

# The Editorial Page

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~ FOUNDED BY ~

**RAMNATH GOENKA**  
IN 1932

BECAUSE THE TRUTH  
INVOLVES US ALL

## After CBAM, exporters need a helping hand

THE YEAR has started on a negative note for exporters in India as the European Union has extended its Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) to imports into the EU. The CBAM is a tax on companies, based on the level of carbon emissions generated during production. Companies that use cleaner and more efficient methods find themselves more favourably placed while those that don't do so get penalised. Starting 2026, Indian exporters selling steel and aluminium to the EU will come under the scope of the CBAM, and experts suggest that this will result in a hefty tax liability — between 16 per cent and 22 per cent — because Indian firms use processes that emit more carbon. For Indian exporters of steel and aluminium, the EU accounts for 22 per cent of overall exports. The net result will be that either firms take a hit on their profit margins matching the tax liability or risk losing out to exporters from other countries.

On the face of it, the move is designed to push the world towards cleaner production systems that cut down emissions and slow down climate change. While that is a worthy goal, penalties like the CBAM put an inordinate and unfair onus on developing countries such as India to reduce emissions. The CBAM essentially applies developed (read rich) country levels of carbon taxation on poorer countries. In fact, many have argued that the main purpose of the CBAM is not to achieve a reduction in carbon emissions but to work as a trade barrier. Studies by independent organisations such as the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development estimate that the EU's carbon tax would reduce global carbon emissions by merely 0.1 per cent even as it substantially impedes the exports of developing countries. Notably, when it comes to steel, steel and aluminium have become two of the most protected sectors across countries.

This is not a story about two specific sectors or just one trading partner. The CBAM rules cover other commodities as well, such as cement, fertilisers, electricity, