terms, perishable handling facilities, and global connectivity. Kashmir must see themselves as a regional power, not a regional client. Airports are not expenses. They are economic multipliers.

For such a transformation to succeed, all government departments must work in sync with this mission. Planning, power, industry, education, health, finance, and environment must move together under a single long term economic vision. Silos, delays, and conflicting priorities dilute impact.

Development at this scale demands coordination, accountability, and continuity. When departments act in isolation, projects stall. When they act together, momentum becomes irreversible. Above all, the youth of Jammu and Kashmir must see themselves as builders of the region, not policy or investment can substitute for generational responsibility. Short term thinking and narrow self interest will not serve Kashmir. What is required is patience, discipline, and continuous building for future generations rather than immediate gains. Regions rise when their youth choose creation over complaint and legacy over convenience.

Cash transfers fade. Schemes expire. Infrastructure, institutions, and industries endure.

Kashmir's economic revival demands long term vision, large scale investment, and collaboration with the state, from industry, and from society itself. There are no shortcuts to development. What is built in haste collapses. What is built with vision lasts for centuries.

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Greater Kashmir

GK Health Editor  
Dr Zubair Saleem

**Note:**  
The Senior Citizens Lounge is an initiative by the Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies on Ageing, Maul Mouf Foundation, and GK Communications.

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Heart Matters

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In our valley, endurance often passes for strength. Sometimes, it is simply the way we forget to ask for help.

Winter does not begin here with a single snowfall. It seeps in quietly, like fatigue at the end of a long day. One morning the tap hesitates before running; another, the latch burns your fingers. Breath stays in the air like unfinished speech. At dawn, smoke rises from hamam chimneys and hangs above the lanes in low ribbons. Houses seem awake before the people inside them. By the time the calendar approaches the twenty-first of December, our bodies have already surrendered—half willingly, half by habit.

From far away, winter looks cinematic. Snow lays its hand on everything—roofs, roads, even worry. Chimneys breathe evenly, and the valley appears calm. But inside that calm, everything slows. Doors resist as mornings stretch longer than their should. We wear the pheran indoors; taking it off feels unnecessary, even insecure. The kangri sits beneath it, glowing against the chest, a mix of comfort and mild danger. Inside the body, blood thickens, vessels tighten, and the heart works harder with out complaint. It has learned what we have learned—to keep going.

By the time people come to seek our consultation, winter has already taken residence inside them. Their hands are cold when they touch ours. Their faces carry a dull heaviness that rest no longer lifts. Blood pressure readings rise because of altered physiology, nonetheless, nobody looks surprised. "Sorry to trouble you."

"Just the cold."

Here, pain rarely arrives loudly; it is softened before it is spoken. Worry is postponed—until the snow melts, until the road clears, until spring looses the air. Even the heart is asked to wait its turn.

A man in his fifties came one morning wrapped in his pheran. He said he still climbed the stairs at home, though he now paused halfway—"just to take a breath." He smiled, embarrassed, holding his kangri like a shield. His blood pressure was high. "It's only the weather," he said. "Otherwise, I am fine."

He wasn't avoiding the truth. He

# Senior Citizens' Lounge

#ELDERS DESERVE BETTER

## Winter and the silent burden on the heart

In winter, the heart works harder in silence, don't mistake endurance for strength



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was explaining it. But winter is never only weather.

Cold narrows blood vessels and arteries. Dark evenings keep people indoors. Meals turn heavier, water intake shrinks, and medicines are forgotten—not always by choice, but quietly, as routines dissolve. By January, the body adjusts to what it shouldn't and calls it normal.

In textbooks, these changes are tidy: vasoconstriction—the narrowing of blood vessels—leads to increased blood pressure, compounded by inactivity. In real life, they appear as delay: a pain ignored because it fades, a visit postponed because the road might close, a walk skipped because warmth feels too good to leave. We are trained to endure, and very often that training saves us.

I often think of one of my patients, Shafi Sahib, a retired teacher. For two weeks he felt pressure in his chest every morning but told himself it was smoke from the kangri. He didn't want to worry his son, who worked far away. When I finally saw him, the heart attack had already occurred, damaging the fragile musculature of his heart. He looked at me, calm and confused.

"But I was managing," he said. "Yes," I told him. "You were. And so was your heart—until it couldn't anymore."

Winter does not break the heart suddenly. It works slowly, the way neglect does—step by step, one small delay at a time. A missed pill, a postponed appointment and a stretch of days without movement. Each reason sounds harmless on its own—together they narrow the margin for recovery.

Cold is not just weather; missed medicines, delayed doctor visits and quiet neglect are what truly narrow the heart's chances.

Inside the cath lab, arteries look the same in every season. But in winter, the stories that arrive with those arteries feel heavier—pain that lasted too long, damage that had time to deepen. Outside, snow lies untouched but inside another stillness forms—a heart that has been doing too much for too long. And still, there is something here to be proud of.

Our health system holds through winter. Hospitals stay lit even when power fails. Emergency rooms remain open when roads disappear. Our Cath labs and theatre warm before dawn, and ambulances crawl through snow where streets once were. Doctors, nurses, and technicians show up every day, often sleeping in hospital corridors because it is safer to stay than to drive home. They show up because hearts within bodies cannot wait for clear skies.

That quiet, unadvertised faith is what saves lives in the valley every winter. When patients finally come—late, frightened, apologetic—the door is still open. That is our victory.

We survive on small, stubborn habits and a sense of humour that outlasts bad weather. A patient once said,

"Doctor, electricity came before the pain today—maybe the government is improving." We both laughed. Sometimes a small laugh delays despair.

Medicine teaches numbers—blood pressure, heart rate, flow but winter teaches observation: the hesitation before a word, the tightening around the eyes, the silence of a house conserving heat. When cold settles into the mind, discipline falters—tables are skipped as routines blur. Nothing fails at once—it accumulates quietly, like snow on a roof you stop noticing.

So we remind people gently. Take your medicines even when you feel fine. Check your pressure without shame. Walk indoors if you cannot go outside. Drink water even when thirst does not announce itself. These are not signs of sickness but acts of care—small rituals, silent promises between body and will.

Then April arrives, light lengths and the pheran loosens. The kangri cools and the Hamam stones rest. People step outdoors laughing, saying how they "survived another winter" and speak of endurance with pride.

But the heart—quiet, faithful—remembers every long night it worked harder than it should have, every signal dismissed as weather. The holy and sacred heart forgives, but it never forgets. Winter will return—it always does. Snow will fall, indifferent to readiness. The question is not whether we can endure it again, but whether we can notice sooner, listen earlier, and take care—before the heart learns silence too well.

## Heart health tips



HeartBeat

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Some important helpful tips to prevent heart attacks/ stroke in winter

1. **Stay warm** with layers, dress appropriately and warmly, wear layers, a hat, gloves and warm socks to prevent rapid heat loss
2. **Exercise indoors** or warm up thoroughly. Avoid sudden exertion like heavy shovelling
3. **Stay hydrated** with warm fluids. Dehydration thickens blood.
4. **Eat heart healthy** meals like fruits and veggies and avoid fried foods.

A healthy diet can help protect the heart, improve blood pressure and cholesterol, and lower the risk of type 2 diabetes. A heart-healthy eating plan includes:

Vegetables and fruits. Beans or other legumes. Lean meats and fish. Low-fat or fat-free dairy foods. Whole grains. Healthy fats such as olive oil and avocado.

Two examples of heart healthy food plans include the Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension (DASH) eating plan and the Mediterranean diet. Take in less of the following:

Salt or high-sodium meals. Sugar or sweetened beverages. Highly refined carbohydrates. Alcohol. Highly processed food, such as processed meats. Saturated fat, which is found in red meat, full-fat dairy products, palm oil and coconut oil. Trans fat, which is found in some fried fast food, chips and baked goods.

5. **Quit Smoking** Smoking is one of the most preventable causes of death and disease in the world. It is also one of the top risk factors for heart attack. The chemicals in cigarettes cause damage to the inner lining of arteries leading to a build-up of fatty material called plaque, which can block blood flow to the heart muscle and further heart attack.

6. **Sound sleep** for 7 to 8 hours. **Manage stress** like practice faith based activities, deep breathing, meditation or hobbies to keep stress hormones down.

8. **Take medication** for hypertension, diabetes, high cholesterol and heart as prescribed.

9. **Be Aware of Warning Signs:** If you experience any chest pain, shortness of breath, dizziness, or nausea, seek medical care immediately. Early diagnosis and treatment are the best ways to prevent a heart attack

Dr Showkat Shah, Critical Care specialist, Srinagar Kashmir

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## My Grandmother's House

A Sanctuary of Lost Values



Back to Roots

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I have often written in these columns about my maternal grandmother, the late Zooni Begum—affectionately known to us as *Zoon Ded*. While I previously profiled her character in a piece titled "An Elderly Rolle Model," today I wish to shine a light on her home. It was a haven of laughter, refuge, wisdom, and calm. In an era where everyone is exhausted by the pursuit of material gain, such idyllic sanctuaries are increasingly rare. It was not a palatial house, yet *Zoon Ded* ruled it like a queen, filling it with a remarkable charm and tranquility blessed by kindness and brotherhood.

I never met my grandfather; my mother told me he passed before I was born. Consequently, my childhood was spent

in the close proximity of my grandmother—a combination of warmth, wisdom, and love. I am often reminded of the calm atmosphere that surrounded her home. Such simple lives and caring matriarchs are a rarity today. Through specific memories have faded with time, the mere mention of my grandmother's house floods me with sights, smells, and sounds that modern society is totally devoid of.

Her house was more than just a physical space; it was an edifice of heritage and a testament to the enduring power of love. It was a reminder of where my heart will forever reside. This house often witnessed a battalion of children from extended families. During Eid, the rush would not decline for days. The house functioned like an institution, teaming with relatives—especially children visiting their *Matamaal* (grandna's house). It was undoubtedly a place where everyone lived happily, ate contentedly, and slept soundly. It was a house of tranquility where nobody ever remained hungry, providing shelter not just to descendants, but to outsiders as well. Not a single day went by without a guest arriving at her door.

Unlike today, there were no AI-powered security systems or gates screening guests

before entry. It was a simple, beautiful refuge without concrete boundary walls. It was maintained in such a way that any neighbor could walk in, sit for a while, stir up a conversation, or seek advice. Nowadays, *Musafir* (travelers or beggars) are rarely spotted in villages. But in those days, many would visit, and none would leave that house empty-handed.

I vividly remember one chilly morning when a beggar knocked at our door and called out, "*Kalandaro, Kalandro Saendes Naous Paeth Ditu Musafir Kehncho*" ("O! Owner, give this beggar something for God's sake"). As soon as my grandmother heard him, she instantly brought him inside. Beyond giving him a bowl of rice, she offered him a *Kangri* for warmth and served him a cup of *Nun Chai*. She taught us that day that whatever we give returns to us in multiples. "A beggar is an emissary from God," she told us. We were taught never to rebuke them. Even with limited resources, nobody left *Zoon Ded's* house empty.

Manzoor Akash is educator, author and regular columnist to GK's Senior Citizens' Lounge

For full text visit greaterkashmir.com

## Insomnia and older adults

The quality of our sleep often deteriorates as we age

Insomnia

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Insomnia is defined as the inability to fall asleep, the inability to stay asleep or waking up earlier than desired. In order to have a clinical diagnosis of insomnia the patient must have an adequate sleep opportunity and adequate sleep environment. The sleep disturbance must also have an impact on their quality of life by causing any of the following: fatigue, impaired cognitive performance, mood disturbance, daytime sleepiness, behavioural problems, reduced motivation, proneness for errors or worry about sleep. Insomnia is categorised as chronic if it persists for more than 3 months and short term if it has lasted fewer than 3 months. The most recent International Classification of Sleep Disorders no longer emphasises previously distinguished insomnia subtypes or insomnia comorbid with mental or medical disorders. Even when insomnia is related to another condition, treatment of the comorbid condition often desist cure the insomnia.

Sleep and Aging

The quality of our sleep often deteriorates as we age. People tend to sleep less and are prone to more waking episodes after initially falling asleep. Sleep latency—the time it takes to fall asleep—may also increase. Some studies suggest that, beginning in middle age, the average

person loses 27 minutes of sleep per night for each subsequent decade.

These decreases in sleep quality and duration are tied to the body's internal timekeeping systems. The body cannot process circadian signals as efficiently, which in turn may cause older people to go to bed and wake up at earlier times.

Our sleep architecture also changes as we age and seniors are more susceptible to waking episodes during the night and also affects how refreshed and alert they feel in the morning.

Epidemiology

Insomnia is a highly prevalent sleep disorder, affecting up to 30% of young adults and increases to about 30% to 48% in those older than 65 yrs. The prevalence of insomnia is higher in older adults, which is likely due to age related reductions in sleep efficiency and the accrual of comorbidities that are associated with insomnia.

Comorbid psychiatric conditions increase the likelihood of developing chronic insomnia. Depression is perhaps the most common and strongly associated mental illness with insomnia. Anxiety is also a risk factor for developing insomnia.

A wide variety of medical problems are associated with insomnia. Epidemiologic evidence shows a greater prevalence of insomnia in hypertension, heart disease, arthritis, lung disease, gastrointestinal reflux, stroke and neurodegenerative disorders, to only name a few. Symptoms of medical illnesses that can disrupt sleep include pain, paresthesias,

cough, dyspnea, reflux and nocturia.

Many medications can impair sleep or change sleep architecture, if stimulating medications (eg caffeine, sympathomimetics, bronchodilators, activating psychiatric medications) are taken too near to bedtime, sleep can be disturbed. Furthermore, sedating medications can lead to daytime sleeping which often decreases the ability to sleep at night.

Evidence shows a greater prevalence of insomnia in hypertension, heart disease, arthritis, lung disease, gastrointestinal reflux, stroke and neurodegenerative disorders, to only name a few.

Causes:

Late-life insomnia is often a long-lasting problem. One study showed that a third of older patients had persistent severe insomnia symptoms at 4-year follow up. Among women older than 65 yrs, more than 80% reported sleeping difficulties, with many making over-the-counter (OTC) sleeping medications. Lastly being a caregiver for others, which often occurs later in life, is a contributing factor to the development of insomnia.

1. Predisposing factors: are a vulnerability to insomnia which may include anxiety, depression, or hyperarousal.

2. Precipitating factors: these are triggers for insomnia such as loss of a spouse, retirement, moving to a new home, or any other sort of stressor.

3. Perpetuating factors: these are maladaptive habits or beliefs that the patient has acquired to deal with the insomnia such as spending long periods in bed or taking naps.

Clinical presentation and evaluation

Many patients do not talk to their doctors about their sleep complaints. The presence of insomnia may be revealed by eliciting self-medication with over-the-counter therapies or alternative sedatives. A careful sleep history and evaluation is conducted in order to assess whether there are comorbid sleep disorders such as Sleep disordered breathing (SDB), underlying the sleep disturbance. The presence of undiagnosed OSA is common in those with insomnia.

PSG and other sleep studies are obtained if a comorbid sleep condition is suspected. Sleep diaries with daily entries over 1 to 2 weeks, with caffeine, alcohol and medication use noted can be very helpful in determining the severity of insomnia as well as identifying possible perpetuating factors such as irregular bedtimes or late night caffeine.

For full text visit greaterkashmir.com

Dr Murassa Shamshad, Geriatric Specialist, Dept of Health, J&K



# The real diary is the black box of your life

Unlike social media, which holds curated snippets of the life you want others to think you lead, a good, old paper diary, to be opened by others after you are gone, records the mundane moments that give life meaning



CULT FRICTION  
SANDIP ROY

At the end of every year my mother had a little ritual. She would say, "Well it looks like I survived another year. So can you buy me a diary for next year?"

As she got more housebound with age, she would say, "Don't get one of those big expensive diaries. Get a small one. Not enough happens anymore in my life to fill a whole page."

But she filled it anyway, painstakingly listing every phone call she had received that day and every phone call she had made. If the cook called in sick, that was recorded as well alongside menus for birthday dinners and the like. At the beginning of every month she noted all the birthdays of various relatives and friends that month, a list that steadily shrank over the years.

One of my last memories of my mother is of her sitting on her bed, propped up against her pillow, still trying to write in her diary with a shaky hand. The last couple of weeks of her life she did not have the strength to write. But after she was gone I opened the diary and saw she had already entered all the upcoming birthdays for that month, calls she never got to make.

My parents were not writers. But when they discovered I liked writing they encouraged me to keep a diary. They thought it would be a good exercise for the writing muscle. My father would get diaries and calendars as gifts and he would let me choose one for myself. My first diaries tended to have dull grey-blue covers with geometric designs and the names of cement companies. Writing in her diary was my mother's ritual at the end of every day, almost like a way to put the day to bed before she went to bed herself. I was not as consistent; sometimes I would miss an entire week, but I tried.

Later I tried to keep a digital diary, a Word document for every year. But somehow it never matched the appeal of a physical diary. After February or March, the entries would become more sporadic. The document buried in my laptop did not tug at my conscience like the physical book's empty pages. Writing on paper with real ink had the feel of a ritual of some import. It carried weight. The first few entries in long-hand were always in my best schoolboy handwriting. Over time it became a scrawl, like a New Year's resolution slowly unravelling.

At that time I thought in a moment of vainglorious delusion that my diary was meant to be a record for posterity, that long after I was gone, someone would read it as a chronicle of my times. When Anne Frank started her diary she wondered why anyone would ever be interested in the outpouring of a 13-year-old girl. History turned her journal into probably the most famous diary in the world. In India, H. Y. Sharada Prasad became a speech writer for prime ministers. But when his prison diary—written when he was in Mysore jail as a 19-year-old involved in the Quit India movement—was published as a book, historian Ramachandra Guha marvelled in a column that "the speeches that Sharada Prasad wrote for Indira and Rajiv Gandhi were of the moment—whereas the words he wrote for himself were quite often for all time." That was probably because, as Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote about journaling, "the good writer seems to be writing about himself but has his eye always on that thread of the Universe which runs through himself and all things."

But when I look back at my old diaries I see no such thread. My diary entries offer no great insight into my life and times. Instead I wonder why anyone would be interested in the minutiae of my life. For example, on 31 March 2018, "At home. Took nap. Got food from Chinese place. Got very dark and stormy. First big *kalbaisakhi* storm. Puppy climbed on lap and sat there. Heard *Ajay mama* died."

Forget the great diarists like Samuel Pepys, Anais Nin or Virginia Woolf. This



was not even Bridget Jones's diary.

Writer Anthony Quinn once admitted in an essay in *The Guardian* that people thought it was "weirdly old-fashioned" that he kept a diary. He confessed he felt oddly furtive if even his wife found him writing his diary at the kitchen table, as if she had stumbled upon him doing something clandestine. The diary, he wrote, "is the most private form of literary creation because you are both the author and (for the present at least) the sole reader."

Social media like Facebook purports to be a sort of diary as well but in reality they are anti-diaries. They are about performance, curated snippets of the life you want other people to think you lead. The real diary is the black box of your life, to be opened by others only after you are gone.

That is not to say it is the most reliable way to make sense of someone's life, or even the most truthful. We change. And when I read my diary entries from 20 years ago, I wonder if that pretentious person was really me. Great events of historical importance find no mention in my diary. Instead, content in my bubble of self-centredness, I am busy noting what I cooked and what haircuts I got. But then as Quinn noted on the day the Bastille fell in France, Louis XVI wrote in his diary "Rien" or "Nothing."

In fact the mistake we make when we read a diary is to think of it as some secret portal into the innermost mind of the diarist, that because it is written for

Even the most trivial notation in the diary is not without value because our lives, even for the most intellectual thinkers among us, are mostly full of such humble moments.

an audience of one, namely herself, it must somehow be the truest reflection of herself. But as Susan Sontag wrote in *Reborn: Journals and Notebooks, 1947-1963*, one is not documenting or expressing oneself more openly in a diary than one could do to another person, one is also creating oneself. Therefore (alas) it does not simply record my actual, daily life but rather—in many cases—offers an alternative to it."

But my diary cannot even claim such grand aspirations. It is mostly filled with details of little significance. Yet even at its most mundane a diary has something to tell us. I once read *Khadda Bodi Thok* by Kalyani Datta, a Bengali book which included a housewife's shopping lists from decades ago. She no doubt never imagined that it would one day merit publication in a book but those simple lists with the prices in annas and pice painted such a vivid picture of early 20th century domesticity that I felt I was looking into her kitchen. It was journaling at its most unselfconscious.

The other day my sister and I were trying to remember which month we had bought some appliance years ago. The receipts were long lost. And the keeper of memories, my mother, was gone as well. But we had her diaries and we knew if we leafed through that year's pages it would surely be recorded.

At that time we had teased her about the mundane things she found worth noting in her diary. But as we came upon the entry, I realised, mother would have the last laugh. Even the most trivial notation in the diary is not without value because our lives, even for the most intellectual thinkers among us, are mostly full of such humble moments. The pages of a diary add up to a life, day by day.

I did not find the meaning of life in my mother's diary. But in its little half-forgotten details I find a quiet familiar comfort that gives life meaning.

Cult Friction is a fortnightly column on issues we keep rubbing up against.

Sandip Roy (@sandipr) is a writer, journalist and radio host.

# The man who invented the world wide web

Rahul Jacob

Heading to a mentor's funeral in Greece in August 2001, Tim Berners-Lee found himself and a colleague flying right over the Parthenon, "the two of us peering out of the window to the Agora steps where Socrates conducted his dialogues," Berners-Lee, the founder of the world wide web, and his fellow traveller Jean-Francois Abramatic, then chairman of the not-for-profit consortium that in effect managed the world wide web in the late 1990s, turned philosophical.

Berners-Lee wondered if we might face another dark age or if the world had reached a point "where civilisation and liberal democracy are locked in?" Abramatic confidently said that liberal democracy was "so strong and growing in concert with technology" that the benefits were here to stay. Less than a fortnight later, in the middle of a meeting on the world wide web, the two turned on the news to learn of the 9/11 attacks.

Reading Berners-Lee's engaging memoir, *This is for Everyone*, one is reminded that the optimism about the web (and likely some of the current hype about Artificial Intelligence) has been overdone. Berners-Lee, who is the rare individual who put brotherhood before billions in what now seems like a dystopian world dominated by the tech bros, has written a memoir alive to the dangers of extreme polarisation on social media but remains a tech optimist at heart.

How could it be otherwise? Berners-Lee generously gave the world the protocols of HTTP, HTML and URL for free in the 1990s and early on had to fend off efforts to monetise this terrain. He remains a believer in a kind of Athenian democracy for the web, but circa 2025, this vision seems naive.

In the past months, headlines or pronouncements involving US-based tech bros—especially of the more than occasionally anti-immigrant rhetoric from the coteries that include Elon Musk, Peter Thiel and military intelligence company Palantir's founder Alex Karp—have rained on us like a relentless mon-

soon. A recent column in *The New York Times* observes that emboldened by the Make America Great Again movement and what the economist Paul Krugman on December 9 denounced as the digital narco state run by the Trump administration, "their nutty ideas are now borderline plausible. And terrifying."

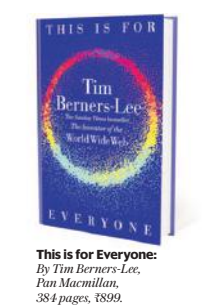
There are two or even three books in *This is for Everyone*: a historical narrative of the idealism and innovation that made the world wide web via a Switzerland-based research organisation a reality, a look ahead to how we could all own and manage our data, now and in the future, and a charming memoir of how Berners-Lee's celebrity as the founder of the web put him in unusual positions such as being one of the principal participants in the opening ceremony of the London Olympics.

This Janus-like 20/20 hindsight and foresight is enlivened by details such as the declaration on 30 April 1993 by the European Council for Nuclear Research, better known by its French acronym as CERN, where Berners-Lee first wrote the proposal for the world wide web, after making public the source code and web server software he created: "CERN relinquishes all intellectual property rights to this code... and permission is given to anyone to use, duplicate, modify and distribute it." This otherworldly generosity contrasts so radically with the tech world today that one cannot help but be overawed. It also explains the exponential growth to some 5.5 billion users of the web today.

There are other examples of selflessness by Berners-Lee and his colleagues dotted through the book. The most dramatic one concerns Daniel Lewin, a brilliant graduate student at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). He devised the crucial algorithm for distributing content requests among thousands and now millions of web servers after hearing Berners-Lee's description of the problem at MIT, where he moved after leaving CERN. "Without consistent hashing, I don't know how back-end infrastructure could have kept up with user demand for front-end content. Hashing solved this issue by reducing the



Tim Berners-Lee at the Web Summit 2025 in Lisbon, Portugal.



**This is for Everyone:**  
By Tim Berners-Lee,  
Pun Macmillan,  
384 pages, ₹899.

1992 and chancing upon an archive of sheet music from the Italian Renaissance. But for its antiquity perhaps, it mirrors the experience many of us have on the internet when we discover a treasure trove for research and reading just by a few seemingly random clicks of a mouse. "I felt as if I were sitting in the Vatican archives, paging through this antique document myself," he writes.

More ominously, Berners-Lee recognised in the early 2000s itself that "the web was not merely a rival to print, television and radio—it was going to decimate and supersede those media. This was perhaps clearer to me than it was to executives within the media industry." While being interviewed by the BBC's Alan Yentob, he asked Yentob whether the BBC had an action plan on how to respond. Taken aback, Yentob said he would check.

Berners-Lee has long been aware of the ability of the internet to distract as it seizes hold of our attention and also its capacity to polarise opinions. After 2016 (a watershed year because of Donald Trump's unexpected win in the US presidential election and the alarming Brexit vote in the UK), he added the word "compassion" to his discussion of how creativity and collaboration had been pillars of the web's rise and rise.

"The algorithms that organised and presented content on Facebook, Twitter

Tim Berners-Lee's idealism clouds his ability to offer solutions for the political and social dystopia of our future in this unusual memoir

and Instagram) prioritised engagement over enjoyment, collaboration or mental health, and soon the fun was gone, replaced by the signature art of doomscrolling through endless streams of invective, propaganda... and envy-inducing lifestyle bait that preyed on the user's fear of missing out," he writes. "The social media giants began to harvest users' attention on an industrial scale."

Nevertheless, it has taken till December 2025 for the first social media ban (in Australia) on usage by those under 16 and more vulnerable to a loss in self-esteem to be put into effect. Inevitably, this prompted a toxic blast from X owner Musk, just months after he used his platform to act as a megaphone for anti-immigrant hatred in the UK.

It is in countering these malignant mutinous millions of genies that have escaped their bottles that Berners-Lee's book seems alternately naive or overoptimistic. He supports the European Union's data protection and privacy laws and has gone further by creating a social enterprise that seeks to enable users of the web to create pods that host all their data rather than allowing the tech giants to control and manipulate it. A regional government in the Netherlands has made such pods possible for six million citizens.

Berners-Lee's other example of empowering us as users—linking health data with our financial data—left me baffled as to how I would gain "new insights," let alone exercise my data sovereignty. He is also nowhere near as articulate as Nicholas Carr was in his decades-old book, *The Shallows*, in explaining the damage the attention economy does to our brains and our ability to concentrate on tasks as straightforward as reading a book from beginning to end. He is neither as philosophical nor as profound as Blaise Agüera y Arcas in *What is Intelligence*, a recent tour de force on Artificial Intelligence. Berners-Lee may be a modern-day saint, but his idealism clouds his ability to offer solutions for the political and social dystopia that seems to be our collective future.

Rahul Jacob is a Mint columnist.



# Mumbai's working life in watercolour

Zainab Tambawalla's vibrant watercolours capture everyday life, work and exhaustion in Mumbai

Rahul Jacob

When Zainab Tambawalla heard that a hospital building with an ornate, antique gate she had admired on a heritage walk in Mumbai might be demolished, she wrote an email to the owners requesting that they preserve the extensive wrought iron grillwork. Closer to home, she was dismayed to find that the elegant wooden signage outside her father's paint shop had been removed. "Some moments will be gone before you take out your notebook," says Tambawalla, who self-deprecatingly describes her work as "urban sketching".

In her first solo show, a high-spirited parade of vibrant watercolours entitled *Seen Unseen*, Tambawalla reveals herself as a miniaturist of the metropolis, but also a conservationist of a kind (the exhibition is on at 47-A Khotachi Wadi till 4 January). In a painting of a telephone repairman, with one of his feet elevated as he lurches over a mesh of wires, she gives us in one image the complexity of the infrastructure of telephony of yesteryear and the skill required to keep landlines working even as they slowly become a relic of the past. Her rendering of a neighbourhood knife sharpener is an ode to a skill that might eventually become a victim of our increasingly throwaway culture.

Tambawalla brings that intensity of observation and depiction to inanimate objects as well. Her series of paintings of electricity junction boxes and feeder-styled boxes are in reds so vivid that they have the glamour of that other emblem of a bygone era, the London phone booth. But, as they are in Indian cities, these junction boxes are festooned with faded adverts.

This series inverts the work of French Cubist artist Georges Braque, who used collages of newspaper cutouts to create



figures of men playing the violin, for example. More than a century later, Tambawalla sees art as a contemporary collage all around us in cities. In a telling comment, she recalls that from her Mumbai home, she would sometimes look out on *chawl* dwellers nearby and be fascinated by the way "they composed the belongings that stayed outside their house".

Her father owns a paint shop, her mother is a seamstress, homemaker and

'Pipe dream 9'; and (right) from 'A Shared Horizon' series.  
PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY GALLERY 47-A

now has a business batching seeds for *mukwas*, and her grandmother was a seamstress. "I am privileged to have been born at a time when we were not privileged," Tambawalla remarks. But her observation is not simply factual. It reflects a world-view of empathy towards fellow city-dwellers who provide the labour and skills that make our metropolises hum. "The streets of Mumbai often feel like an open studio... a flower seller



setting up at dawn, a chai vendor pouring into a glass tumbler," an exhibition caption observes. "Together, these workers form the quiet machinery of the city."

For me, the most moving section was Tambawalla's tribute to many of these workers around the city catching a nap while going about their day or simply succumbing to exhaustion. The artist has worked in animated film as well and that is reflected in a series of snappy captions and titles as one walks through the show. In *The City that Never Sleeps*, the cliché used to laud Mumbai's urban vitality, she uses the same words with irony for a series that is a documentary of immigrants worn out by work or by the effort of seeking work in a city reputedly paved with gold. Her view is more Steinbeckian than *Stardust*.

One arresting frame is of a young man, presumably unemployed, who has fallen asleep against a bus stop pillar, decorated with "help wanted" ads. The pathos and poignance of the scene is representative of our supposed "demographic dividend", which is mostly a falsehood. Like "the city that never sleeps" the dividend turns out to be too many young people chasing too few jobs. In another, a Bengali woman is sleeping on a handcart. Tambawalla explains that her paintings in that section have only one woman because very few Indian women, even in a city, would feel comfortable sleeping in public.

A painting of a handsome casual labourer who has fallen asleep against a

bleached pink shuttered metal roller gate makes him seem temporarily beaten down by the struggle of getting by, too tired to be the dockworker about to rise against the system in the 1970s *Deewar*. "These works stay with that thin line between exhaustion and resilience, between dreaming and simply making it through the night," the exhibition notes explain.

Tambawalla's work is collectively one of social commentary, but against such vivid Henri Matisse-like colours, hers is a vision that makes you think without turning gloomy. In a spectacular series on, of all things, water tankers, she is simultaneously exploring the inequalities of water supply, and the coming dystopia of water scarcity in one of the most vulnerable countries on earth, while somehow celebrating these giant beasts of burden. With her Technicolour palette, she makes the tankers seem like caparisoned elephants at a Rajasthani festival.

In another love song to Mumbai, *The Moor's Last Sigh*, Salman Rushdie quipped that Arco Deco was a corruption of the Hindi word *dekho*. Tambawalla, who bemoans that she rarely sees people looking out of windows these days, has crafted a debut show that is a rallying cry to do just that. In *Seen Unseen*, she has created a kind of portable movie projector of yesteryear for us to observe a world that many of us are too preoccupied to see.

Rahul Jacob is a former travel, food and drink editor of the Financial Times, London and a Mint columnist.

## Medium Talk

More than small talk

### Perils pets face at home

WIZARD OF PAWS

Anything from incense to floor cleaner can pose a threat. Here's how to create a safe space for your pet

Nameeta Nadkarni

It is easy to believe that a pet living in an apartment is protected from most dangers—no cars zooming past, no street dogs picking fights, and no monsoon puddles carrying infections. Yet the most serious risks to pets often sit quietly inside our homes.

Indoor air quality is a major culprit. We light incense during prayers, burn mosquito coils, and run diffusers because they smell pleasant. Dogs and cats breathe in the same particulate matter that irritates human airways, but they do it at the floor level where heavier particles settle. Cats groom themselves meticulously, so whatever lands on their coat ends up in their stomach. I have seen healthy pets develop chronic coughing or recurrent vomiting that improves simply by moving incense to the balcony and switching from coils to sealed mosquito machines placed out of reach. A practical rule is to keep all smoke or vapour sources away from the room your pet sleeps in and ensure good ventilation. Similarly, take precautions during pest control so that the pet does not inhale or walk through the residues left behind.

Water quality is another invisible hazard. Many apartments rely on overhead tank water that travels through ageing pipes. Pets who drink tap water that tastes metallic or odd often reduce their intake. Hard water can irritate the urinary tract. Offer filtered drinking water. Even basic RO or UV-purified water prevents recurring tummy upsets.

Cleanliness agents also create trouble. Homes are mopped frequently, and wet paws pick up whatever remains on the tiles. Phenyl-based cleaners, bleach and strong floral solutions leave residues that



Indoor air quality can affect the health of pets.

irritate the skin and stomach. I have traced many vague "off and on" vomiting episodes back to the floor cleaner. The solution is to dilute properly and switch to fragrance-free, pet-friendly products. Ensure the floor is dry before your pet walks through the room.

Balconies are one of the biggest risks in high-rise living. I have treated cats that survived falls from the sixth or seventh floor with fractured jaws, ruptured organs and severe shock. Contrary to myth, cats do not always right themselves during a fall. A sudden noise or a pigeon can send them straight off the ledge. The simplest solution is netting or grills.

Electrical hazards also go unnoticed. Loose wires, chargers left plugged in, or frayed cables are irresistible to puppies and cats. Electric shocks are rare but oral burns can occur even with low voltage.

Medication left unattended is another common emergency. One case involved a Labrador who ate an entire strip of ibuprofen left on a bedside table. Ibuprofen is highly toxic to dogs and can cause catastrophic kidney failure. He survived because his family reached the hospital quickly. Keep all medication inside closed cabinets, never in handbags,

drawers left slightly open or table tops. Kitchens contain their own set of hazards. Overheated non-stick pans release fumes that irritate airways. Hot oil splatters and boiling water spills occur quickly in compact cooking spaces where pets love to sit underfoot. Food toxicity is another issue. Grapes, raisins, onions, garlic, xylitol-containing items and chocolate are all dangerous for pets.

Indoor plants can be deceptively dangerous. Decorative favourites like peace lilies, pothos and philodendrons are common in apartments and toxic when chewed. Cats nibble plants out of boredom and dogs sometimes dig in pots. Noise is also a stressor. Noise anxiety accumulates over time. Pets become jumpier, clingier or withdrawn without obvious reason. Creating a quiet safe room with curtains and a comfortable bed helps. During festivals or building repairs, allow your pet a refuge away from the sound.

Look at your flat from the eye level of your pet. Safe homes are created by intention.

Nameeta Nadkarni is a veterinary soft tissue surgeon and pet blogger from Mumbai.



The young are growing up intimately aware of handheld devices.

ISTOCKPHOTO

### Why bans won't work

Legal restrictions cannot realistically protect a generation that has been born into an always-online world

Somak Ghoshal

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If you are a parent wondering about how to reduce your child's screen time in the new year, you are not alone. Two judges of the Madurai bench of the Madras high court recently urged the Union government to consider imposing a law to restrict children from accessing the internet. Their idea is inspired by a recent legislation in Australia, which banned social media for under-16s. Studies around the world show that children are exposed to inappropriate content online everyday, face cyberbullying, and are vulnerable to scammers and other abusers, which lead to mental health breakdowns, low self-esteem, body dysphoria and, in extreme cases, suicide ideation. In recent times, artificial intelligence agents have also abetted such harmful behaviours. Responding to a public interest litigation filed in 2018, the court suggested better awareness be created among parents and children

about the dangers that lurk online.

Countries around the world are observing Australia's move. Whether similar restrictive laws come through elsewhere or not, bans are not a foolproof solution. If prohibitions had the power to solve problems, the world be free of drugs, crime, hate, and violence. Ironically, it would have also become more despotic, with no space for dissent.

Although all social media platforms have a minimum legal age requirement to register an account, users circumvent the rule easily due to lack of stringent age verification tools. With a ban in place, such practices are only going to get ubiquitous, as Unicef recently warned. There is now talk of making social media access stricter by mandating users to sign-in with government IDs and biometric details. While such a rule may prevent underage users from getting on these platforms, it is also going to cut out others who don't have the required IDs or refuse to share personal details with Big Tech.

As scholar Shoshana Zuboff shows in her 2018 book, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, social media users concede massive amounts of data to tech giants, which mine the information to train the algorithms that run these behemoths. More layers of verification may deepen the surveillance economy, making users like journalists, activists and whistle-blowers more vulnerable to a state over-

reach. Such a policy also makes it easy to start collecting data from early on, when the users are still in school.

While countries like Germany, France, the Netherlands and South Korea debate issues of parental consent and limiting the use of cellphones in classrooms, the fact remains that the under-16s—or Gen Alpha—are born into a world where they are exposed to the internet from infancy.

With parents and adults documenting every milestone of their lives on social media, the young are growing up intimately aware of handheld devices. When a baby turns a tantrum, parents default to using a screen as a pacifier. On public transport, young people see adults lost in their phones, scrolling through noisy reels. A family outing at a restaurant often ends up with each person absorbed in their phone. Instead of getting out and playing in parks, which are anyway rare in Indian cities, children get hooked to video games behind locked doors.

Eventually, when Gen Alpha joins the workforce, many of their colleagues will be robots and the tools of their trade fully tech-enabled, as a recent study published by International Workplace Group found. Keeping young people away from the internet isn't going to help them to make a life for themselves. Instead, it would be more useful to train them to become ethical and responsible citizens of their inevitable digital future.





Editor's  
TAKE

## The human cost of an invisible line

Every year, hundreds of innocent civilians accidentally cross the Indo-Pak border and languish in jail for years for their mistake

As the world looks forward to the new year enthusiastically and with hope, there are a set of innocent people trapped in jails of India and Pakistan, languishing for years for a rather innocuous crime - crossing the border and being caught for straying into another country. Every year, hundreds of fishermen and people mistakenly cross the border, only to be nabbed and put into jails. Sometimes it is years before they are released; the less fortunate never make it, though they are no security threat, their fate sealed by India-Pakistan hostility and bureaucratic paperwork.

Every year, as India and Pakistan exchange lists of civilian prisoners and fishermen on January 1, under the 2008 Agreement on Consular Access. These lists deal with a disturbing yet avoidable human tragedy. Ordinary fishermen drift across an invisible maritime boundary by mistake. Many civilians stray across land borders, only to languish in foreign prisons for years - often long after their sentences are completed. The latest exchange reveals the scale of the problem. Pakistan has acknowledged 199 Indian fishermen and 58 Indian civil prisoners in its custody, while India holds 33 Pakistani fishermen and 391 civil prisoners. The sad part is that 167 Indian fishermen and civil prisoners in Pakistan have already completed their sentences but are still awaiting repatriation. Everyone knows that they are not hardened criminals or security threats; many are poor fishermen whose lives depend on uncertain seas - faulty navigation equipment, unreliable GPS, compulsions of livelihood and bad luck is all it takes them to land up in jail.

For fishing communities along the Gujarat-Sindh coast, the maritime boundary is not a visible fence but an invisible line drawn on maps. Boats are often small, GPS devices unaffordable, and sudden weather changes common - a wrong turn, an engine failure, or a strong current can push a fisherman into foreign waters within minutes. What follows is far beyond their imagination - arrest, trial under immigration or maritime laws, imprisonment, abhorrent living conditions in jail, and years of separation from families already living on the edge of poverty. While both governments routinely assert that prisoners are treated humanely, prolonged detention after sentence completion exposes serious flaws in the system. Delays in consular access, and bureaucratic inertia add to their misery. Though the exchange of prisoner lists is a confidence-building measure, it is clearly insufficient. What is required is a humanitarian approach. The fishermen who cross maritime boundaries inadvertently should be treated as civil detainees, not criminals, and released through fast-track mechanisms once identity is established. Secondly, consular access must be time-bound. The government must take initiatives to provide reliable GPS devices for fishermen and maritime warning systems to reduce accidental crossings. Fishermen should not become collateral in Indo-Pak rivalry. Borders may define nations, but compassion must define humanity.

## Thinking about 'Time' and More

Rarely do we pause to ask whether the way we measure time reflects any deeper reality: how human assumptions, beliefs, and limitations have shaped the way we measure, interpret, and ultimately live by time itself



VINAYSHIL  
GAUTAM

Time never had a beginning; time never has an end. Yet the human mind believes in measuring time. There was a point when measurement began, and various units were created to measure it. All this is a human creation. Different communities have developed different measurements of time. This has varied from region to region and has followed differing planks of logic. Mostly, they reflect regional beliefs or assumptions, which help the understanding of the world.

Very often, the measurement of time has been linked with the movement of the sun, the moon, or some other planet. All of this is a human creation. None of it has been ordained by the supreme existence. It is, therefore, fairly obvious, as indicated above, that human beings do this to bring measurement and understanding to their own behaviour and actions.

The immediate stimulus for this line of thought is the talk of the so-called 'New Year'. 2025 has concluded, and 2026 has begun. This can, at best, be seen as a calendar effort. In reality, nothing ended and nothing began.

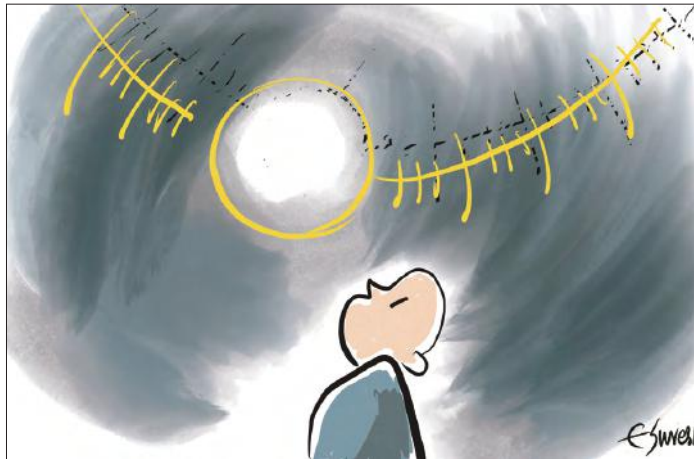
There is a popular belief that the so-called calendar, of which 2025/2026 would be a part, was created by Pope Gregory. He calculated time in a way that led to the fixing of a date for the birth of Jesus Christ. Therefore, the time before the birth of Christ was labelled 'Before Christ' (B.C.). Christ was supposed to have been born in B.C., and from there, the A.D. (Anno Domini) era is said to have begun. Hence, we now live with 2025 ending and 2026 beginning.

Another calculation suggests that the concerned dating has an error of about three years, and that Jesus Christ was not born in 0 A.D., but rather in 3 A.D. This calculation has been, expectedly, questioned by some and defended by others. This cannot be the place to resolve this debate. However, the debate itself is not the point; the point is the calendar which so much of the world follows.

There are parts of the world that follow different calendars. In many parts of India, the Vikram Samvat calendar is followed, and there is a difference of over 50 years between the A.D. nomenclature and the Vikram Samvat reference. This is yet another debate which cannot be resolved in this text. Similarly, followers of Islam have their own calendar, which has to do with Prophet Muhammad.

Many calendars can be identified across the world. Typically, the official Indian calendar, as proclaimed by Jawaharlal Nehru, is considered by many to be the Shaka Samvat.

Obviously, there is a debate, and there is no single framework which can resolve it. Legislation has not provided a way forward.



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This line of thought can be observed in other patches of elaboration and needs to be noted to highlight, if not the contradictions, then at least the limitations of such measurement.

For example, the sun is supposed to rise in the morning and set in the evening. The truth of the matter is that the sun never rises and the sun never sets. It is the Earth that rotates around its axis, and the position of the Earth with reference to the sun creates illusions of sunrise and sunset.

This is yet another example of how the limitation of the human mind has projected itself into a so-called universal law which everyone instinctively, or otherwise, follows.

The above examples raise a very basic question: is there a possible improvement that can be made in measuring time, classifying calendars, understanding seasons, and so on?

The question has been posed, and the resolution will clearly take time, debate, and more. However, this realisation is important because so much of the human narrative is around time.

Scientifically, the average lifespan of a Homo sapiens is less than 100 years. Accordingly, a 'century' has become a bench-

mark for the standard of life. Little is realised, however, that there are many cells with a lifespan far beyond a century. These cells also have some critical faculties and are capable of procreating. If they have a language among themselves, it has yet to be deciphered by humans. But that is not the point; the point is that humans dominate the planet, and their way of thinking determines measurement. There have been illustrations of a certain kind of life of cells in the icy desert of Siberia which have literally existed for thousands of years.

Be that as it may, the end of a year and the beginning of another is a fitting time to reflect on some of the givens which humans use to measure and record. All this affects their conduct and behaviour.

There is always scope for refinement. The purpose here is not to find fault or highlight flaws. The purpose here is to cause reflection and thought on some basic issues which affect our way of thinking, and indeed the so-called measurement of time itself.

Maybe, as the human species evolves, some of these concerns will be refined and managed at a higher level of thought.

How this debate will unfold, if at all, only time can tell.

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## Before goals, pause and honour your journey



ASHA IYER  
KUMAR

2ND OPINION  
THE PIONEER

It's that time of the season when life slowly comes to a pause and people return to themselves, leaving their external businesses outside the door. Resolutions, reflections, goal-setting and a smattering of philosophy take centre stage, and a fresh blueprint for life ahead is chalked out. The first week of the New Year is filled with renewed optimism about the times that would ensue and the leaps we would make in the next twelve months.

As the year was drawing to a close, an acquaintance on LinkedIn posed a question - 'What goals and lessons are you planning to bring into 2026? Let's inspire each other with our answers.' I sat with the question for a bit, and confessed that I was not setting any concrete goals as of now. I was merely going to take stock - of

how far I have come from what I was, and what comes I have turned to get to this point of success. I was going to defy the phrase 'no looking back' and seriously look at my past to acknowledge the distance I have stridden, the milestones I have reached, and the footprints I have left on those whose lives I have touched.

Self-acknowledgement: is that something we have forgotten to put on our to-do list in our hurry to be proactive and future-ready? If yes, it is the first thing we must do not just on the occasion of a new Gregorian year, but periodically. Every once in a while, we must ask ourselves: Where am I today? How did I get this far? - and then turn that thought over in the mind. Count every small win and compliment ourselves for the effort we took to make that victory possible. No accomplishment, big or small, could have arrived without putting ourselves out there; without exposing ourselves to risks; without taking chances; without being resilient; without self-belief; without falling and faltering; without learning.

It is only when we allow ourselves this quiet contemplation about our own past that we realise we are more worthy than we give ourselves credit for. That's when gratitude and fulfillment gush into our life, shifting our understanding of what success truly means. Currently, we define ourselves more by how we are perceived by

the world than by self-estimation - a huge disservice to our talent, perseverance, endeavours, and triumphs.

Of course, planning and setting goals give us direction, but the courage to expand our horizons comes from recognising how steadfast we have been. We may not

have come as far as we aspired, but staying stuck in cynicism and self-doubt can only hold us back. What propels us forward is self-recognition - not grandstanding - but an intimate acceptance of who and what we are today, by dint of hard slog.

We have all been through the harsh winters and sultry summers of life. We have hung in there. We have driven on the roughest roads, and we have arrived here - and for this, we all deserve congratulations.

Internally, many of us still critique ourselves for not having done better or reached that elusive point of success. This habit of focusing on what was not attained keeps us in despair. We may have miles to go before we sleep, but while we are awake, let us pat ourselves on the back for making a difference - to our lives and to others - with our resolve and resilience. We are our own heroes with inspiring backstories - and nothing should take away from that truth.

The Pioneer  
SINCE 1865

The writer is a Dubai-based author, columnist, independent journalist and children's writing coach

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Indore water crisis exposes neglect

Indore has slipped shockingly from one of India's best cities to one of the worst in terms of public safety after the contaminated water crisis led to several deaths and hundreds being hospitalised with gastrointestinal problems.

Laboratory investigations confirmed that the contamination occurred because of a pipeline leak in the densely populated Bhagiarthpura locality, where sewage seeped into the drinking water network.

The incident has raised grave concerns about water safety, not only in Indore - ranked the cleanest city for eight consecutive years - but also in other Indian towns and cities. It underscores the urgent need for regular monitoring, sound engineering standards, and fault-free laying of water and drainage pipelines.

Equally disturbing is the fact that residents repeatedly complained about foul water, yet effective corrective measures were not taken.

Laxity and neglect on the part of the authorities paved the way for this tragedy. The episode should serve as a strong warning to remain alert, accountable, efficient and prompt in protecting public health. This tragedy must never be repeated. Safe drinking water is a basic right.

M PRADYU | KANNUR

### Sin taxes: Tobacco over alcohol

The government's move to enforce the Central Excise (Amendment) Act, 2025 - resulting in a steep increase in tobacco duties from 1 February 2026 - while largely sparing liquor, reflects a calculated social and fiscal strategy. By raising cigarette taxes by nearly 30 per cent, the Centre aims to curb smoking, especially among the youth, and align more closely with global health recommendations. Tobacco is increasingly seen as a public health crisis that can be priced out of reach over time. However, alcohol occupies a different place in the revenue system. State governments depend heavily on liquor taxes, and any drastic central intervention could push vulnerable consumers towards unsafe, illicit brews, creating new social risks.

The policy therefore creates a paradox: tobacco becomes more expensive and may drive growth in smuggled, unregulated products, while alcohol remains comparatively protected because of its fiscal importance. The result exposes the tension between health priorities and financial dependence.

Ultimately, India's new tax direction suggests that tobacco is treated as dispensable, whereas alcohol is considered too economically significant to disrupt abruptly.

A MYLSAMI | COIMBATORE

### Pay more taxes on unhealthy products

Imposing higher taxes on 'sin goods' is expected to discourage consumption while strengthening government revenues.

From February 1, 2026, India will levy higher duties on tobacco products and pan masala, following the notification of a new excise duty and cess to replace the GST compensation cess on these goods.

Under the revised structure, pan masala, cigarettes, tobacco and similar products will attract a 40 per cent GST, while bids will be taxed at 18 per cent. In addition, a Health and National Security Cess will be imposed on pan masala, and tobacco products will face an additional excise duty as notified by the Finance Ministry.

These measures may increase the financial burden on consumers, yet they also serve a broader objective: discouraging harmful habits and generating resources for public priorities.

If implemented transparently and monitored effectively, the policy could reduce health-related risks linked to tobacco while ensuring a more predictable revenue stream for the government.

Higher prices may change behaviour. Health benefits may outweigh objections. The real test will be enforcement.

DIMPLE WADHAWAN | KANPUR NAGAR

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### DESPITE TRUMP, MAMDANI SWORN IN AS NEW YORK MAYOR

Zohran Kwame Mamdani was sworn in just after midnight on New Year's Day as New York City's first Muslim mayor, in a modest ceremony at the historic City Hall subway station. The moment capped a swift and surprising rise for the progressive leader.

Only a year ago, he was a relatively unknown state legislator; in 2025 he surged through the mayoral race and defeated former governor Andrew Cuomo by nearly ten percentage points.

Born in Uganda to parents of Indian origin, Mamdani's victory unfolded amid a heated national debate on immigration, as Donald Trump and his allies pushed for tighter curbs that disproportionately affected Muslims and African migrants. Trump branded Mamdani a

"communist" and warned that his leadership would be disastrous. In his November victory speech, Mamdani countered that "in this moment of political darkness, New York will be the light."

As he begins his term, he must convert ambitious promises into workable policy, expand affordable housing, address public safety concerns, and rebuild trust with communities that feel excluded from City Hall. Governing a politically divided state and nation will test his negotiating skills, but allies say his calm discipline and grassroots instincts may prove decisive. The months ahead will reveal whether his expectations meet reality for this historic new administration.

BHAGWAN THADANI | MUMBAI

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# Jan 2, 1976: When India's Constitution was bent towards dictatorship

In today's debates about constitutional assault, historical honesty is essential. The gravest attempt to bend the Constitution towards dictatorship did not occur incrementally or ambiguously. It occurred openly, systematically, and unmistakably during the Emergency, culminating on January 2, 1976

FIRST Column



HEMANGI SINHA

Independent India was not born into calm or cohesion. The Republic inherited from British rule a land scarred by Partition, communal violence, displacement, poverty, and institutional fragility. The nation was fragmented, its social fabric torn, its economy exhausted, and its political future uncertain. Few countries at independence faced such diversity of language, religion, caste, region, and historical memory — combined with such trauma. Yet it was precisely this heterogeneity, this expanse and complexity, that compelled India's founders to adopt not a majoritarian charter, but a deeply restrained Constitution — one that placed limits on power, elevated liberty, and treated dissent as a democratic necessity rather than disruption.

Adopted in 1950, the Indian Constitution was not merely a governance result; it was a moral compass. That authority without restraint would fracture the Republic, and that freedom was safest when protected against the state itself. This understanding shaped the early decades of India's constitutional life. The 1950s and much of the 1960s witnessed intense disagreements over land reforms, nationalisation, preventive detention, and economic planning, but the underlying commitment remained intact: power would operate within constitutional limits, and opposition would remain legitimate.

Dr BR Ambedkar, the Constitution's principal architect, warned explicitly against the dangers that could destroy this delicate balance. He cautioned Parliament against hero-worship in politics, arguing that blind devotion to leaders was "a sure road to degradation and eventual dictatorship." Democracy, he insisted, could not survive on institutions alone; it required constitutional morality — self-restraint by those in power. That warning, prophetic and precise, would be ignored within a generation.

By the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Republic entered a phase of deep unrest. Corruption in politics, economic stress, inflation, and unemployment eroded public confidence. Electoral setbacks weak-



ARTICLES GUARANTEEING EQUALITY, FREE SPEECH, ASSOCIATION, AND PERSONAL LIBERTY WERE HOLLOWED OUT. COURTS WERE INSTRUCTED NOT TO INVALIDATE LAWS MERELY BECAUSE THEY VIOLATED INDIVIDUAL FREEDOMS IF THE STATE CLAIMED HIGHER OBJECTIVES

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ened the moral authority of the ruling establishment, while popular movements began questioning not merely policies, but legitimacy itself. It was in this context that Jayaprakash Narayan's call for "Total Revolution" emerged — not as a quest for power, but as a moral indictment of unaccountable authority. His movement articulated a deeper anxiety: that democracy was being hollowed out from within.

## From Constitutional Debate to Constitutional Fear

Even amid political turbulence, constitutional safeguards initially held. The judiciary asserted itself in landmark judgments. In Golaknath (1967), the Supreme Court held that Parliament could not amend Fundamental Rights. In response, Parliament asserted its amending power, culminating in Kesavananda Bharati (1973), a historic compromise that allowed amendments but preserved the Constitution's "basic structure." Judicial review, separation of powers, and fundamental freedoms were declared inviolable.

These cases reflected a functioning constitutional tension — an argument over limits, not an attempt to erase them. That equilibrium collapsed with the declaration of the Emergency on June 25, 1975. Civil liberties were suspended, opposition leaders arrested, the press censored, and fear institutionalised. The Emergency was officially justified as a response to "internal disturbance." Even

if that claim was deeply flawed, it retained the language of exception. What followed by the end of 1975 abandoned even that pretence.

## From Emergency to Permanent Control

Parliament functioned without a real opposition. Elections were postponed indefinitely. Pre-publication censorship strangled the press. Thousands were detained without trial. Trade unions were broken, student movements crushed, and civil society paralysed. What began as extraordinary governance rapidly transformed into a project of permanence.

The objective was no longer to rule through Emergency provisions alone, but to rebuild the constitutional order itself — to ensure that dissent could never again challenge authority.

## ADM Jabalpur: Liberty Judicially Abandoned

No episode better captures this collapse than ADM Jabalpur v Shivkant Shukla (1976), the infamous Habeas Corpus case. The Supreme Court held that during the Emergency, when Article 21 was suspended, no citizen could approach the courts even against illegal detention.

Justice MH Beg reasoned that the right to life and liberty was a creation of the Constitution and could therefore be withdrawn by it. Justice V Chandrachud concurred. Only Justice HR Khanna dis-

sented, warning that such reasoning legitimised tyranny and reduced the rule of law to executive convenience. His dissent cost him the Chief Justiceship, but preserved constitutional conscience.

ADM Jabalpur did more than reflect judicial submission; it institutionalised fear. It told the executive that liberty had no sanctuary. What the Court surrendered temporarily, the government sought to surrender permanently.

One of its most haunting symbols is the custodial death of P Rajan, a young engineering student from Kerala, who was arrested in 1976 and tortured to death in police custody. His only crime was alleged association with political dissent. For years, the state denied his detention altogether, made possible by a constitutional climate where courts had been stripped of the power to demand accountability. It was Rajan's father, TV Fachara Warriar, who waged a solitary, relentless legal battle that eventually forced confessions from the police and exposed the truth. The Rajan case revealed what ADM Jabalpur meant in practice: when liberty has no judicial refuge, torture becomes routine and death becomes deniable.

Rajan did not die because of excess; he died because the Constitution had been silenced, and the fundamental right to life, guaranteed, was taken away by the state.

## January 2, 1976: Rewriting the Constitution

That moment arrived on January 2, 1976, with the introduction of what would become the 42nd Constitutional Amendment. This was not routine amendment; it was constitutional reconstruction. Judicial review was weakened. Parliamentary supremacy was asserted. Fundamental Rights were subordinated to state-defined goals. The Constitution was transformed from a restraint on power into an instrument of it. Ambedkar's vision of limited government was deliberately inverted.

Articles guaranteeing equality, free speech, association, and personal liberty were hollowed out. Courts were instructed not to invalidate laws merely because they violated individual freedoms if the state claimed higher objectives. Liberty ceased to be inherent. It became conditional — revocable at will.

The state acquired not just coercive

authority, but moral supremacy over freedom itself.

The constitutional shift mirrored the brutality on the ground. Preventive detention filled prisons. Families were torn apart in midnight arrests. Newspapers were reduced to blank columns. A few national dailies chose defiance, publishing empty editorials rather than propaganda. Forced sterilisation campaigns terrorised the poor. Slum demolitions destroyed lives in the name of discipline. This was not excess. It was method.

## Article 31D: January 2, 1976 and the Architecture of Fear

The most chilling provision introduced in this phase was Article 31D, proposed in January 1976. It empowered Parliament to prohibit vaguely defined "anti-national activities" and "anti-national associations," while shielding such laws from challenge under Articles 14 and 19. The term "anti-national" was left deliberately undefined. Political opposition, journalism, poetry, trade unions — even protest — could be criminalised. Voices like Ramdhany Singh Dinkar, who celebrated courage and conscience, would have stood constitutionally vulnerable. Nationalism was reduced to obedience.

Although Article 31D was later repealed before enforcement, its intent was unmistakable: repression was to be permanent, legal, and normalised.

India was never formally declared a one-party state. But when opposition cannot organise, speak, or seek judicial remedy without constitutional peril, pluralism becomes illusion. Democracy survives in form, not substance. The Emergency ended. Elections returned. But January 1976 marked the moment when the Constitution itself was in real danger. That project failed not because institutions stood firm, but because citizens did — guided by figures like JP Narayan, fearless journalists, and ordinary Indians who refused to forget freedom.

In today's debates about constitutional assault, historical honesty is essential. The gravest attempt to bend the Constitution towards dictatorship did not occur incrementally or ambiguously. It occurred openly, systematically, and unmistakably during the Emergency, culminating on January 2, 1976.

# New year, or the old deceiving in a new costume



ACHARYA PRASHANT

Another new year has arrived. Fireworks have faded, toasts have been made, resolutions have been written. And yet, if this were truly a new beginning, why does it feel like a familiar loop with a fresh date? Why does the future reek of nostalgia? The pattern repeats so reliably that one must suspect our very idea of what 'new' means.

Apps spike their downloads, planners sell out, and the same old restlessness changes its wallpaper. The new year arrives like a deft salesman who has been knocking on our doors for centuries. He closed the deal last year. He closed it again this week. The question is not whether he is dishonest, but whether we are ready to see what he cannot sell.

The desire for the new is genuine. But notice how we seek it: through dates, events, external markers. The desire for the new is also the desire to become someone else. And wherever there is this need to become, there is dependence on time: an unspoken hope that the next moment might deliver what this moment has not. Fifty new years have come and gone, and if they could not supply the happiness we seek, why would the fifty-first?

## The Old in New Packaging

What we call new is almost always the old in fresh wrapping. The calendar changes; the person does not. A digit shifts from five to six, yet the one who reads it remains imprisoned in the same patterns, the same desires, the same fears. New programmes, new resolutions, new routines: none of it works, because we have tried all of it before in different forms. The one who has tried it all is a funnily mysterious entity; he tries so hard to change externally while silently ensuring that nothing changes internally.

The child once desperately wanted is now in one's arms, yet one remains as hungry and hollow as before the birth. Last year one was poor without employment; this year one is poor with it. The degree came, the emptiness remained. The wedding happened, the loneliness deepened. The same person who posted 'New Year, New Me' at midnight was scrolling the same feed with the same restlessness by morning. The Instagram story expired; the self did not transform.

Zoom out and the pattern is civilisational. Humanity has been creating new years for millennia; each culture convinced that the next cycle would bring redemption. The Berlin Wall fell; freedom was declared. Technologies arrived promising to remake the human con-

dition. And yet here we are: more connected and more lonely, more informed and more confused. History keeps turning its pages; the reader remains illiterate.

This is the species-wide pattern, and it is also the individual pattern: same sleeper, different dream, same waking emptiness. We rotate through identities: child, student, professional, spouse, parent, imagining each role to be a departure from the last. But the one who plays all these roles never auditions himself for change. Life becomes repetitive because there is no observation of the one living it.

So where is the new? Not in the next moment. Not in the next year. The new is in the act of seeing the repetition as it happens. The seeing itself is the rupture. But if the new is not in time, where has it been hiding all along?

## The New That Was Always Here

Here is the paradox: the truly new cannot be fetched from the future because it was never lost in time. It is not something to be added; it is something to be uncovered. That which we long for is older than our longing; it precedes our birth and will outlast our death. It does not age because it was never born. And yet we cannot see it, not because it is hidden in some mystical beyond, but because we have buried it ourselves, under conditioning, habit, fear, and borrowed identity.

Layer upon layer, like dust hardening into time. We have spent decades accumulating: beliefs, identities, opinions, wounds, possessions. And now we imagine that more accumulation will save us. But wisdom moves in the opposite direction. Wisdom subtracts. The ancient method is neti-neti: not this, not this. One does not reach the truth by adding to the pile. One reaches it by discarding what was never essential.

And that discarding is not a weekend workshop. The discomfort of dropping one's cherished patterns cannot be postponed to a guru, a therapist, or a pill. The teacher can point, show the direction, but he cannot walk for you. We want the fruit but not the uprooting. We want the freedom but not the death that precedes it. And yet this is the only way: to remove the old is to discover that the new never left.

When the new genuinely arrives, it does not arrive piecemeal. It floods everything. The smile changes, the eyes change, the quality of one's silence changes. This is the test: if only the calendar has changed while the face remains as dull as it was six months ago, nothing new has happened. You can lie to your Instagram followers. You cannot lie to your own mirror.

There will be a particular new year after which there will be no more new years for you. Some who toasted this week will not toast next year. And when that final moment arrives, what will you be leaving behind? A series of repetitions? Fifty, sixty, eighty new years, and not one of them truly new? Until one begins to see



clearly, one has not been living, merely going, rolling forward like a snowball gathering dust — growing larger, perhaps, but never cleaner, never lighter, never free.

## Observation as Renewal

How does one begin? Not through another resolution; that is merely another layer on the existing crust. The new requires only observation, and observation requires no future. Ask yourself: what was I doing around this time last year? Not as nostalgia, but as fact. Not to decorate memory, but to see repetition. And if you find that you were doing almost exactly what you are doing today, let that discovery disturb you. Let it sting. That sting is the beginning.

Instead of fantasising about what the next year will bring, look at what you have been doing over all the past years. Can you not see an unchanging underlying pattern? Look closely: the way you reach for the phone the moment silence arrives, the way discomfort sends you running toward pleasure. The moment one truly sees one's mechanical repetitions, something shifts. Not because you have done something new, but because seeing itself is the new. It does not age. Every honest glance is the first glance.

The newness one seeks is like a river. It is not somewhere ahead, around the bend, or in next December. It is flowing now, as it always has been. Every moment one turns to look at oneself is a moment of stepping into that river. The only question is whether one will step in or remain on the bank, waiting for a more convenient current. That current will never come. The river is here. It is we who keep postponing the plunge.

Do not pretend the world is not celebrating; that would be dishonesty. But do not imagine celebration will cure what ails you; that would be delusion. Toast the new year, if you must. But know that the real turning point will not come with fireworks. It may come quietly, alone, in a moment when you finally stop and see what you have been doing to yourself all along. That seeing will not wait for January. It is available now, and it always has been.

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# The impact of floods on policy



EKLAVYA PRASAD

The floods that struck North Bihar in 2024 were not an isolated disaster. They were part of a familiar cycle that continues to shape everyday life in the region. Yet what remains ambiguous is how flood impacts are measured and how this evidence is used for policy. A recent household-level flood loss assessment, conducted by Megh Pyne Abhiyan and supported by Tata Trusts, after the second phase of the 2024 floods, offers important lessons for flood governance in Bihar and other flood-prone regions.

In late September 2024, episodes of very heavy rainfall across North Bihar and the adjoining Nepal region directly and indirectly triggered embankment breaches, elevated river levels, and severe drainage congestion across major river systems, including the Gandak, Bagmati, Kosi, and Mahananda.

The resulting Phase 2 floods caused extensive damage across the region, bringing the total number of flood-affected districts in 2024 to 27. Within this larger disaster, the assessment focused on 2,290 flood-affected households across 134 wards in 21 panchayats of seven districts in North Bihar. By combining household surveys with participatory flood mapping, focus group discussions, key informant interviews, and spatial analysis, the study captures how flood impacts varied across locations, flood typologies, and social dimensions. This level of granular insight is rarely visible in conventional assessments. Overall, across the 2,290 households, reported economic losses amounted to approximately ₹126.3 crore. Land damage was the largest component, accounting for nearly half the total, followed by housing repair and reconstruction costs. Housing damage was also the most widespread, reported by nearly two thousand households.

Losses to everyday items — kitchenware, groceries, furniture and sanitation materials — as well as agricultural losses, were extremely common, though their monetary share was comparatively lower. The average loss per household was estimated at ₹5.51 lakh, while the median loss was ₹2.11 lakh — indicating that a smaller number of households suffered very high losses, while many others faced moderate but deeply disruptive damage. Flood typology played a critical role in shaping outcomes. Breach-induced flooding resulted in the highest aggregate losses, while flash flooding between embankments caused very high losses for a smaller number of households. Spatial patterns further complicate prevailing assumptions. Fifty-eight per cent of surveyed households were located in the countryside, including areas between and outside river embankments. Despite flood protection struc-

tures, these locations provided limited protection during the 2024 Phase 2 floods. This raises an important policy concern. Structural measures such as embankments may protect certain areas, but they also redistribute flood risk to other locations rather than eliminating it.

One of the most significant insights from the assessment relates to inequality. Households belonging to the general category reported higher monetary losses, while Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe households reported lower absolute losses.

However, smaller losses do not mean lower vulnerability. For many households with limited resources, even modest losses can be difficult to absorb and recover from. The assessment desecrate this as an assessment-based vulnerability paradox, where monetary loss figures alone fail to reflect the true depth of hardship.

The social costs of flooding become clearer when coping strategies are examined. Most households reported cutting food consumption, relying on stored grains, borrowing from relatives or neighbours, or depending on remittances. Displacement was widespread. Distress asset erosion was common: mortgaging jewellery, selling or mortgaging livestock, and in some cases mortgaging or selling land. Access to insurance was extremely limited, with most households unaware of or unable to access any flood-related mechanism.

The assessment also highlights gaps in institutional response. Many households reported short warning periods, uneven relief distribution, and limited involvement of local self-government institutions. Yet community showed strong understanding of flood dynamics and proposed practical solutions —

boats, raised and flood-resistant housing, cattle shelters, community-managed water and sanitation systems, grain banks, flood-tolerant crops, mobile health and veterinary services, and locally operated early warning systems. The policy implications are clear: flood governance must move beyond counting damaged houses and crops. It must recognise differentiated vulnerability, invest in preparedness, and integrate household-level evidence and local knowledge into planning and compensation frameworks. Household-level assessments show how floods redistribute risk, deepen inequality, and shape recovery pathways.

For North Bihar, where flooding is recurrent and climate variability is increasing, the message is unmistakable. Flood policy must shift from managing water alone to managing vulnerability. Without grounding decisions in household realities, future floods will continue to overwhelm systems while remaining entirely predictable for the people who live with them.

The writer is Managing Trustee, Megh Pyne Abhiyan, from Saahajal Verma and Siddhant Puri

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Idea 2.0

AGR dues relief for Vi is just the first step

The Centre's latest relief package for Vodafone Idea (Vi), a five-year interest-free moratorium on ₹87,700 crore of AGR (adjusted gross revenue) dues payable over FY32-41, along with a fresh reassessment of the dues, certainly gives the troubled telco breathing space. The move follows the Supreme Court's decision two months ago permitting the government to take a call on relief. A panel will now reassess AGR dues, including those frozen earlier based on audit reports. This opens the door for a further reduction in liability.

The AGR dispute has stalled out Vi for nearly five years. The crisis stems from the Supreme Court's 2020 ruling upholding the DoT's expansive AGR definition, controversially including non-telecom revenues, and imposing retrospective dues. Though all operators were hit, Vi bore the brunt. Since then, it has bled market share, lost financial strength, and stalled on technology upgrades. As Airtel and Jio invested aggressively in 4G and 5G, Vi slipped further behind, bringing India perilously close to a two-player market. A de facto duopoly may appeal to neither policymakers nor consumers in the long run. Less competition risks higher tariffs, weaker service quality, and slower innovation. The Telecom Ministry has repeatedly acknowledged the need for a strong third operator, although wishing for competition and enabling it are two very different things.

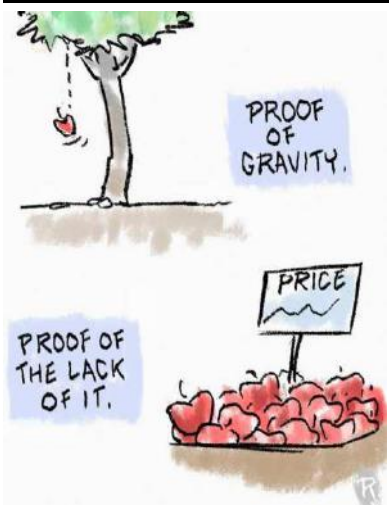
Relief on AGR alone does not address Vi's deeper financial fragility. Beyond AGR, the operator faces ₹1.2 lakh crore of deferred spectrum liabilities stretching through FY44, with heavy repayment peaks. In FY28 alone, Vi must shell out around ₹28,000 crore, more than twice its likely EBITDA. Meanwhile, cash flows are inadequate to fund both capex and debt service. Without fresh capital, network investments will continue to lag, accelerating subscriber erosion and trapping the company in a vicious cycle. The only credible path to survival is meaningful equity infusion from a strategic or financial investor. And that hinges on clarity around total debt. Setting up a committee to scrutinise dues simply prolongs uncertainty. A bolder approach would have been to restructure AGR decisively and ring-fence residual obligations, even parking them in a special purpose vehicle, akin to the "bad bank" construct used in the Air India sale. That would immediately de-risk Vi's balance sheet.

Time is of the essence. It already took the government more than a year to execute its previous equity conversion. A delay now could tip Vi beyond recovery. The review panel must move swiftly to fix the true AGR payable and create a predictable liability trajectory for investors. Fresh capital should be channelled into spectrum dues repayment rather than short-term firefighting. Ultimately, this debate is not about bailing out one private operator. A resilient third player is essential if India's billion-plus mobile users are to benefit from fair pricing, reliable service and world-class technology.

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POCKET



GDP growth raises questions

MIXED SIGNALS. High real growth above 8%, inflation near target, and muted nominal growth are an unusual combination



RAJIV KUMAR  
KUNTALA KARKUN

India's 8.2 per cent GDP growth in July-September 2025 puts it comfortably at the top of the global growth league, at a time of weakening demand, fractured supply chains, and higher US tariffs. At the start of the New Year, the headline number signals resilience, but it also obscures a softer undercurrent: muted nominal growth, abnormally low deflators, and widening gaps between official output data, corporate results, and fiscal collections.

**THE NOMINAL PROBLEM** While real GDP has accelerated from 7.4 per cent to 7.8 per cent to 8.2 per cent over three consecutive quarters (Q4 FY 2024-25 to Q2 FY 2025-26), nominal GDP growth has declined (see table below). This is driven by a collapse in the implicit price deflator from 3.7 per cent to just 0.5 per cent. Such convergence of nominal and real GDP growth rates is rare for a developing economy. For India, it's a red flag. Economic decisions are made in nominal rupees. Firms book nominal revenues; workers earn nominal wages; governments collect nominal taxes. When nominal growth weakens, corporate results miss targets, tax collections fall short, and fiscal deficits widen automatically. Net tax growth, at 9 per cent in H1 FY26, has already slipped below the Budget's assumptions (of 10.1 per cent).

**'OPTICAL' REAL GROWTH** Manufacturing and services GVA grew around 9 per cent in the quarter, buoyed by favourable base effects, sharply lower deflators, front-loading of export orders ahead of tariff deadlines, GST rate cuts, and festival-induced inventory build-up. But manufacturing IIP, actual physical output, rose just 4.8 per cent. The gap could be suggestive of the 9 per cent surge in manufacturing and services being 'optical', reflecting deflator compression and accounting quirks, rather than broad-based production gains.

On the demand side, private consumption picked up 90 basis points, helped by fiscal transfers, accommodative monetary policy, GST cuts, and festive stockpiling. Investment remained solid but showed early signs of moderation. India isn't in a demand recession, but the growth impulse is clearly becoming consumption-heavy and investment-light.

Further, NSO's press note shows that 12 of 22 high-frequency indicators decelerated in Q2 FY 26 vs Q1; only three

Real GDP growth by demand and supply components

|   | Dec 2024   | Mar 2025    | Jun 2025    | Sep 2025   |
|---|------------|-------------|-------------|------------|
| <b>GDP by expenditure and income</b>              | <b>6.4</b> | <b>7.4</b>  | <b>7.8</b>  | <b>8.2</b> |
| Government consumption                            | 9.3        | -1.8        | 7.4         | -2.7       |
| Private consumption                               | 8.1        | 6.0         | 7.0         | 7.9        |
| Gross fixed capital formation                     | 5.2        | 9.4         | 7.8         | 7.3        |
| Exports   | 10.8       | 3.9         | 6.3         | 5.6        |
| Imports   | -2.1       | -12.7       | 10.9        | 12.8       |
| <b>Net indirect taxes</b>                         | <b>5.0</b> | <b>12.7</b> | <b>10.3</b> | <b>9.5</b> |
| <b>Gross value added</b>                          | <b>6.5</b> | <b>6.8</b>  | <b>7.6</b>  | <b>8.1</b> |
| Agriculture forestry and fishing                  | 6.6        | 5.4         | 3.7         | 3.5        |
| Industry  | 4.8        | 6.5         | 6.3         | 7.7        |
| • Manufacturing                                   | 3.6        | 4.8         | 7.7         | 9.1        |
| • Construction                                    | 7.9        | 10.8        | 7.6         | 7.2        |
| Services  | 7.4        | 7.3         | 9.3         | 9.2        |
| • Trade transport & communication                 | 6.7        | 6.0         | 8.6         | 7.4        |
| • Financial real estate and professional services | 7.1        | 7.8         | 9.5         | 10.2       |
| • Public administration and other services        | 8.9        | 8.7         | 9.8         | 9.7        |

Source: HSC Analytics

of 18 physical-quantity measures (namely, steel, cement, commercial vehicles) grew faster than 6 per cent. Core GDP growth (excluding residual discrepancies) fell to 4.1 per cent in Q2; indicating that statistical adjustments, not real activity, could explain much of the headline acceleration. (Ref: *The Paradox of a "Blazing" Economy That No One Feels*, by Dhananjay Sinha, *Nation*, Feb 3, 2025)

FY26 OUTLOOK

The policy debate now needs to move beyond patting ourselves on the back, to three core questions.

**GST sugar rush:** Was the consumption spike durable demand increase, or front-loaded festive buying? If the latter, retail sales and manufacturing orders will cool once festival and contingent demand is exhausted and inventories normalise.

Indeed, manufacturing momentum is already showing signs of softness: PMI slid to 36.6 in November 2025, its weakest in nine months. Without sustained job and income growth, consumption alone won't power 8 per cent growth for long.

**Tariff drag:** Higher US tariffs on key Indian exports come atop an already fragile global environment. Persistent trade barriers or fresh supply-chain disruptions will weigh on export volumes and factory orders, prompting firms to delay investment and hiring.

**The banking system is flush with liquidity,** but private investment is constrained by regulatory uncertainty, lack of demand visibility and inadequate policy clarity rather than cost of funds.

Export-intensive States and manufacturing clusters face the sharpest pain.

**Data googlies:** India will revise base years for GDP and CPI in February 2026 and introduce a revamped Index of Industrial Production in May 2026. Past revisions have materially altered historical growth trends and sectoral weights.

At a time when deflators are already distorting the real-nominal relationship, these changes could force markets and policymakers to reprice risk mid-flight.

THE POLICY BIND

The Reserve Bank of India projects H2 FY26 growth at 5.7 per cent, pulling full-year real GDP to 6.8 per cent. Yet the dilemma is more nuanced: high real growth above 8 per cent, inflation near target, and muted nominal expansion is a combination that macro textbooks describe as rare.

Rate cuts cannot solve weak nominal revenues driven by collapsing deflators; the banking system is flush with liquidity, but private investment is constrained by regulatory uncertainty, lack of demand visibility and inadequate policy clarity rather than cost of funds. Fiscal arithmetic is equally harsh: absent dramatic improvements in tax efficiency or upside surprises in growth, the government must choose between boosting public investment and maintaining welfare schemes, or meeting deficit targets.

BETTER GROWTH

Even adjusting for deflator-driven overstatement, India is growing faster than most large economies. Private consumption has support from easing inflation and tentative rural improvement. But composition matters more than the headline. The economy is increasingly consumption-led, with private investment moderate and exports underperforming. This mix can

Growth: Real vs nominal

| Quarter      | Real GDP Growth (y-o-y %) | Nominal GDP Growth (y-o-y %) | Implicit Price Deflator (IPD) (%) |
|--------------|---------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Q1 FY2024-25 | 6.5                       | 9.7                          | 3.2                               |
| Q2 FY2024-25 | 5.6                       | 8.3                          | 2.7                               |
| Q3 FY2024-25 | 6.2                       | 9.9                          | 3.7                               |
| Q4 FY2024-25 | 7.4                       | 10.8                         | 3.4                               |
| Q1 FY2025-26 | 7.8                       | 8.8                          | 1.0                               |
| Q2 FY2025-26 | 8.2                       | 8.7                          | 0.5                               |

Source: MOSPI, NSO

deliver a few good years; but it won't sustain a decade-long expansion required for absorbing additions to the workforce that are estimated at eight million every year.

A more durable growth strategy for this year requires three shifts:

**Revive private investment:** Private-sector investment slipped to 11.2 per cent of GDP in FY2025-26, with private capex contributing only 33 per cent of gross fixed capital formation, a 10-year low (MOSPI). These trends highlight weak investment sentiment, underscoring the need for targeted interventions, e.g., focusing on improving the emerging industrial ecosystems via regulatory clarity, faster execution, and sector-specific de-risking rather than across-the-board measures such as production linked subsidies.

**Rebuild export momentum:** Deepen integration into global supply chains with predictable trade policy and laser focus on logistics, power quality, and firm-level competitiveness. Export growth of 6.05 per cent in FY2024-25 and of 5.86 per cent during April-November 2025 will certainly not suffice (total trade in goods and services, YoY growth rate, MOSPI, RBI).

Despite India's modest share in global trade of goods and services (3 per cent, WTO, UNCTAD); we should accelerate exports, especially now when world markets are fragmented and trade is growing slower than GDP. The opportunity is real, and achievable.

**Modernise statistical systems:** Ensure deflators, base years, and sectoral coverage keep pace with structural shifts in the economy. In an era of infinite data scrutiny, credibility of the numbers is a policy asset, not a technical footnote.

India's 8.2 per cent headline deserves applause, but not complacency. The real test is not the next quarter's number; it is whether this sprint can become a marathon. That requires less reliance on consumption spikes and more on the unglamorous work of reviving private investment, strengthening exports, and modernising the statistical apparatus. Get that right, and India will not just surprise the world with speed; it will impress with staying power.

Kumar is Chairman, Public India Foundation & former Vice Chairman NITI Aayog and Karkun is Senior Fellow, Public India Foundation

Platforms need to deliver on workers' needs

Workers need predictable earnings, basic protections, and a voice in systems that manage work assignment

Rejimon Kuttappan

On December 24, Swiggy and Zomato were trading at ₹400.25 and ₹284.85 per share — numbers that reflected investor confidence in India's fast-expanding platform economy.

Within 48 hours, that confidence was tested. On December 25, delivery workers across India employed by major food delivery and e-commerce platforms — including Swiggy, Zomato, Zepto, Blinkit, Amazon, and Flipkart — observed an all-India strike. What followed was not merely disruption of dinner plans, but a warning shot to markets, regulators, and platform executives alike.

By December 26, shares of platform majors had fallen. Around 40,000 delivery workers participated, causing 50-60 per cent disruptions in several cities. Companies tried to cushion the impact with short-term incentives, third-party outsourcing, and reactivating inactive IDs — measures that sidestepped core worker demands. Union leaders called the December 25 strike "only the trailer," warning of a much larger nationwide action on December 31.

The strike on New Year's Eve prompted food delivery platforms to announce an increase in payouts per delivery for that day; a short-term fix. This is among the highest-demand periods of the year for food delivery, quick commerce, and last-mile logistics. Platforms depend on this window to convert festive demand into revenue, reinforce consumer habits, and demonstrate operational resilience. A coordinated nationwide strike during this peak period strikes at the core of the platform business model.

STRIKE IMPACT

Clearly, India's gig economy is at a crossroads. The December 25 strike went beyond temporary delivery disruptions, exposing a deeper governance failure in how platforms manage technology, labour, and livelihoods. The December 31 strike has left a telling message.

The workers' message is unequivocal: this is not a seasonal nuisance to be managed with incentives or outsourcing, but a demand for predictable earnings, basic protections, and a voice in systems that increasingly determine how work is assigned, penalised, and valued.

Business leaders must face two uncomfortable truths. First, labour



GIG WORKERS. Stressful times

stability is not a discretionary cost but a core driver of resilience. When algorithms push speed without regard for human limits, turnover rises, reliability drops, and reputational risk grows. Peak-demand periods like New Year's Eve become stress tests. Platforms that cannot rely on a predictable, motivated workforce are structurally vulnerable, and short-term fixes — higher incentives, constant onboarding, outsourcing — come with a hidden cost: they erode margins and trust over time.

Second, worker rights are not a charitable add-on but a business and human rights imperative. Growth is no longer measured solely by user numbers or order volumes; investors now consider governance, social licence, and long-term sustainability. Minimum

earnings floors, portable protections, and transparent, contestable algorithms are not concessions — they safeguard the ecosystem. Predictable incomes and safety nets make workers more reliable and productive.

The platform economy promised speed, convenience, and affordability; it now requires a matching commitment to people. Technologies like real-time routing and dynamic pricing are not neutral and cannot be divorced from human consequences.

What must change is neither radical nor unrealistic: minimum earnings floors linked to living costs; portable social protections; transparent, contestable algorithms with worker representation; clear classification standards; and institutionalised dialogue to prevent recurring strikes.

For businesses, this is not altruism but prudent risk management. Exploiting labour precarity may yield short-term gains but invites disruption, reputational damage, and regulatory firestorms.

Public policy has a role too. Clear, enforceable standards can level the playing field and prevent a race to the bottom — without stifling innovation.

The writer is an independent journalist, business and human rights investigator

✉ 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, Kasturji Buildings, 859-860, Anna Salai, Chennai 600002.

Petro price pain

This refers to 'ATF price cut by steep 7%: commercial LPG rate up ₹111 per cylinder' (January 1). This 'Ladder and Snake' could continue till ATF, diesel, petrol and LPG are brought under the ambit of GST. It is time the Union Petroleum Minister brought the petrol product prices under GST to curb their price volatility.

SK Gupta  
New Delhi

Gig incentives

It refers to 'Platforms roll out incentives as big worker strike disrupts deliveries on New Year's eve'. Flash strike by gig workers have put pressure on these companies. But the incentives offered by companies do not fulfil the core demand of gig workers. Increased per order payouts will put more pressure on the workers to put their lives at risk and deliver more in a day.

Gig workers are the most critical cog of the e-commerce and quick commerce and they need maternity protection, emergency leave, life, health insurance coverage and other social security benefits.  
Bal Govind  
Noida

Job scheme revamp

It is with reference to the article 'VB-G-RAM-G scheme every State

come under stress' (January 1). While MNREGA promises 100 days of employment annually, VB-G-RAM-G guarantees 125 days per rural household annually, which is welcome. Under MNREGA, Central government bore 100 per cent of unskilled wage costs and 75 per cent of material costs. But in the VB-G-RAM-G scheme every State government has to provide 40 per cent and the UTs and North-Eastern States 10 per cent

and the remaining amount is born by Central government.

The new 60-40 funding pattern creates a problem for States with limited tax revenues but higher rural poverty and greater need for MNREGA. During times of economic distress, the Centre must provide supplementary funds to Security for the smooth functioning of the VB-G-RAM-G scheme.

P Victor Selvaraj  
Palayamkottai (TN)

# The Venezuelan dilemma

Trump's sabre rattling portends deep instability

Sridhar Krishnaswami

The drone attack by the Central Intelligence Agency inside Venezuela, the first land operation in a tussle that has gone on for the last four months, has shown the resolve of US President Donald Trump: that it goes farther than hitting boats in the Caribbean and eastern Pacific bringing drugs that kill Americans. It goes to the source of the transshipment.

This goes again to show that the ultimate objective has always been the same: regime change or getting President Nicolas Maduro out of power.

## HOLDING ON

But that strategy has not worked so far, in terms of either the strongman in Caracas stepping down on his own or one of his powerful allies in the clique giving the necessary signal for him to leave.

The attack on the port facility by a top intelligence agency that is supposed to be focused on covert operations is perhaps just a message to Maduro that more such attacks are in the offing.

But the fact of the matter is that the attacks on the boats supposedly carrying narcotics, the squeeze on oil tanks and now the port attack have not brought Maduro anywhere near crying 'Uncle'.

On the other hand there seems to be a sense of defiance in his dismissal of Trump's moves as "psychological terrorism" and in having at least one pursued oil super tanker suddenly sporting a Russian flag suggesting it has the protection of Moscow.

Not surprisingly, there is a studied silence from the Kremlin.

## CIA INVOLVEMENT

By involving the CIA, the Trump administration — at least for now — does not have to go before Congress, get involved in a lengthy debate on War Powers or for that matter even give the impression of an imminent "boots on the ground" land invasion.

But sceptics of the administration are worried about a different aspect: has Washington thought of Venezuela after Maduro?

It is not as if the current dictator is popular or tears are going to be shed in the region on his exit.

But there is apprehension of what could follow if Maduro is suddenly ousted.

It is one thing to go by the new



NICOLAS MADURO. Under pressure

Monroe/Trump Doctrine as laid out by a recently released Security Document that stressed that Washington will restore "American pre-eminence in the Western Hemisphere" with a view to eventually paying dividends on the drug flow and migration fronts.

But in a real worry that the post-Maduro scheme of things will be reminiscent of quagmires. Vietnam comes to mind of the yesteryears, of more relevance is that of Iraq and Afghanistan.

Aside from an irritant of being a leftist regime closely aligned with Cuba, Russia, China and Iran, it is pointed out that Washington knows too well that Venezuela is not the prime source of drugs that kill Americans.

When it comes to Maduro and regime change in Caracas, Trump is likely to pay far less attention to what Havana, Beijing, Moscow or Teheran thinks but more on his own domestic constituents and the Make America Great Again (MAGA) base.

## MAGA SPLIT

Moderate Republicans are hoping to hear in detail of the game plan but there are also divisions in the MAGA between the hardline "primacists" and the traditionalist "America First" that emphasises avoiding overseas involvements that Trump himself advocated in the course of his 2024 Presidential campaign.

Furthermore a full scale involvement in Venezuela is something that the Grand Old Party would want to avoid ahead of the November 2026 Mid Term Congressional elections.

The writer is a senior journalist who has reported from Washington DC on North America and United Nations

# India's AI policy needs to get global-scale ready

AI PLAY. We need a policy framework that leverages our advantages — Talent, data, market scale, public infrastructure and institutional maturity



SANCHIT VIR GOGIA

India's AI governance guidelines have struck a chord. They present the country as a responsible, inclusive leader, offering an approach built on digital public infrastructure and voluntary guardrails, not burdensome regulation. It is a tone that resonates across emerging economies, and rightly so. But once the applause fades, there's a harder, quieter question. If we are serious about building global-scale AI capability, are we doing enough beyond intent?

At Greyhound Research, we've spent the past few months dissecting this framework. The ambition is real, the philosophy is clear, but the policy is still tilted toward deployment rather than creation. That imbalance matters.

Let's start with what's working. India's digital public infrastructure is world-class. Aadhaar, UPI, DigiLocker, Bhaskini, and DEPA have become the foundation for scalable, real-world innovation. They give developers a head start on identity, payments, authentication, and data-sharing. Building AI solutions on top of these platforms is not only efficient, but it is also this kind of integrated architecture at a national scale.

## BUILDING AI

But while we are applying AI well, we are not yet building it with the same depth. That's where the cracks begin.

First, there is no legal clarity on whether publicly available data can be used to train AI models. The Copyright Act has not been updated. There is no text-and-data mining exemption. Developers cannot be sure if they are operating within legal limits.

Many are avoiding full-scale model training altogether. Some are moving their compute offshore. Others are fine-tuning open models rather than building their own. This is a direct

impact on sovereignty. We are shipping applications, but do not own the core technology behind them.

Second, the question of liability is still unresolved. If an AI system causes harm, who is responsible? Is it the model creator, the enterprise that deployed it, or the platform that hosted it? The current guidelines acknowledge these questions but defer answers to future laws and regulators. That uncertainty introduces risk. Smaller companies, especially those working in high-stakes sectors like finance or healthcare, are likely to stay out of foundational development altogether.

Third, our research institutions remain underleveraged. India has an outstanding academic talent pool in AI, but lacks a compute backbone that they can reliably access. The AIRAWAT initiative is promising but not yet fully operational or transparent. Access pathways are unclear. Public documentation is limited. There is no simple way for a university lab to spin up model training jobs without going through approvals, applications, and delays. This slows experimentation and puts us behind countries that are aggressively funding research infrastructure.

## GLOBAL MODELS

Elsewhere, things are moving fast. The UAE has launched Falcon, its own open-source language model, with real government backing and visibility. Singapore is actively shaping rules around explainability and user redress. The EU, despite its heavy regulatory stance, has managed to provide certainty to developers and carve-outs for research. The United States, for all

Our advantage today lies in deployment. The DPI stack is our superpower. But further up the stack — into model training, risk calibration, and core development — the support gets thinner

its chaos, still allows developers to operate under a broad fair use doctrine. These countries are not just regulating. They are enabling.

China, too, deserves a mention. DeepSeek made waves; its models matched and, in some areas, outperformed OpenAI and Google on cost and capability. The R1 model briefly wiped over a trillion dollars off US tech stocks. But global traction has been limited. Privacy concerns and policy constraints have held it back. The lesson for India: great models alone don't scale. Trust, openness, and alignment matter just as much.

Taken together, these examples highlight a clear shift. Countries are not just scaling infrastructure; they are backing it with policy clarity, trust frameworks, and sustained public investment.

India is not falling behind yet. But we cannot afford to stand still.

Our advantage today lies in deployment. If you are building AI applications in local languages, integrating with Aadhaar, or delivering citizen services at scale, India is one of the best places in the world to be. The DPI stack is our superpower. But the further up the stack you go, into model training, risk calibration, and core development, the thinner the support becomes.

Over time, this creates dependency. If we are not building our own models, we are relying on others. That means relying on their assumptions, their licensing models, and their decisions on what gets supported. It also means we are shaping user experiences and public services on top of systems we did not design. This is not just a technology issue. It is a question of control, resilience, and competitiveness.

## TARGETED POLICIES

The good news is we do not need a major new law to change course. We need targeted policy interventions.

We need to clarify that using publicly available data for AI research and training is legal in India. That one move would unleash experimentation across academia and start-ups without putting them at legal risk.

We need to create safe harbours for developers, just as we did for internet intermediaries. If an AI tool is misused by a third party, the developer should not automatically be liable. Liability must be proportional and predictable.

We need to make AIRAWAT truly usable. Publish access norms. Build onboarding tools. Create shared compute clusters that researchers and small companies can access with minimal overhead.

We need to set up structured sandboxes for AI development, particularly in regulated sectors. These sandboxes should be run with sector regulators and supported by legal guidance, not just left to informal experimentation.

And we need a lightweight certification regime. If a model passes basic tests for fairness, transparency, and robustness, let it plug into DPI use cases by default. This creates a positive incentive structure and builds trust with both users and enterprise buyers. None of this is radical. All of it is doable.

The current AI governance framework reflects a careful, considered approach. It avoids the pitfalls of overregulation and acknowledges the complexity of the space. That is to be applauded. But now, we need a second chapter. One focused not on protecting what exists, but on creating what does not.

India has every ingredient. Talent. Data. Market scale. Public infrastructure. Institutional maturity. What we need now is a policy to unlock those ingredients into capability.

The world is watching. And so is the Global South. If India can build a governance model that is both inclusive and production-ready, we will not just lead by example. We will offer a roadmap that others can follow.

The question is not whether we will use AI safely. That part is underway. The real question is whether we will own the tools, shape the direction, and claim our seat at the table as true builders. Now is the time to decide.

The writer is Chief Analyst, Founder & CEO, Greyhound Research

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### TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

January 2, 2006

#### Govt to step up monitoring of small hikes in drug prices

The government will step up monitoring of even small price hikes of drugs and pharmaceutical products. While currently the National Pharmaceutical Pricing Authority (NPPA) seeks explanations from companies on price hikes of over 20 per cent in a year, Part Two of the proposed new Pharmaceutical Policy is likely to bring this cap down further.

#### SAFTA may not lead to immediate jump in imports

The ushering in of the treaty on South Asia Free Trade Area (SAFTA) from Sunday is not expected to lead to any immediate quantum jump in imports into India since as many as 884 specific product groups have been kept on the Sensitive List where the trade liberalisation programme would not be applicable, industry and trade experts told Business Line. There is, however, an acknowledgement that SAFTA has more chances of success than South Asia Preferential Trade Arrangement (SAPTA).

#### IndusInd Bank on lookout for NBFC

IndusInd Bank is looking to acquire another non-banking financial company, preferably in the vehicle financing business, to augment its growth, according to Mr Bhaskar Ghose, Managing Director.

## Sovereign funds push into tech as assets swell to \$15 trillion

Alex Dooler  
Bloomberg



TECH. The top draw

Sovereign wealth funds globally amassed a record \$15 trillion in assets under management in a year when many deepened their technology investments and profited from buoyant markets, according to a new report by Global SWF.

Overall, sovereign owned investors ploughed \$66 billion into investments in artificial intelligence and digitalization in 2025, the data firm said. Middle East sovereign wealth funds led on digital investments, with Abu Dhabi's Mubadala Investment Co. investing

\$12.9 billion in AI and digitalization, followed by the Kuwait Investment Authority's \$6 billion and Qatar Investment Authority's \$4 billion in 2025. The Middle East continues to be a

hotspot for sovereign wealth fund riches. The main seven Gulf wealth funds accounted for 43 per cent of all capital invested by state owned investors globally at \$126 billion, a historical maximum. In particular, Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund was the single largest dealmaker of 2025 by committing \$36.2 billion. Still, the PIF's participation in the acquisition of Electronic Arts Inc. made up the bulk of that figure. Stripping out that deal, Abu Dhabi's Mubadala was the most active sovereign wealth fund, investing a record \$32.7 billion over 40 transactions, according to the report.

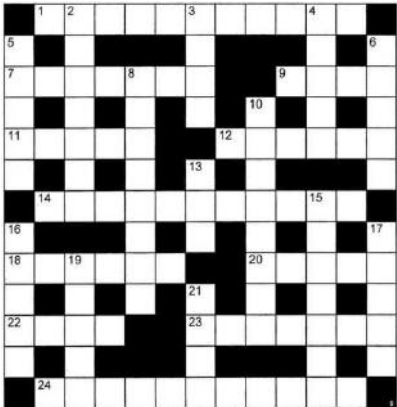
Sovereign investors grew their might

in 2025 amid a market of strong returns for investors across fixed income, public equities, real estate and infrastructure, according to Global SWF.

The US stands out with \$13.2 trillion in assets under management by state owned investors, followed by China with \$8.2 trillion and the United Arab Emirates at \$2.9 trillion.

Overall, the number one destination for state owned investments, by some margin, was the US, attracting some \$13.18 billion in 2025 compared with \$68.9 billion a year earlier, the report said. Investments into China by sovereign owned investors fell to \$4.3 billion from \$10.3 billion in 2024.

## BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2589



### EASY

#### ACROSS

01. Ancient Greek physician (11)
07. Hold back, save up (7)
09. Fine spray (4)
11. Due to (5)
12. Dark brown malt liquor (6)
14. Dismension (11)
18. Chose (6)
20. From sunset to sunrise (5)
22. Cause, basis, foundation (4)
23. Cloth goods, hangings (7)
24. Regrettable, unlucky (11)

#### DOWN

02. Give encouraging influence (7)
03. Ship's company (4)
04. Dispossess by law (5)
05. Audacious attempt to influence (3-2)
06. Stock laid up (5)
08. Compass of instrument, voice (8)
10. East European nation (8)
13. Branch of service (3)
15. Disregard, uncared-for state (7)
16. Tall tapering church feature (5)
17. Corset (5)
19. Top of head (5)
21. Superintend publication of (4)

### NOT SO EASY

#### ACROSS

01. Greek physician used short animals to hold bow (11)
07. Restrained manner in which to bring it to table again (7)
09. Soundly failed to connect, due to poor visibility (4)
11. There's nothing on the flank if one's in debt (5)
12. He can handle cases of drink (6)
14. Satisfied a certain people inside the distance (11)
18. Selected the very best editor for it (6)
20. Hating a loss that might have brought darkness about (5)
22. Mathematical function of a sort of beer (4)
23. Cloth goods used to mash pear and dry out (7)
24. Unlucky for the fish in net making u-turn (11)

#### DOWN

02. It will give one the courage to breathe in (7)
03. What the cock did for people in a boat (4)
04. Output from civet that may make one leave home (5)
05. See if clothes fit with a bit of audacity (3-2)
06. Keep by the hill in the Southeast (5)
08. Greets the right one in switching the written record (8)
10. Country, craze for which follows our revolution (8)
13. A jolly service to get ready for war (3)
15. Fail to attend to broken leg caught in net (7)
16. A feature of the church is prayer Ayr forgot to order (5)
17. Guys one supports if one doesn't leave (5)
19. Tooth repair to have under credit (5)
21. Put articles in order when spring is coming up (4)

### SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2588

ACROSS 1. Granted 5. Forum 8. Oarsman 9. Risen 10. Metronome 12. Set 13. Tripe 17. Was 19. In between 21. Loose 22. Undergo 24. Steps 25. Hundred  
DOWN 1. Grooms 2. Aerated 3. Tom 4. Dingo 5. Forecmeat 6. Risks 7. Minute 11. Outsiders 14. Cleaner 15. Swells 16. Enfold 18. Shove 20. Blush 23. Din



# The Statesman

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## Viral India

India's viral moments over the year gone by offer more than a light-hearted rewind of what trended online. Taken together, they reveal how the country now performs, negotiates, and asserts its identity in a hyper-connected public sphere where national confidence is increasingly shaped by visibility rather than validation.

Consider the rapturous response to Shah Rukh Khan making his debut at a global fashion event. The excitement was not simply about celebrity glamour. It reflected a long-simmering belief that Indian cultural icons no longer need to wait for permission or timing to be deemed "global". The reaction online carried a tone of inevitability rather than surprise - an assertion that such recognition was overdue, not aspirational.

A similar sentiment surrounded India's triumph at the Women's Cricket World Cup under Harmanpreet Kaur. The victory was celebrated not as a feel-good underdog story but as a corrective moment. For decades, women's sport in India existed in the margins of public attention. The scale and intensity of the online response suggested a broader cultural shift: sporting excellence, regardless of gender, is now central to national pride rather than an adjunct to it.

Perhaps the most telling viral moment, however, came from outside stadiums and red carpets. When Shubhashree Shukla stepped aboard the International Space Station, the achievement travelled across social media through short videos and informal explanations. This was not the distant, reverential space triumph of an earlier era. It was intimate, accessible, and deeply personal - science recast as something Indians could emotionally inhabit, not merely applaud. The message was clear: ambition in India today is not just about scale, but about participation. Then there was the chessboard drama involving Gukesh Dommaraju and Magnus Carlsen. The viral spread of that moment owed as much to humour as to victory. Indians did not just celebrate a teenage prodigy beating a global great; they revelled in the collapse of old hierarchies. The memes that followed suggested a society confident enough to laugh at power rather than simply revere it.

What stood out was how quickly these moments crossed class, language, and regional lines. Virality became a rare common currency, briefly aligning disparate audiences around shared emotion, shared humour, and a shared sense of national presence in a fragmented public sphere.

What unites these episodes is the way social media has become India's most democratic national stage. Algorithms now sit alongside institutions in deciding what matters. Moments once filtered through official narratives are instantly reinterpreted, parodied and claimed by the public. Pride is expressed horizontally, through collective participation, rather than vertically through sanctioned symbols.

In this sense, India's viral year was not about distraction but definition. It showed a country increasingly comfortable with its contradictions - glamour and grit, tradition and irreverence, achievement and mockery. The real story is not that these moments went viral, but that India recognised itself in them, and liked what it saw.

## Clearer Contours

What the world is entering now is not a sudden crisis, but the moment when a long, uneven transition becomes impossible to ignore. The geopolitical order that shaped the early 21st century did not collapse overnight; it eroded gradually. But in 2025, enough pillars cracked at once for the illusion of continuity to finally give way. For more than three decades, global politics rested on a loose but powerful consensus: open trade would expand prosperity; institutions would arbitrate conflict; and American leadership - even when contested - would ultimately stabilise the system. That framework survived wars, financial crises, and political shocks. It did not survive 2025.

What distinguished last year was not turbulence, but intent. Long-standing norms were not merely bent; they were actively dismantled. Trade rules were weaponised. Alliances were reframed as transactions. Institutions once treated as neutral referees were openly questioned, defunded or bypassed. At home and abroad, executive power expanded at the expense of institutional restraint. By the end of 2025, the message was unmistakable: the old order was no longer being preserved, even rhetorically.

As 2026 begins, the consequences of that shift are coming into focus. The world is not reorganising into a clean bipolar rivalry, nor returning to a stable hierarchy. Instead, power is fragmenting across regions, technologies, and economic systems. Military strength, economic weight, and political influence no longer align neatly. States that once followed are now shaping outcomes in narrower but decisive ways.

One defining feature of this new phase is the primacy of economic security. Trade is no longer treated as a shared good, but as a strategic vulnerability. Supply chains are being shortened, duplicated or redirected with geopolitical risk in mind. Governments are embracing industrial policy, even at the cost of efficiency, signalling a permanent shift away from the assumptions that governed globalisation in the 1990s and 2000s. Technology sits at the centre of this transformation. Control over artificial intelligence, semiconductors, data, and critical infrastructure increasingly determines national power. Unlike past industrial competitions, these struggles blur civilian and military domains, making regulation and standards as consequential as hardware and troops.

Alliances, too, are changing character. Commitments once framed around shared values are now assessed through cost, leverage, and reciprocity. This does not mean alliances are disappearing, but that they are becoming conditional and fluid, effective in some moments and hollow in others.

For India, 2026 will test strategic autonomy: balancing growth, technology access and security ties while avoiding entanglement in rival blocs without forfeiting leverage.

For middle powers, 2026 will be a year of sharper choices. The erosion of rigid blocs offers room for manoeuvre, but neutrality is harder to sustain when economics, technology and security are deeply entangled. The significance of 2026 lies not in dramatic realignments, but in accumulation. As these trends reinforce one another, the world order will become less recognisable - not as chaos, but as a more competitive, less forgiving world where adaptation replaces consensus as the core test of statecraft.

# Throttled city

PM2.5 can be generated within an already polluted atmosphere and this secondary formation is one of the most underestimated reasons for persistently high pollution levels in cities like Delhi. Even when direct emissions are reduced, polluted air rich in precursor gases such as sulfur dioxide, nitrogen oxides, ammonia, and volatile organic compounds can chemically react in the atmosphere to form new fine particulate matter. Under conditions common to Delhi - high humidity, low wind speed, fog, and temperature inversion - these gases undergo complex photochemical and aqueous-phase reactions, producing secondary PM2.5 such as sulfates, nitrates, and organic aerosols

Air pollution in Delhi has reached a critical and almost irreversible stage, turning the city into one of the most polluted capitals in the world and posing a serious threat to public health and environmental sustainability. For a significant part of the year, especially during winter, the air becomes a toxic mix of PM 2.5 and PM 10, vehicular emissions, industrial pollutants, construction dust, and smoke from biomass and stubble burning, often pushing the Air Quality Index into the "severe" category. Dense smog reduces visibility, disrupts daily life, and leads to a sharp rise in respiratory and cardiovascular illnesses, particularly among children, the elderly, and outdoor workers.

I wish to record my deep grievance over the chronic and almost normalized failure of India's air-pollution governance, where responsibility has been systematically avoided by scientists, politicians, institutions, and society together. Scientific data produced for agencies like the Central Pollution Control Board accumulated year after year, but without moral pressure or unified scientific resistance, it failed to translate into enforceable action. Politically, pollution persists because it is a slow killer without immediate electoral consequences. Accountability is diluted through blame-shifting between central and state governments, seasonal excuses, and symbolic emergency measures that vanish once winter ends.

Though regulatory agencies issue notices, they rarely translate into closures, penalties, or long-term deterrence, especially against powerful industrial and infrastructural violators. This air pollution is treated as an episodic inconvenience and invoked loudly



during winter smog or court interventions and quietly ignored when elections, economic optics, or corporate interests take precedence. Successive governments publicly endorse clean air targets while simultaneously diluting enforcement, extending compliance deadlines, and prioritizing short-term growth narratives over the right to breathe clean air.

Worse still, corruption is not an aberration but an enabling mechanism - inspectors vulnerable to pressure or inducement, data manipulation to underreport emissions, and selective enforcement that spurs influential polluters while penalizing small, visible actors - creating an ecosystem where non-compliance is cheaper than compliance.

Neotism and patronage further corrode the system, as appointments, transfers, and regulatory decisions are influenced by political proximity rather than expertise or integrity, hollowing out agencies that should be science-driven and autonomous. Even ministries tasked with stewardship, such as the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, appear constrained by inter-ministerial politics and industrial lobbies, resulting in fragmented policies that lack accountability, transparency, and measurable outcomes.

In addition to these, I want to strongly highlight the deeply flawed approach in which the government spends huge public funds every winter to procure and install pollution-monitoring gadgets, sprinklers, smog towers, mobile vans, and emergency-response equipment, while conspicuously failing to design or implement any serious year-round programme to control air pollution at its source. This seasonal, optics-driven strategy reduces governance to spectacle: equipment is hurriedly showcased when AQI levels spike and media pressure mounts, only to be forgotten once winter passes, even though emissions from industries, construction, transport, waste burning, and power generation continue unabated throughout the year.

Under national frameworks like the National Clean Air Programme, targets are announced but accountability is missing, funding is skewed toward short-term technological fixes rather than sustained regulatory action, and structural reforms - such as strict industrial audits, continuous emission penalties, urban planning corrections, and public transport expansion - are indefinitely postponed. This pattern reflects a deeper

political failure, where the Government of India appears willing to finance visible winter-time interventions that generate headlines, but unwilling to confront powerful polluters or invest consistently in preventive measures that may be politically inconvenient.

As a result, public money is repeatedly spent on treating symptoms during a few months of crisis instead of curing the disease through continuous, science-based governance, leaving citizens trapped in an annual cycle of emergency, expenditure, and abandonment, with clean air promised every winter and denied for the rest of the year.

In my opinion, control of air pollution in Delhi will never be truly effective unless strategies are framed around the geographical reality of the region, its adverse meteorological conditions, and the actual distribution of pollution sources, with a strong emphasis on preventive, ground-level action.

Delhi's landlocked location in the Indo-Gangetic Plain, weak wind circulation, frequent temperature inversion, and high winter humidity trap pollutants for long durations, making the city a permanent receptor of both local and regional emissions.

Under such conditions, merely organizing seminars, conferences, or laboratory-based research by scientists within pollution control boards, choosing academic safety over public confrontation, may allow pollution to become a research subject rather than a civil-rights emergency but cannot by itself deliver cleaner air. It demands coordinated field action, strict enforcement on roads, construction sites, industries, landfills, and agricultural regions, along with sustained public awareness so that citizens become active participants rather than passive sufferers.

Equally essential is strong political will to take scientifically guided but often unpopular decisions, instead of relying on short-term announcements and media-driven publicity that highlight political visibility rather than real outcomes.

It is pertinent to mention here that PM2.5 can be generated within an already polluted atmosphere, and in my view this secondary formation is one of the most underestimated

base went up. The Cricket Association of Nepal (CAN), the sport's governing body in Nepal, keeps 50 percent of its earnings to itself and distributes the rest among the franchisees under this arrangement, the teams received Rs 5.4 million each last year. This year the introduction of OTT streaming must have helped within the tournament's reach.

The franchises also did a better job of selling real estate on team jerseys to local sponsors. The teams can - and need to - do more. The franchisees need to sustain themselves financially because, apart from the love for the game, they are in it for money. Merchandising is a real possibility, and for that, the teams need to be able to create a fan base.

The only franchise that is miles ahead of the pack is the Royals, whose fans - donned in the yellow - show intense passion and untiring loyalty. There were instances of Royals fans reserving buses and arriving here from Mahendranagar. The tournament was held in Kathmandu, and there were hardly any Gorkhas fans - relatively - in the stadium. Growing a fan base from nothing and turning it into a community requires passion from team management.

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THE KATHMANDU POST

## Fans, franchises and the future

Fortunes changed dramatically at the recently concluded Nepal Premier League (NPL). This was the second edition of the eight-franchise tournament, which took place from November 17 to December 13 at the Tribhuvan University Cricket Stadium, which, too, went through a massive transformation as it was only a ground until last year. In last year's inaugural championship, the Janakpur Bolts prevailed over the Sudurpashchim Royals in the final, with the Lumbini Lions finishing at the bottom of the group matches with one win out of the seven they played. This year, the Lions lifted the trophy by defeating the Royals in the final, while the Bolts finished at the bottom of the group stage with only one victory.

The real winners were the fans, the game of cricket and Nepal. Last year, cricket lovers turned up in thousands to sit on grass and root for their teams under sunlight, as the

22-day affair resulted in ticket sales worth Rs150 million. This year, there were seating arrangements, and most matches were played under floodlights. Ticket sales this year are said to have brought in Rs400 million. Nepali fans draw accolades the world over for their enthusiastic support for the national team, showing up everywhere - from England to the United States to the United Arab Emirates.

Star Sports, the NPL's official broadcaster, put this year's viewership at 200 million, putting to rest doubters' claims that cricket has no future in Nepal. Last year, the franchisees - Birmagar Kings, Chitwan Rhinos, Bolts, Karnali Yaks, Kathmandu Gorkhas, Lions, Pokhara Avengers and Royals - spent Rs80 million to Rs100 million each. They probably invested in the same ballpark this year, with decent odds that their revenue

base went up. The Cricket Association of Nepal (CAN), the sport's governing body in Nepal, keeps 50 percent of its earnings to itself and distributes the rest among the franchisees under this arrangement, the teams received Rs 5.4 million each last year. This year the introduction of OTT streaming must have helped within the tournament's reach.

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Letters To The Editor ✉ editor@thestatesman.com

## Uncertain

Sir, There's a global compelling assessment of how 2025 may mark a structural break in global politics and economics. The erosion of the boundary between geopolitics and geoeconomics is significant, as national security has displaced efficiency as the organizing principle of global trade.

The shift from "just in time" to "just in case" supply chains, along with the normalisation of industrial policy, signals a world where predictability has given way to strategic caution.

For India, the implications are profound. Remaining outside major regional trade arrangements risks marginalisation at a time when bloc-based trade survives only within such blocs.

Closer ties with the US are now framed by reciprocity shaped by political expediency,

underlining the need for diversified partnerships. The prospect of a loose bipolar order, with the US as an off-shore balancer in Asia and China asserting regional primacy, further complicates India's strategic calculus.

Equally sobering is the warning on artificial intelligence. Massive investment without commensurate productivity gains could trigger a global financial shock, amplifying China's leverage.

India must therefore combine preparedness with strategic agility to navigate the uncertain landscape beyond 2026 with foresight.

Yours, etc., Sanjay Chopra, Mohali, 1 January.

## Corrupt

Sir, In Lucknow, nearly 7000 potted plants worth around Rs 10-11 lakh were stolen within 24 hours of Prime Minister



Narendra Modi inaugurating the Rashtriya Pratna Shal. The plants were part of a Rs 60 lakh horticulture project, and videos showed people carrying them away on scooters and cars.

Who says only India's netas (politicians) are a corrupt lot? Given a chance, even well-to-do Indians will not hesitate to steal public property. Corrupt people elect corrupt netas, who in turn foster corruption.

Similar to Lucknow, residents in Noida and Gurugram have been caught on camera carrying away decorative flower pots placed for public events.

Our railways, metros, statues and other

reasons for persistently high pollution levels in cities like Delhi. Even when direct emissions are reduced, polluted air rich in precursor gases such as sulfur dioxide, nitrogen oxides, ammonia, and volatile organic compounds can chemically react in the atmosphere to form new fine particulate matter. Under conditions common to Delhi - high humidity, low wind speed, fog, and temperature inversion - these gases undergo complex photochemical and aqueous-phase reactions, producing secondary PM2.5 such as sulfates, nitrates, and organic aerosols.

In such stagnant conditions, pollution effectively "self-generates," meaning the atmosphere itself becomes a factory for fine particles rather than just a carrier of emissions. This explains why PM2.5 levels often remain critical even when visible sources appear limited or temporarily controlled. This PM2.5 formed within a polluted atmosphere (secondary PM2.5) is often more harmful, or at least equally harmful, than PM2.5 emitted directly from point sources.

Secondary PM2.5 is rich in sulfates, nitrates, ammonium, and secondary organic aerosols, which are often more acidic and oxidative. These particles can trigger stronger inflammatory and oxidative stress responses in the lungs and bloodstream.

It is important to note that during the Covid-19 lockdown, when most transport systems and industries were shut down, AQI levels in Delhi often remained high, which clearly demonstrates that air pollution is not controlled by emission sources alone. Secondary formation tends to produce ultrafine and highly hygroscopic particles that grow in humid air, allowing them to penetrate deep into the alveoli and even enter the bloodstream, and in some respects, it can be more dangerous.

Therefore, focusing only on direct emission sources without reducing precursor gases and unfavourable atmospheric conditions fails to address this hidden but powerful mechanism of pollution build-up, reinforcing the need for preventive, year-round control strategies.

In my view, unless pollution control strategies are designed around Delhi's geographical disadvantage and meteorological reality, and focus on permanently lowering baseline emissions rather than reacting after pollution peaks, clean air will continue to remain an unfulfilled promise despite repeated emergency measures.

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## SATURDAY INTERVIEW

## 'The young should learn their culture'

**P**adma Vibhushan Sonal Mansingh has practiced many dance forms, including Manipuri, Kuchipudi, Odissi, and Bharatanatyam. She has been the recipient of many awards, including the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award (1987) and the Padma Bhushan (1992) and Padma Vibhushan (2003), two of India's highest civilian honours.

She founded the Centre for Indian Classical Dances in 1977. Her choreography is often rooted in Indian mythology though she also explores contemporary topics such as women's issues and environmentalism.

Mansingh was nominated by the President of India to the Rajya Sabha in 2018. This marked a historic moment as she became the first classical dancer to receive this honour. She is currently serving her second term as a trustee at the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA).

In an exclusive interview with Surya S Pillai of The Statesman, the Odissi dancer talks about her latest book 'A ZigZag Mind', the stature of Indian performing arts on the global stage, and how the contemporary political class views artists.

**Q. You latest book "A ZigZag Mind" was widely praised for its beautiful account of the 'Guru-Shishya' (teacher-disciple) parampara, creativity in dance, and the divinity of life itself. How do you feel about it?**

**A.** I feel honoured and am thankful to my readers for the kind feedback. I usually write longhand as there is stream of thoughts, and I do not

like the hurdle of technology. Yes, the book talks about the 'Guru-Shishya' tradition, which unfortunately is on a decline. India is one of the few countries which still keeps this tradition close to its heart. Apart from this, I have also brought into focus "secularism in the Indian performing arts" in the book. I have talked about how Hindus, Muslims, Parsis, Sikhs, Buddhists, Sufis, among others have come together to 'create and worship art', from time immemorial. I am surprised why people do not talk about it.

**Q. Indian art and culture has come a long way. From mere participants to now major influencers, our artists and their craft have made a niche for themselves on the global stage. What role, do you think, the politics of the day play in propagating art?**

**A.** Besides the artists, the political leadership also plays a role. We have seen many Padma awards being given to many 'unconventional' artists from varied backgrounds.

When I started off, there were only four dance forms (Bharatanatyam, Kathak, Kathakali, and Manipuri). I am one of the rare art personalities who has lived through various political regimes. Today, art is not just dance and song. There is respect, money, and opportunities for artists across the country. Case in point is the 'Mera Gyan, Meri Dharohar' scheme which aims to document the cultural heritage of 65 lakh villages of India.

**Q. You have been a mentor to many students. How does the young generation, or the Gen Z, view art?**

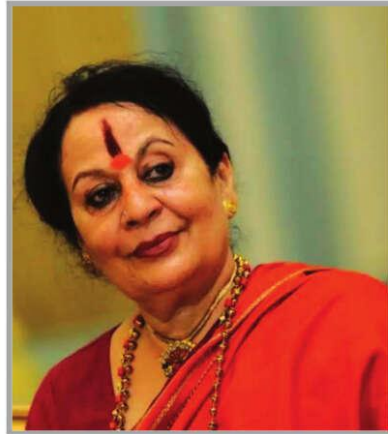
**A.** For the young today, there is no dearth of opportunities to exhibit their work. From reality shows to OTTs, I am so envious of the range of platforms the youth is getting today. Back in old days, artists depended on print media for the publicity. The Statesman's art critic Charles Fabri wrote a piece on me titled "New Star on The Horizon". He made me a star overnight.

Regarding the young generation's attitude towards art, I would say many take it up for pure recreation or as a means of employment. But only those who have the 'staying power' can reap the benefits of art. It is all about continuing 'sadhna' (practise).

**Q. The five-day 'Festival of New Choreographies - KalaYatra 2026' is scheduled from January 13-15 and January 28-29 in the national capital. Can you elaborate on the event?**

**A.** To be really honest, I am a madcap. I am crazy about all aspects of dance. The festival will enter its 49th year in 2026. The non-ticketed event, held at Kamani Auditorium, is open to all discerning dance lovers, rasikas, artists and general audiences. KalaYatra, in its true essence, is a continuum of 10 new choreographies, each presented by eminent dance institutions of India and led by their gurus, showcasing India's civilizational soul and pride in a timeless cultural expression in motion!

I invite all big names from the art world for the festival every year. We will be presenting many choreographies like Yakshagana, Kathakali, Sattriya from Assam, Kuchipudi from Telangana, Bharatanatyam from Pune, Odissi,



among others. For the first time, we also have a group (Rainbow) representing the LGBTQ+ community from Kolkata.

**Q. As an artist, what are the issues that are close to your heart?**

**A.** I have talked about many issues via my art, be it environmental conservation, jail reforms, women empowerment or human rights. But women issues have always been dear to me. I believe 'women empowerment' is a misnomer. Women have always been empowered. Right from the Upanishads, Vedas,

and even in the freedom struggle, women have been at the forefront.

According to me, the women who are toiling hard in the fields are more empowered than the so-called educated ones 'caged' in the comforts of their houses. They are more in control of their lives than others who are bogged down by the walls created by the society. So, we cannot and should not lump all women in one basket.

Secondly, people, especially the young, are not 'concerned' about their traditions. I wish they participate more to learn about their culture and sensibilities.

## 100 Years Ago



Front page of The Statesman dated 05 January 1926

## OCCASIONAL NOTE

The Home honours list does not strike one as very much more sensational than the Indian list. Lords D'Abernon and Duncin move up a step in the peerage and become viscounts, and two new barons are created — Lord Oranmore and Browne, who is promoted from the Irish to the British peerage and ex officio Sir Ernest Pollock, Master of the Rolls. It would appear that economy in the creation of new peers is still the order of the day — Mr. Lloyd George's extravagance in this direction has still to be lived down. Seven new baronets have come into being, among them Mr. William Butler, a Birmingham brewer. Is the peerage to be closed in future to this deservingly class of Conservative philanthropists? The new knights number 55, and one wonders whether Mr Baldwin is not here lavishly making up for his parsimony in the matter of peerages. The Privy Council, however, is still as jealously guarded against intruders as the House of Lords itself, only five new "right honourable" appearing in the list.

## News Items

## BOMB CASE ECHO

## SUSPECT ARRESTED IN BURMA

Rangoon, Dec.

On Friday afternoon a C.I.D. Inspector arrested at Duncinad a young man named S. Shaker Chowdhury wanted by the Calcutta Police for alleged complicity in the Dakshinshwar bomb case. It is understood that the police had been searching for him since the discovery but were unable to trace him until the arresting officer received information that he had come to Burma. The accused is alleged to have made a statement to the police to the effect that what he had done at Dakshinshwar he had done for his country. The trial of the nine young men charged with the possession of explosive substances, possession of arms and ammunition and conspiracy concluded at Alipore on December 23, but judgment has not yet been delivered.

## RAILWAY ACCIDENT

## INQUIRY BY TANJORE MAGISTRATE

(From Our Correspondent.)

Tanjore, Dec.

Mr. H. S. Shield, I. C. S., Collector and District Magistrate, Tanjore held a public inquiry on Tuesday last, into the circumstances connected with the recent accident on the District Board Railway near Pattukottai. Mr. D.M. Short, District Engineer, South Indian Railway at Tanjore, two passengers, one a passenger and the other the Union Chairman of Pattukottai, the assistant Surgeon of the place, the Divisional Superintendent of South Indian Railway, the senior and assistant station masters of Pattukottai and the guard and driver of the ill-fated train were among the witnesses examined. The Magistrate also visited the spot where the accident occurred and will submit his report to the Government of Madras in due course.

## HOLLAND PLIGHT

## WIDESPREAD HAVOC OF FLOODS

Amsterdam, Jan.

Floods in the districts of the rivers Meuse, Waal, Rhine, and Lek, have assumed the character of a great catastrophe. Railway dykes have collapsed in several places, and others are threatening to collapse. The damage is so serious that it will be months before railway traffic can be resumed. Several villages have been practically evacuated, and cattle have been transferred to higher land. The authorities are working day and night to assist the population. —Reuter.

## Dealing with the ecology of poverty

RUDRASHIS DATTA

**E**nvironmental pollution and poverty are often discussed as separate crises, but they are deeply intertwined, forming a vicious cycle that traps millions of people across the developing world, including India. Pollution does not merely damage ecosystems; it systematically erodes livelihoods, health, and human dignity. At the same time, poverty compels communities to depend on environmentally harmful practices for survival, perpetuating degradation. Decoding this cycle is essential if sustainable development is to move beyond slogans and become social reality.

At the heart of the pollution-poverty nexus lies inequality. Poor communities disproportionately inhabit environmentally hazardous spaces — along polluted rivers, near landfills, industrial zones, highways, or mining belts. These locations are not chosen freely but imposed by unaffordable housing, insecure land tenure, and social marginalization. In urban India, slum settlements often emerge on floodplains or beside drains, exposing residents to contaminated water, toxic air, and recurring disasters. In rural areas, land degradation, pesticide overuse, and deforestation affect small farmers and landless labourers the most, stripping them of productive assets.

Environmental pollution directly deepens poverty through health impacts. Air pollution, contaminated drinking water, and chemical exposure cause respiratory illnesses, cancers, neurological disorders, and chronic diseases. For poor households

lacking access to healthcare or insurance, illness translates into lost wages, mounting debt, and intergenerational poverty. Children growing up in polluted environments suffer from stunting, cognitive impairment, and reduced educational outcomes, undermining their future earning potential. Pollution thus functions as a silent tax on the poor, extracting value from their bodies while remaining invisible in economic calculations.

Livelihoods are another major casualty. Fishermen lose income when rivers and coastal waters are polluted by industrial effluents and sewage. Farmers face declining soil fertility and water scarcity due to chemical-intensive agriculture and climate stress. Informal workers — ragpickers, waste sorters, construction labourers — work in toxic conditions without safety nets. Ironically, many of the poor survive by engaging in environmentally harmful activities such as illegal mining, sand extraction, forest logging, or waste burning, because safer alternatives are unavailable. Poverty pushes them into ecological destruction, even as it destroys their own long-term prospects.

The cycle is intensified by weak governance and environmental injustice. Regulatory failures allow polluting industries to operate with impunity, often targeting regions with limited political voice. Environmental laws exist on paper, but enforcement is selective and uneven. When pollution affects affluent neighbourhoods, protests, litigation, and media attention follow. When it affects the poor, it is normalized as collateral damage

of 'development.' This unequal distribution of environmental harm reflects deeper power imbalances within society.

Climate change acts as a multiplier of both pollution and poverty. Extreme weather events — floods, droughts, heatwaves — disproportionately affect vulnerable populations who lack resilient infrastructure or adaptive capacity. Polluted rivers overflow into slums during floods, spreading disease. Heat stress reduces labour productivity among outdoor workers. Crop failures push marginal farmers into distress migration. Climate-induced poverty, in turn, increases reliance on fossil fuels, biomass burning, and resource extraction, further degrading the environment.

The 2025 Global Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) report "Overlapping Hardships: Poverty and Climate Hazards" released ahead of the COP30 climate summit in Brazil, presents clinching evidence that the climate crisis is not only reshaping global poverty but intensifying it. By overlaying climate hazard data with multidimensional poverty data for the first time, the findings reveal a world where poverty is not just a standard socio-economic issue but one that is deeply interlinked with planetary pressures and instability.

The Report reinforces the assumption that exposure to climate hazards exacerbates the daily challenges faced by people living in poverty, reducing and deepening their disadvantages. The report finds that among those assessed to be living in acute multidimensional poverty — spanning health, education,

and living standards — an overwhelming 651 million endure two or more climate hazards, while 309 million face three or four hazards simultaneously.

Breaking this cycle requires rethinking development itself. Traditional growth models prioritize GDP expansion while externalizing environmental and social costs. Industries pollute, ecosystems degrade, and the poor pay the price. A more just approach demands integrating environmental protection with poverty alleviation. Clean air, safe water, and healthy ecosystems must be recognized as basic human rights, not luxuries.

Policy interventions must be locally grounded and socially inclusive. Investing in clean cooking fuels, renewable energy, and sustainable public transport can reduce pollution while creating jobs. Decentralized solar power, for instance, can transform rural livelihoods without ecological damage. Sustainable agriculture practices — organic farming, water conservation, agroforestry — can enhance food security and farmer incomes simultaneously. Urban planning must prioritize affordable housing away from hazardous zones, with access to sanitation and green spaces.

Equally important is empowering communities. When people participate in environmental decision-making, outcomes improve. Community-led water management, waste segregation, and forest conservation initiatives across India demonstrate that environmental stewardship and livelihood security can go hand in hand. Education and awareness

play a crucial role in enabling such participation, helping people understand the long-term costs of environmental degradation and the benefits of sustainable alternatives.

Corporate accountability is another critical pillar. Polluters must pay — not merely through fines but through restoration, compensation, and structural reform. Transparent environmental impact assessments, independent monitoring, and strong judicial mechanisms are essential to deter exploitation. The informalization of risk — where profits are privatized and pollution is socialized — must end.

Finally, addressing the pollution-poverty cycle demands a moral shift. Environmental degradation is not an unfortunate side effect of progress; it is a symptom of unjust systems that value profit over people. The poor are not enemies of the environment; they are often its first victims and most committed protectors when given the chance. Sustainable development will remain elusive unless social justice and ecological responsibility advance together.

Decoding the link between environmental pollution and poverty reveals an uncomfortable truth: environmental crises are also crises of inequality. Solving one without addressing the other is not only ineffective — it is ethically indefensible. The path forward lies in policies that heal both people and the planet, recognizing that a healthy environment is the foundation of a dignified life.

(The writer is Assistant Professor, Department of English & Co-ordinator, RQAC, Prithala Waddar Maharajakalyana.)

## Crossword | No. 293339

**YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION**

**ACROSS**

9 Typically taking a very short time (4,5,4,1)

10 A northern's course (5)

11 Coach likes strapping batter's midriff to be bowler's target (7)

12 Talk incessantly about old weapon (5,4,1)

13 Bear loses right to invest (5)

14 Immature flyer is rashly flying after cold (9)

**DOWN**

1 Revealed secret to let opposition win (4,3,4,1)

2 Robert longs to overtake the French racing vehicles (10)

3 Victor's first to leave ring circling bull (5)

4 Winner, surprisingly sleek, secures try almost (7)

5 One's six at Lord's? (5,4,1)

6 One helps pupils losing way in Windows (5)

7 Try pronouncing Irish town overlooking last event (8)

8 Sport left burden in A&E (8)

9 Small champion loves large swimming group (6)

10 Bill picked up wall game here (4)

11 What char does at night for unblemished record? (6)

12 Unusually striking way to avoid a commercial overhead? (10)

13 Follow round a pair of females in ship's bar (8)

14 Victory banner raised to welcome Hearts player (4,4,1)

15 Nearly avoid oddity crude error at the Crucible (6)

16 Some tin got smelted making these? (6)

17 Secure measure of speed for flyer (4)

18 Small bar at Old Trafford's temporary free (4)

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



# Expect turbulent asset markets in 2026



KENNETH ROGOFF

The biggest surprise of the past year is not that global asset prices have risen so sharply but that investors have shown so little concern about risk, apart from a brief scare following United States President Donald Trump's "Liberation Day" tariff announcement in April. The question now is whether 2026 will break the spell.

One might expect that, after three years of extraordinary returns, markets would start worrying about the inevitable crash

that follows periods of sustained euphoria. Artificial intelligence (AI) may be full of promise (at least for firms, if not always for workers), but the long history of transformative technologies — from railroads and internal combustion engines to the internet — has been marked by booms and busts. Early entrants often collapse spectacularly, only to be replaced later by second-generation firms that "get it right." And while a few companies may come to dominate, as IBM once did in computing, that does little to reduce uncertainty, since longevity is never guaranteed.

As investors struggle to assess how AI will affect growth and corporate profits, the odds of a global stock-market crash in the next few years appear uncomfortably high. Does that mean it's time to sell? Not necessarily, as stock prices can continue to rise long after warning signs start flashing red. That is what happened in 1996, when then-Federal Reserve Chair Alan

Greenspan — drawing on the shock of Nobel laureate Robert J. Shiller — warned of the stock market's "irrational exuberance." Greenspan and Shiller were ultimately proven right, but their timing was off: The dot-com bubble did not burst until March 2000, after stocks had more than doubled.

The same thing could easily happen now. Yet the pressures on the system are becoming increasingly hard to ignore, starting with the geopolitical uncertainty looming over the global economy. Even if Ukraine and Russia reach a ceasefire agreement, Europe's eastern frontier will probably continue to simmer for years. Meanwhile, China is expanding its naval fleet at a breathtaking pace, and no matter how many dollars the US plans to buy — one million, if recent reports are to be believed — China will almost certainly produce more, and better, ones. Then there is Trump, whose return to the White House

has been deeply disruptive. Health permitting, he is likely to be just as ambitious — or heavy-handed, depending on who you ask — in 2026 as he was in 2025.

Mr Trump's predecessor, Joe Biden, also presented himself as a transformative President in the mould of Franklin Roosevelt, but his macroeconomic policies were largely predictable. The policy debate during his term centred on whether his agenda would boost gross domestic product (GDP) growth or drive up consumer prices. With Mr Trump, by contrast, each day brings a new surprise, setting the stage for an extended period of policy volatility. Adding to the uncertainty is the end of Jerome Powell's term as Fed chair.

Trying to capitalise on volatility turned out to be a losing proposition in 2025, as many investment products that claimed to offer insurance against sharp market swings failed to deliver. The coming year is shaping up to be far riskier, as global

indebtedness and equity valuations are increasingly out of line with economic fundamentals. Moreover, the negative impact of Mr Trump's tariff and immigration policy will be felt more acutely in 2026. Structural reforms typically take years to bear fruit, which is why politicians often avoid them despite the long-term payoff. But this reality cuts both ways: Dismantling or undermining key reforms can inflict serious economic damage even if the short-term effects seem benign.

The European Union faces its own moment of truth in 2026. The best-case scenario would be a decisive move towards a fiscal union, at least among a subset of member states. Failing that, any serious reform will require major treaty changes, beginning with the elimination of the unanimity rule that paralyses the block's decision-making. Imagine if the US could pass laws or wage war only with the unanimous consent of California, Mississippi, and Texas. As I argue in my recent book *Our Dollar, Your Problem*, should Europe finally get its geopolitical act together, the

euro could play a much larger role in global finance. Japan is another wildcard. No one knows how far the Bank of Japan will go in raising interest rates or how quickly the unwinding of the yen carry trade — whereby investors borrow in yen to invest in higher-yielding assets, fuelling the surge in global prices — will unfold.

One potential stabilising factor is the likely depreciation of the dollar, which was warned it was a "five-star" news item where unsophisticated Hindi Medium Types (HMTs) would be severely judged and discarded. But *India Today* evolved. My first cover story for the magazine, by the way, was on Sunil Gavaskar after he scored his 29th hundred to equal Donald Bradman. I had never done any long-form sports writing. It was just that Aron Purie and Suman Dubey (managing editor then) thought I was the keenest. TN Ninan was the first Hindi Medium journalist (he died in July, 1988) was the dream team of Indian journalism. Proof of the pudding lies in Google. Check the masthead of that decade and see how far we reached.

While a clinical mercocracy was key, there was also a concept *India Today* pioneered: The reporter-editor. It wasn't limited to a reporter rising to be an editor. It also meant that even after becoming an editor, you continued reporting, whatever your multiple editorial responsibilities.

Here's an example of how we were taught to multi-task. This decade *India Today* launched its five language editions (Hindi, Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Gujarati), which I was asked to helm from 1991 onwards, in addition to all my other responsibilities and writing. Sometimes, we were exhausted and wished *Aron* would acknowledge that. But he wouldn't. After anchoring an 18-page cover story on the 1989 fatwa against Salman Rushdie with a football-team byline from across the world over two unsleeping nights, I sat on the news desk writing my legs, sort of smug in satisfaction, as *Aron* passed by. "Tell him not to work so hard, *Aron*, he will die," said then news-coordinator Sandhya Mulchandani, hoping *Aron* would sympathise. He just said, "Hard work never killed anybody" and walked away.

At this point, finally, I list three most important lessons that stay with me:

- There is always the other side to a story. Unless you have checked with that "other" side, no story is publishable. This is non-negotiable. And if somebody complains about a story being unfair to them, as editor, your default position is on their side. Until you facts check out.
- *Aron* had a comes free or easy, is loaded with evil. Just say no.
- And third, be unselfconscious of identity in the workplace. No discrimination, victimisation, exploitation or favouritism based on gender, ethnicity, caste, religion, anything. In this manner, too, *India Today* was institutionally prescient. It was ahead of the new middle-class consciousness for competitive equality that reform and growth brought in our history. The theme of politics.

Having joined in 1983, I left in 1995, just as the decade concluded. If, out of the dozen-plus history-defining stories I listed at the outset, I got a piece of all but one — economic reform — I'd say it was a decade well lived, especially in an Aristotelian sense.

By special arrangement with *ThePrint*



ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

# Congress' alternative legacy



PLAIN POLITICS  
ADITI PHADNIS

He is one of the most senior members of the Congress. And yet, he periodically lands himself and his party in thought controversy, suggesting the Congress' search to find its ideological self is ongoing and it continues. Former Madhya Pradesh chief minister and current Rajya Sabha member (his term ends next year) Digvijaya Singh's praise for the command-control-reward structure in the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-Rashtriya Swamasevak Sangh (RSS) is once again rolling the waters in the Congress.

Attaching a picture of a young Narendra Modi sitting on the floor at the feet of BJP patriarch L K Advani, Mr Singh observed in a social media post that it was "quite impressive" that "the BJP-RSS allow grassroots workers to grow within the organisation to top posts like chief minister and prime minister." In another post pulled up and cited by enthusiastic BJP supporters, he is said to have noted, addressing party leader Rahul Gandhi directly: "Like @ECISVEEP needs reforms, so does Indian National Congress... we need more pragmatic decentralised functioning."

Some party members say the real question he is asking is: Why can't the Congress be more like the BJP?

Before the 2018 state Assembly election, he launched a Narmada Parikrama on foot. Ahead of the 2023 Assembly elections, wearing saffron robes he did prayers and rituals at the Pitambara Peeth in Datia. Before that he walked in a 35-km-long

Kanwar yatra, starting in Gwarhat and culminating in Kailash Dham in Jaberpet. More than 100,000 people took part in the yatra, and Mr Singh was seen walking barefoot and briefly shouldering a *kanwar*.

The same Digvijaya Singh, at the Congress plenary session in Buar in 2010, delivered a fire and brimstone speech on "fascist forces" like the RSS and the BJP. "The RSS, in the garb of its nationalist ideology, is targeting Muslims the same way the Nazis targeted the Jews in the 1930s," Mr Singh said. He said the RSS was sowing the seeds of Muslim hatred in the minds of the new generation and "this is the biggest danger for us." He said the RSS had made its activities enter the bureaucracy and even the army. He asked: "Why did all the people involved in various bombings like Malegaon, Mecca Masjid, Samjhauta Express have links with the RSS", effectively restarting the debate on Hindu terror.

The Congress, driven by its own compulsions and contradictions, neatly assembled the problem and slid it under the carpet. Academics and experts call the whole package "soft Hindutva." The party has had its proponents of ritualised Hinduism. Kamalapati Tripathi, chief minister of Uttar Pradesh more than 50 years ago, prominently wore external symbols of Hinduism. Madhya Pradesh was the first Congress-ruled state in India, under chief minister Govind Narayan Singh, to pass an anti-conversion law, the Madhya Pradesh Dharma Swatantraya Adhiniyam, 1968, though a committee to investigate conversions and missionary activity had already been set up by the Congress government in 1954 (the Niyogi Committee). These are just two examples of various manifestations of Hindutva that existed in the Congress as a stream of thought.

This is the background of the thinking in the Congress of which Digvijaya Singh is a product. But

there's more to him than just a closet Hinduva-vadi at best and a rabid anti-RSS politician at worst. As of late minister (1993-2003, admittedly a long time ago) Mr Singh, who began as a *shishya* of Arjun Singh, put in place many administrative reforms that ironically came back to bite him. His implementation of decentralisation and strengthening of panchayati raj institutions, leveraging the 73rd constitutional amendment, gave the sanchay of zila panchayats autonomy and power.

However, when they got to a point where members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) began to feel disempowered, his party MLAs began to question him. Madhya Pradesh's road infrastructure was unimpressive. Though Mr Singh made budgetary allocations for roads, only a small part of this went towards maintenance, with the lion's share paying for wages of the road development corporation, a state-owned entity. After the bifurcation of Madhya Pradesh and the creation of Chhattisgarh in 2000, 32 per cent of the power-generation facility went to Chhattisgarh.

Madhya Pradesh had two options: Quickly augment power generation while buying power from Chhattisgarh. But in the interim, the state was, for a time, saddled with a 50 per cent shortfall in power. After having promised free power to farmers and other categories of consumers, Mr Singh was left to face the ire of angry consumers, who demanded he keep his word. Little wonder then, that the Congress was thrown out of power in 2003.

In his thinking, Digvijaya Singh has merely mimicked many of his predecessors, leading to the question of soft Hindutva construction, which tends to weaken constitutional secularism without overtly attacking it. As an administrator he has many half-successes to report. But in the history of the Congress, he will always be more than just an agent provocateur.

# India's most consequential decade

You'd think the decade of 1985-95 is long over. Not really. The issues that erupted in that decade are still shaping Indian conversations

The news magazine *India Today* just turned 50. It asked me to write on the decade of 1985-95, across which I worked there. The result is this fresh episode in my occasional series *First Person Second Draft*.

In a republic still young and evolving, decades would naturally come to be called the "most consequential". Put to that test, 1985-1995 would have the most stories that dominate our democracy and debates today.

At home and abroad, the terminal decline of the Congress after peaking, the first coalitions, the Bofors scandal, Mandal versus Mandir contestations, insurgencies in Punjab and Kashmir, two Indian military interventions overseas (Sri Lanka and the Maldives), two war-like situations with Pakistan (Brasstacks, 1987; Pakistan's first nuclear blackmail, 1990), a fraught Sumdorong Chu stand-off with China (1986-87) and then a thaw with Deng Xiaoping, assassinations of Zia-ul-Haq and Rajiv Gandhi, the globalisation of Islamism (as distinct from Islamic jihad and its spread to Kashmir, and the freeing of India's economy.

Although it started with rock-solid stability with the Congress at 414 in the Lok Sabha, the 10 years saw four Prime Ministers. Isn't that enough for a mere decade?

There's more. Because of economic reform, as a globalising India's stake and stature in the world rose, the Congress's pioneering spirit took its readers to the world — from the Afghan war and Tiananmen Square to the collapse of the Soviet Bloc and the first Gulf War. The Cold War ended, as did apartheid, India and Israel became friends.

For good news or bad, for generational shifts and eternal debates, the other decades can't compete. That all these fears India nursed since independence — political instability, communal and caste divides, decline of a stabilising dynasty, nuclear and terrorist threats, loss of the most trusted ally (Soviet Union) — came true in this decade is one side of the coin. How India responded, learned to trust coalitions, reformed its economy, repositioned strategically and leveraged its human resources is the other. India emerged much stronger, with a global presence.

Through these years, *India Today* was at the heart of this transformation and often at the front. The first enduring reform for this era was Rajiv Gandhi's push for computers. The first computers for an Indian newsroom, a pair of boxy Apple desktops, arrived in 1985. These were given an exclusive cabin, even in a newsroom so constrained for space.

There was a crush for keyboard time as we discovered the freedom from finger-wrecking typewriters, and the assurance of the floppy disk. Soon enough, Dilip Bobb, who did the most editing and rewriting, staked one out for himself — or at least pretended to — by having Shirley Joshua, his incredible pivot of the process-driven back end, create a little placard reading, "This is the Apple of my Eye", and plunking it on one desktop. That line of control was violated as often as the one up there by the bad guys. Since we remember the turning points in our lives by association, the first story I wrote on one of these was the initial controversy over the Mandal Commission in 1985. It endures four decades.

L K Advani's Rath Yatra and, ultimately, the Babri Masjid demolition in December 1992 unleashed communal riots across states. In its wake came the serial blasts, targeting key commercial buildings and neighbourhoods. This wasn't India's first trial with a serial bombing. But not at this scale, and not ones clearly traced back to Pakistan. That awful three-letter acronym, ISI, made its appearance and has haunted us since. Gangster Dawood Ibrahim rose from a somewhat comical presence at the Sharjah cricket stadium to India's villain number one. He continues to be so.

Rajiv Gandhi's instinctive disapproval of the Mandal report in 1985 sparked a backward caste awakening. Then a series of errors, with communal implications — reversal of the Shah Bano judgment, the ban on Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, the unhooking of the temple site in Ayodhya. Thereafter, our

politics has been a contest between two contrasting ideas. Can you use caste to divide what religion united, or employ religion to reunite what caste divided? Whoever wins, rules India. The Mandal (caste) side had its 25-year epoch from 1989 to 2014 — until Narendra Modi reversed it in 2014. Now is the era of mandir (Hinduism) and it won't have a half-life any less than 25 years. The issue is still Mandir versus Mandal. It played out in Bihar, as it will in Uttar Pradesh in 2027. This decade's redefinition of national politics has been the most durable in our history. The theme of politics, economy. Thirty-five years after the reform-led boom, fears and doubts over opening up continue, even as we celebrate our successes.

The strength of *India Today*, the institution, comes from having become a fair, opportunity-laden mercitocracy. Unforgiving values, brutal sometimes. But if you had the hunger, diligence, talent, and also a thick skin, nothing — and nobody



FIRST PERSON  
SECOND DRAFT  
SHEKHAR GUPTA

# Is Brand Shubman bruised or ruptured?



YES, BUT...  
SANDEEP GOYAL

Three to four years ago, we approached Shubman Gill for an endorsement deal. His contract, even back then, had a clause that specifically stated that if he were to be named India captain, his fees would go up significantly during the agreed contract period. Having seen, and signed, tens of celebrity contracts over the years, the clause seemed odd and surprising and unusual. One was not sure if it signalled genuine self-belief and self-confidence, or whether Gill (and his handlers) had got a bit too influenced and carried away by all the media hype surrounding him as the next big thing after Virat Kohli.

But Brand Shubman Gill recently took a severe hit when he got dropped from India's T20 World Cup squad due to a significant slump in form in T20 Internationals, scoring only 291 runs in 15 innings in 2025 with-

out a 50 (averaging 24.25, strike rate 137.26, highest score 47). The selectors prioritised explosive openers and wicket-keepers like Sanju Samson and Ishan Kishan, viewing Gill as an anchor struggling for runs in a format demanding higher strike rates, despite his proven quality in Tests and ODIs.

Many in the brand world saw that as a black swan event — a superstar cricketer getting dropped from the India team has been pretty rare. Calls to at least three of Gill's current endorsement clients evinced one common response: "Total surprise" — with dollops of disbelief. Does that put his continuity as brand ambassador at risk, we asked. No, not really they all said in near unison. "It is a passing phase." "He is a run machine; poor form is just temporary." "He is only 26." "He is still captain in other formats."

The vote of confidence in Gill was inspiring and reassuring. But we still asked the Indian Institute of Human Brands (IIHB) to run a small panel with other advertisers that have hired celebrities, and ask: "What would you do if your celebrity falls off the cliff? The responses were pretty revealing.

"We have Akshay Kumar. He's had a string of flops — *Mission Raniganj*, *Bade Miyan Chote Miyan*, *Sarfira*, *Khel Khel Mein*, *Selfie* ... though *OMG 2* and *Sky Force* were good. But all that still doesn't impact his fan following. We will continue with him. With celebs you win some, you lose some. You have to factor all that in when signing up."

"We signed Ranveer in 2020. 83 was a lukewarm success. Then his *Cirkus* was a flop in 2022. *Jayeshbhai Jordaar* was a disaster the same year. But then *Rocky and Rani* did well in 2023. In 2024, he had no release. And then finally *Dhurandhar* has been thunderous and rewarded our patience in sticking by him."

"Deepika has been in pregnancy for a while. She has been dropped from ODIs and Tests in 2025-2006, though he made strong comebacks later. In any case, brand endorsements were not such a big issue back then."

Gill may be unscathed as of now, and advertisers may be claiming that they are impervious to star performance, but one can be mighty sure that going forward more and more contracts will have some empirical metrics built-in on career trajectory. Both ups and downs. There is not much choice — both for corporate governance and consumer choice.

For now, Brand Shubman Gill is bruised, not ruptured. May the bruise heal quickly too.

The author is chairman of Redifusion

# TV at 100: What's next?

## EYE CULTURE

ATANU BISWAS

Aisha Gaban, an AI news anchor, made her debut on Channel 4 in the United Kingdom this October, saying, "In a British TV first, I'm an AI presenter... I don't exist... My image and voice were generated using AI." AI anchors and news presenters, Lisa or Sana, AI Krish or AI Kaur, are, however, already quite widespread today.

Since Scottish inventor John Baird used his mechanical "television," which projected images of moving objects onto a screen, to give the world's first public demonstration of a true, functional television system in London in January 1926, television has changed significantly. From cumbersome mechanical systems to modern digital streaming, a specialised technology transformed into a worldwide force influencing culture, entertainment, and information.

In *Radio News* magazine's May 1925 issue, science fiction icon and tech enthusiast Hugo Gernsback made some amazing predictions about television: "In 1935, we shall have radio television... An explorer will take along with him a portable radio station and he will be able to give a lecture right on the spot in the jungle in darkest Africa or up in the unexplored regions — if such there be at that time — of the Amazon." Crucially, even in the realm of sci-fi, Gernsback anticipated that this new technology would be utilised for more than just broadcasting, although it would take decades for his vision of point-to-point communica-

tion to come to pass.

From the grainy black-and-white images of early broadcasts to the ultra-high-definition, live-streamed spectacles of today, television has united billions of people across countries and cultures to create shared global experiences, in addition to providing entertainment. It has the wonderful ability to broadcast live events right into our living rooms, allowing us to watch history as it happens. In 1969, some 650 million people saw the Apollo 11 moon landing live. In 1981, approximately 750 million people watched Prince Charles and Lady Diana Spencer's wedding live, and in 1997, between 2 and 2.5 billion people watched Diana's funeral. Approximately one billion people watched the 2010 rescue of the Chilean miners live. And for the 2022 FIFA World Cup Final, there were approximately 1.5 billion TV spectators. There's little doubt that these and many such incidents had a significant social impact. For instance, the 1960 Kennedy-Nixon presidential debate, anticipated by millions, saw seventy million Americans watched the debate in real time, turning politics into an electronic spectator sport.

Television was initially widely viewed as "seeing by wirelessly." Nevertheless, the sci-fi element has never truly been erased. Sci-fi has frequently foreseen the development of television, anticipating ideas such as reality TV (*The Truman Show*), touchscreen interfaces (*Star Trek*), video calls (*Blade Runner*), tablets (*2001: A Space Odyssey*), TV as surveillance to examine themes of control, privacy, and power with the viewer as watched (*The Twi-*

light Zone), and even AI-driven content, though frequently exaggerating or emphasising social impacts (like *Black Mirror*'s cautionary tales).

In the end, television aims to give us the impression that we are in a different location, making it appear as though we are actually there witnessing a story unfold. It was referred to as a "psychologically ideal theatre" by renowned early television and film producer Dallas Bower. In his 1936 book *Plan for Cinema*, Bower explored ambitious 3D projections. In 1960, Pye Ltd even created a mock-up of these for these televisions for an exhibition. Is it what lies ahead? Or is customised watching, immersive virtual reality, augmented reality experiences, and AI-driven content the more appealing future? Ashley Highfield, the BBC's director of new media, noted as early as 2006 that "if we want to unlock the archive and enable people to search by programme or theme, then we are going to have to have awesome metadata." AI now improves personalisation by producing insightful search results and recommendations. A "choose-your-own-reality" headset to game consoles, TV's purpose to inform, entertain, and connect is being reimagined as an interactive, data-rich ecosystem.

One hundred years ago, Baird could hardly have imagined the vast potential and diversity of media that television encompasses in the 21st century, from smart TVs to phone screens, virtual reality headsets to game consoles, TV's purpose to inform, entertain, and connect is being reimagined as an interactive, data-rich ecosystem.

The author is professor of statistics, Indian Statistical Institute, Kolkata





# The Smart Investor

## STREET VIEW

“WHAT WE ARE SEEING TODAY IS A CONTINUATION OF THE RUN HIGHER IN EQUITIES, WITH AI AND TECH AGAIN AT THE FOREFRONT”

Tim Waterer  
Chief Market Analyst, KCM Trade



## IFSCA seeks vast changes to develop commodity trading hub at GIFT-IFSC

Proposed changes to bring commodity markets within unified regulatory framework

KHUSHBOO TIWARI  
Mumbai, 2 January

As India looks to reclaim ground in commodity trading, the International Financial Services Centres Authority (IFSCA) has sought a series of regulatory changes from the government to deepen commodity trading and participation at GIFT-IFSC.

The proposals, drawn from an earlier report submitted by an expert committee, are aimed at positioning the Gujarat-based financial hub as a global centre for commodity trading. A central recommendation is to notify commodity trading as a “financial product” under the IFSCA Act, alongside classifying warehousing as the commodity broking as “financial services”.

According to the Authority, this change would bring commodity markets within a unified regulatory framework. “Its central recommendation — to notify commodities and commodity derivatives as financial products under the IFSCA Act — would enable a unified, single-regulator framework covering exchange-traded, over-the-counter (OTC), and structured commodity products. This reduces regulatory fragmentation and improves capital efficiency compared to other IFSCs,” said Sanjay Kaul, managing director (MD) and group chief executive officer (CEO) of GIFT City.

### Key takeaways

- Seeks to notify commodity trading contracts as “financial products”, classify warehousing and commodity broking as “financial services”
- Powers to notify the list of commodities on which derivatives can be issued
- Move expected to help in expanding the permissible contracts
- Broader definition of commodity, taxation incentives also recommended

The committee has also suggested amending regulations to empower IFSCA to notify the list of commodities on which derivatives can be issued, thereby expanding the universe of permissible contracts. Currently, the list comprises 104 commodities, which, the committee noted, carry ambiguity around the permissibility of issuing derivatives. Another key proposal is to adopt a broader definition of commodities by moving to a “negative list” approach — allowing all commodities for trading unless explicitly prohibited. “The committee also proposed development of internationally bench-

ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA



marked, cash-settled and deliverable commodity derivatives, allowing GIFT-IFSC to evolve into a price-discovery and hedging hub for commodities where India has natural economic linkages. Further, enabling OTF commodity derivatives, commodity-linked notes, indices, and futures with central clearing and netting would attract global banks, trading houses, and asset managers,” Kaul added.

Industry experts, however, pointed out that implementing these recommendations would require approvals from multiple ministries and extensive inter-departmental consultations.

Units operating in IFSCs are treated as foreign entities under Foreign Exchange Management Act, but remain subject to the Foreign Trade (Development & Regulation) Act, 1992, and the Foreign Trade Policy administered by the Directorate General of Foreign Trade. The report also recommended taxation incentives and allowing IFSC banks to undertake commodity trading as priority areas. It noted a steady migration of major Indian commodity traders to hubs such as Dubai, Singapore, and Hong Kong, citing easier access to credit, seamless banking, and more favourable regulatory regimes.

## Sebi working on tech road map for stock exchanges, other MIIs

KHUSHBOO TIWARI  
Mumbai, 2 January

The Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi) is planning a working group to develop a technology road map for market infrastructure institutions (MIIs) such as stock exchanges, clearing corporations, and depositories, Chairman Tuhin Kant Pandey said on Friday.

Speaking at the celebrations of 40 years of Sensx, Pandey further detailed plans of the market regulator to develop artificial intelligence (AI) tools for supervision.

“Sebi is in the process of constituting a working group to develop a technology road map for MIIs. This road map will provide the MIIs a structure, five-year and 10-year technology vision for the securities market ecosystem,” said Pandey.

On strengthening MIIs, the Sebi chairman called for investments in technology, risk management, and cyber resilience to match with the rapidly evolving market ecosystem. “The next phase of market development will be defined not just by scale but by quality and sophistication,” said Pandey, emphasising on investor protection along with innovation.

The Sebi chairman also detailed technology-driven measures taken by the regulator such as

AI-powered market surveillance system to detect fraudsters, AI-driven advertisement viewer to monitor and analyse advertisements by asset management companies, and tools to monitor disclosures by listed entities.

“AI-driven inspection tool is currently under development to strengthen risk-based supervision of regulated entities. This tool will analyse cyber audit reports, identify control gaps, and classify entities based on their risk exposure, thereby enhancing supervisory effectiveness,” said Pandey. On the journey of Sensx, the Sebi chairman said: “Over the last four decades, the Sensx has stood the test of time as a robust market indicator, mirroring India’s economic transformation and the growing maturity of our capital markets. As India liberalised and integrated with global markets, the index evolved alongside the economy.”

He added that the changing composition of the index has reflected the rise of private enterprises, shifts from traditional industries to services, finance and technology, and deeper linkages between domestic markets and global capital.



“OVER THE LAST FOUR DECADES, THE SENSX HAS STOOD THE TEST OF TIME AS A ROBUST MARKET INDICATOR, MIRRORING INDIA’S ECONOMIC TRANSFORMATION AND THE GROWING MATURITY OF OUR CAPITAL MARKETS”

Tuhin Kant Pandey, chairman, Sebi

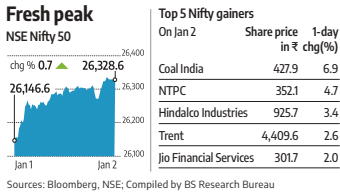
## Nifty hits new high amid hopes of earnings revival

SUNDAR SETHURAMAN  
Mumbai, 2 January

Indian equities gained, and the benchmark Nifty hit new high amid gains in other peer indices and hopes of corporate earnings revival for the December quarter. The benchmark Nifty ended the session at 26,329.62, up 182 points or 0.7 per cent. The 50-share benchmark hit a new high on both the closing and intraday basis.

Sensex, meanwhile, ended the session at 85,762, a gain of 573 points or 0.7 per cent. For the week, Sensx gained 0.9 per cent and Nifty 1.1 per cent.

The UK’s FTSE 100, Singapore’s Straits Times Index, and South Korea’s Kospi were among the other major indices that set new intraday records on Friday. Investors are hoping that measures such as the rationalisation of the goods and services tax and the Reserve Bank of India’s rate cuts will be reflected in better corporate earnings for the



## OUT OF LINE

ON ARTISTIC TRANSGRESSION AND URBAN CHAOS



**Anish Gawande**  
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# Speed cannot come at the cost of dignity

Why Dabbawalas teach us what the gig economy has forgotten

In Mumbai, efficiency is not measured in minutes but in trust and dignity. The city's famous Dabbawalas — an almost 125-year-old network of lunchbox delivery workers — have been doing something simple and regular every day: Picking up home-cooked meals, carrying them by hand, bicycle and train, and delivering them to offices across the metropolis before lunch. They weave through crowds with precision that has been studied by business schools and admired globally, moving roughly 200,000 meals each day with an error rate so low it's been likened to Six Sigma logistics despite using little more than codes, bicycles and railway cars.

Their work teaches us something profound about Mumbai: That delivery need not be dehumanising. It is built on personal relationships; Dabbawalas are known by customers who trust them with food, with time, and with care. In a city that prizes speed, they remind us that service and dignity can coexist.

So when Zomato, Swiggy and other quick-delivery platforms faced a nationwide strike by gig workers on New Year's Eve, it illuminated a tension at the heart of our modern economy, between rapid convenience and the value of human labour.

Trade groups including the Mangana Gig and Platform Workers' Union and the Indian Federation of App-Based Transport Workers (IFAT) had called for a strike protesting declining pay and poor



One model treats labour with dignity, the other thinks it is something to be exploited

working conditions. These workers argued that base pay per delivery has fallen sharply, leaving many dependent on unpredictable incentives just to make ends meet, even as platforms tout "lightning fast" deliveries.

The companies responded by



raising incentives for a single night — offering Rs 120-Rs 150 per order on peak hours and waiving penalties on cancellations. Swiggy and Zomato claimed this ensured continuity of service during a high-demand period, and their CEO boasted on social platforms about

record order fulfilment — millions of orders delivered on New Year's Eve. Yet this fleeting uptick in pay exposed a deeper reality: A business model built on ever-faster delivery shrinks the worker's share while expanding the platform's reach.

Here is where Mumbai's Dabbawala ethos — that work should be humane — stands in stark contrast. Dabbawalas operate within a cooperative structure with rules and collective support. They have long fought for rights without abandoning dignity, forging relationships with train authorities for travel rights and organising themselves for mutual benefit. Their identity is not an algorithm, but a community bonded by shared purpose.

I saw this up close growing up in Mumbai. I used to watch the dabbawalas moving through the local trains in their white Gandhi caps, a reassuring, human network threading the city together. I remember Maharashtra's government granting them special passes to use local transport — a small but symbolic recognition that their role in the city's life mattered. That dignity was part of the deal.

Contrast that with the plight of app-based delivery partners. Most are classified as "independent contractors", a status that excludes them from basic labour protections such as minimum wage guarantees, paid leave, insurance and formal grievance mechanisms. Algorithms — not managers — set their pay and work expectations, often with little transparency and no human recourse if something goes wrong.

This is not just a local issue. Globally, gig workers face similar conditions: Unstable earnings, lack of safety benefits, opaque performance metrics, and the constant threat of deactivation without appeal. Researchers and human-rights advocates have documented these patterns and warned that without protections, workers in

these economies are left exposed and voiceless.

None of this was lost on me last New Year's Eve. I had planned ahead for the celebrations — bought supplies early, prepped food, and hosted a houseful of friends without turning to a single "quick delivery" order. It was slower, yes, but it felt more human. It reminded me of an older Mumbai where anticipation and effort were part of the joy, not an inconvenience to be eliminated.

The strikes fizzled partly because incentives diluted participation this time, but the grievances remain. Gig work is projected to grow rapidly in India, with tens of millions of workers likely to be engaged in the platforms by the end of the decade. That scale demands systemic responses — not band-aid bonuses on festive nights.

We must rethink how we value work that is essential to modern life. It is no longer sufficient to assume that convenience is an unquestionable good. Speed cannot come at the cost of dignity. Workers who deliver groceries, meals and essentials deserve protections that ensure fairness, safety, and respect.

Regulation must protect rights without stifling opportunity. Platforms should enable social security, insurance, minimum earning standards, grievance mechanisms, and the ability to organise collectively. And consumers should recognise that a Rs 10 or Rs 15 delivery is not a trivial number when a human being bears the cost.

Mumbai's dabbawalas remind us that meaningful work builds connections and trust. As we embrace technological convenience, we must carry forward that human dimension — where work is not just done quickly, but done with care, respect and dignity. Only then can our cities and economies truly prosper.

Anish Gawande  
 writer and translator

## THE PARENT PLAYBOOK

STRATEGIES FOR GROWING UP, TOGETHER



**Piya Marker**  
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# Ultimate parenting resolutions for the new year

Every year we make resolutions: "I will not yell", "I will be more present", "I will put my phone down"... and then a week into the new year, life starts to happen again. This year try these, and by the end of 2026 you will never need to keep making parenting resolutions. I resolve to be calmer (not all the time because I'm only human). And because I understand that I cannot be calm and regulated all the time, I resolve to understand that my child cannot be calm and regulated all the time.

It is OK for us both to have moments of dysregulation: Calm parenting is not about never getting

angry; it is about the ability to return to calm faster.

I resolve to apologise when I mess up (and you will because you're not an AI-generated parent): Many of us were raised to believe that authority means never having to admit fault. Always remember that respect grows when accountability is visible.

I resolve to listen more and lecture less: When children have the space to share, they automatically argue less, communicate more and trust deeper. Try to listen before you dive in to fix. What we do, we do out of love, so try to invest time being curious about how your child

thinks, how they perceive situations and what their approach is to problem solving. After you listen, guide if you feel they need it.

I resolve to stop taking my child's behaviour personally: Don't parent from ego and insecurity. Remember, your child's behaviour is simply their way of communicating. It's not targeted at disrespecting you. The faster we realise this, the better equipped we are to effectively redirect behaviour that is possibly disrespectful, inappropriate or thoughtless without getting worked up or our egos hurt.

I resolve to take care of myself (without guilt): A burnt-out parent,

an unhappy parent, a dissatisfied parent, an overwhelmed parent can't parent well. So, take care of yourself so that you can pour into your child only the best of you. Self-care is not indulgence; it is a responsibility toward yourself and your child.

I resolve to focus on long-term values not short-term wins: Raising compliant kids is easy, raising kids who do the right thing when no one is looking, who are good people, honest and hardworking — that is the ultimate win in parenting.

I resolve to measure success differently: Successful parenting is not indicated by your child's grades, the

medals and the trophies. It's measured by how safe they feel with us, they can be good friends, honest workers, kind people and happy human beings.

Parenting will have its ups and downs: Don't aim for perfection, aim for progress and always notice the little wins. Some days you will nail it, others you will fail. Both matter. Remember that finally the most important resolution is to keep showing up, keep learning, keep repairing and keep loving. And that is more than enough.

Piya Marker is a parent coach and special educator



EDITORIAL

Bangladesh at an inflection point

Carrying the burden of a turbulent history since its birth, Bangladesh is now at an inflection point. The death of Khaleda Zia, the former Prime Minister who played a key role in the country's politics for over three decades, will cast a shadow on the national elections, slated for February 12. For the first time, neither of the rival begums — Zia and the ousted Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, now in exile in India — will be around for the elections, which are being held amid prolonged political turmoil and the rise of Islamist hardliners. However, their political legacies will shape the future of a nation that stands on the precipice of major transformation. Khaleda Zia's son and acting chairman of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), Tarique Rahman, who returned to the country last week from his self-imposed exile in London for 17 years, will lead the party to the polls. It is a foregone conclusion that he will take over the reins of the country because Hasina's Awami League party has been barred from contesting the elections. Given the BNP's cosy political equation with extremist Islamist groups in the past, it remains to be seen how Rahman would calibrate his party's stand on the issue, as it would determine the upcoming regime's policy towards India. It was during Begum Zia's tenure as Prime Minister between 2001 and 2008 that anti-India terrorist outfits and insurgent groups targeting India's Northeast found political space and legitimacy in Bangladesh. The BNP had joined hands with the Islamist Jamaat-e-Islami. This period was marked by strained bilateral ties, a sharp contrast to the warming of relations after Hasina's return to power in 2008, when Dhaka cracked down on such groups. After the ouster of Hasina, following massive student protests and the subsequent strife, Dhaka's relations with New Delhi have nosedived. Systematic attacks on minorities and the growing anti-India rhetoric have further worsened the situation. The recent lynching of a Hindu worker, Dipu Chandra Das, in Mymensingh had raised serious concerns over the safety of minorities in the country. The incident was a grim indicator of how rapidly the country is sliding into mob rule under the watch of an unelected interim dispensation. Over 2,900 incidents of violence against minorities have been documented by independent sources during the tenure of the interim government. The unfolding developments in Bangladesh are bound to have security implications for India. By sending External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar to attend Khaleda Zia's funeral, New Delhi signalled an outreach to the new political establishment in Dhaka. A stable and peaceful Bangladesh is in the best interests of India. Post-poll developments and policies of the new regime in Bangladesh would be keenly watched by New Delhi before resetting the terms of bilateral engagement. In the meantime, India needs to keep the communication channels open.

How India's stock market learned to modernize itself

A dil Rustomjee's "Running Behind Lakshmi" is a sweeping narrative of how India's stock market slowly learned to modernize itself. Rather than presenting market evolution as a neat sequence of reforms, the book portrays advancement as a messy, uneven process shaped by global shocks, political hesitation, technological leaps and repeated crises. The result is a richly textured account of how an informal trading culture gradually transformed into a structured, technology-driven financial system. Rustomjee begins with the earliest phase of Indian stock trading, when markets operated more on personal relationships than formal rules. Transactions under banyan trees in Bombay reflected a system built on trust, reputation and proximity. This stage, the author suggests, was crucial—it created a risk-taking culture but lacked the institutional strength needed for scale. As global forces like the American Civil War triggered cotton booms and speculative frenzies, the limitations of these informal markets became clear, pushing traders toward more organized exchanges. The book then shows how advancement stalled after Independence. The Nehruvian economic model, suspicious of private capital, restricted the role of markets. Rustomjee describes this period as one where the stock market survived but did not thrive. Regulations were heavy, participation was narrow, and innovation was minimal. Yet this stagnation, the author argues, was not wasted time; it preserved the market infrastructure while exposing the costs of sidelining capital markets in a growing economy. A major shift in the narrative comes with liberalization. Rustomjee treats the 1990s not merely as a policy turning point



but as a cultural transformation. The creation of the National Stock Exchange marks a decisive break from closed, opaque trading practices. Electronic trading, screen-based price discovery, and nationwide access fundamentally altered who could participate in the market. Advancement here is shown as both technological and psychological—investors begin to trust

systems more than individuals. One of the book's strongest contributions is its focus on institutions. Rustomjee details how dematerialization of shares, faster settlement cycles, and the strengthening of regulatory bodies gradually reduced friction and fraud. Market scandals, particularly episodes of manipulation, are framed not as derailments but as stress tests. Each

crisis exposes weaknesses, leading to tighter oversight and stronger frameworks. In this sense, advancement is depicted as reactive, built through correction rather than ideal planning. "Running Behind Lakshmi" frames the advancement of India's stock market as a reflection of India's broader economic journey—slow to trust markets, cautious in reform, but capable of rapid

transformation once momentum builds. Rustomjee's detailed historical storytelling makes it clear that today's sophisticated financial ecosystem is the product of decades of learning, failure, and institutional evolution. The book stands as both a history of markets and a reminder that progress in finance, like progress in nations, is never linear.

Russia shares evidence with US after alleged drone attack on Putin's Novgorod residence



Days after Russia alleged that Ukraine targeted President Vladimir Putin's official residence in a drone attack, Russian authorities on Thursday said they had shared what they described as evidence related to the incident with the United States, Anadolu Agency reported. The drone strike earlier this week targeted the presidential residence located in the Novgorod region. Moscow has blamed Ukraine for the attack. The Russian Defence Ministry released a video on Telegram showing a meeting between Igor Kostyukov, Chief of the Main Intelligence Directorate of the Russian

General Staff, and a representative from the US military attaché office in Moscow. The meeting was held to present materials that Russia claims are linked to the alleged drone strike. "I am Igor Kostyukov, chief of the Main Intelligence Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Russia. I have invited you for an important matter. I would like to inform you that we have found the debris of unmanned aerial vehicles involved in this attack," Kostyukov said while opening the meeting, as seen in the video. During the meeting, Kostyukov displayed a device which he said was recovered from one of the drones. He

claimed that several drones shot down during the incident had their navigation systems largely intact. "In several of these drones, the navigation systems are well-preserved and technically functional. The decoding of the content of the memory of the navigation controllers of these drones, carried out by specialists of the Russian special services, unequivocally and accurately confirmed that the target of the attack was the complex of buildings of the residence of the President of the Russian Federation in the Novgorod region," he said, quoted by Anadolu Agency. Kostyukov later handed over the device to the US military representative, he said. "We want to hand over this controller and the description of this controller made by our specialists to you. We believe that this step will help to remove all questions and contribute to the establishment of the truth. "Earlier, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov had said that Ukraine carried out a large-scale drone attack involving 91 drones on the night of December 29. He claimed all drones were intercepted and destroyed, and that there were no casualties or damage reported from falling debris, TASS reported. According to TASS, Lavrov confirmed that all drones were successfully intercepted and destroyed, with no casualties or property damage reported.

I&B Ministry denies ordering removal of 'Baloch' word in Dhurandhar

The Ministry of Information and Broadcasting on Thursday dismissed media reports suggesting it had directed the makers of "Dhurandhar" to remove the word 'Baloch' from the film, clarifying that no such orders were issued and that the film's producer had approached the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC) seeking certain changes in the revised version of the movie. Helmed by Aditya Dutt, the film features Ranveer Singh and Alkaayee Khanna in pivotal roles, and centres on a gripping narrative involving four of Pakistan's most notorious militants. "Dhurandhar" delves into the country's



intricate social and ethnic fabric, using a mix of real events and fictionalised storytelling to probe how extremist networks and state structures collide. The film portrays Khanna in the role of Rehman Daktai, a character shown to be of Baloch heritage and hailed as Sher-e-Baloch. The film also showcases Baloch supplying weapons to Daktai who he in turn sells to the ISI for terror attacks on India.

The movie has drawn a connection between the supplied weapons and the 26/11 Mumbai attacks carried out in India. Speaking with the UMI, a source in the ministry stated that the changes in the revised version of the film were proposed by the applicants/producers themselves and were being examined by the CBFC under the routine certification process prescribed in the Cinematograph Act and Rules. "The revisions were permitted in accordance with CBFC guidelines, which require that visuals or words not presented. The process was carried out as per Rule 31," the source added. "It was learnt that there were objections from the Baloch community who were being shown in a negative light in the first edition of the movie. Fearing backlash, the producers approached the body for a revised edition of the film with cuts," the source revealed. The revised version of the film was screened nationwide on Thursday. According to the reports, theatres across the country received an e-mail from the distributors on Wednesday stating that they were replacing the Digital Cinema Package (DCP) of the film. "The reason for the change is that the subtitles have muted two words and changed a dialogue in the film, as per the directives received from the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting of India. The cinemas were requested to download the new content and play the revised version of the film from January 1, 2026," the reports claimed further.

POEMS

An Owl (in Memory of Gil)

Owl small be enough

The child for all his feathers was a cold.

Oh wow the owl.

The poem the vowels

The owl, look its vowels

That branch for you

Owl, are you an armature vector

And a large step for mankind?

Owl astronaut burgeoning owl is a gift

You give to me give to you

Terrible other things happen.

We stay on our branch.

A hundred eyes

Two will do

By David Shapiro

Eating more vitamin C can physically change your skin: Study

Scientists discovered that vitamin C from food travels through the bloodstream into every layer of the skin, boosting collagen and skin renewal. People who ate two vitamin C-packed kiwifruit daily showed thicker, healthier skin. The findings suggest glowing skin really does start from within. Scientists at the University of Otago, Faculty of Medicine Christchurch (Otago), have identified a direct connection between how much vitamin C people eat and how well their skin produces collagen and renews itself. The findings show that skin health responds measurably to dietary vitamin C, not just topical treatments. Published in the Journal of Investigative Dermatology, the research found that vitamin C levels in the skin mirror levels in the blood (plasma). Increasing intake through vitamin C-rich foods was shown to raise both blood and skin concentrations. Eating Vitamin

C Raises Skin Levels and Thickness The study followed 24 healthy adults in Aotearoa New Zealand and Germany. Participants who raised their plasma vitamin C levels by eating two vitamin C rich SunGoldTM kiwifruit each day showed a clear increase in vitamin C within their skin. This increase was associated with thicker skin (collagen production) and greater renewal of the outer skin layer. Lead author Professor Margreet Vissers from Matala Hoara – Centre for Redox Biology and Medicine within the Department of Pathology and Molecular Medicine described the results as striking. The strength of the association between skin thickness and vitamin C intake is "compelling," she explained. Vitamin C Moves From Blood to Skin According to Professor Vissers, the relationship between blood vitamin C and skin vitamin C stood out compared to other organs. "We were surprised by the



tight correlation between plasma vitamin C levels and those in the skin this was much more marked than in any other organ we have investigated," she says. The research team also found that

vitamin C circulating in the bloodstream reaches every layer of the skin and supports healthier skin function. "We are the first to demonstrate that vitamin C in the blood circulation penetrates all

layers of the skin and is associated with improved skin function. I am very proud of my team and excited about what the data is telling us. "Why Diet Matters More Than Creams Professor Vissers says the

findings reinforce the idea that skin health begins internally, with nutrients delivered naturally through the bloodstream. Vitamin C is essential for collagen production, which is why it is commonly added to skincare products. However, vitamin C dissolves easily in water and does not absorb well through the outer skin barrier. The study showed that skin cells are highly efficient at absorbing vitamin C from the blood, with uptake into the outer epidermal layer appearing to be a priority. How the Study Was Conducted The research was funded by New Zealand company Zespri International, along with a University of Otago Research Grant, and included two phases. The first phase examined the relationship between plasma and skin vitamin C levels using healthy skin tissue from patients undergoing elective surgical procedures at Te Whaitu Ora Canterbury (with support from the

Otago campus's He Taonga Tapa Canterbury Cancer Society Tissue Bank). The second phase involved a controlled dietary intervention carried out in Christchurch and Germany. Each location included 12 healthy participants. Eight Weeks of Dietary Change Participants were asked to eat two Kiwi Gold kiwifruit daily for eight weeks. This provided the equivalent of 250 micrograms of vitamin C. All were instructed to consume two Kiwi Gold kiwifruit daily -- the equivalent of 250 micrograms of vitamin C -- for eight weeks. We then collected skin samples before and after the intervention, with separate analyses allowing us to look at the skin basal layers in Christchurch and the outer dermal skin layer and skin function tests in Germany. "Professor Vissers explains. German participants were recruited and tested by the SGS Institute Fresenius in Hamburg, which has the technical capability

to collect samples from the outer dermal skin layer (the blister 'roof'). The institute evaluated skin regeneration using ultrasound measurements of skin thickness, elastically UV protection and epidermal cell renewal to assess overall skin function. Clear Gains in Collagen and Skin Renewal One of the most significant findings was a measurable rise in skin thickness among participants, indicating increased collagen production along with faster regeneration of epidermal cells. "The other really substantial finding showed a significant increase in the participants' skin thickness levels, reflecting collagen production and an upsurge in the regeneration of their epidermal cells, in other words skin renewal," Professor Vissers says. Other Vitamin C Foods Likely Offer Similar Benefits SunGold kiwifruit was selected for the study because of its consistently high vitamin C content.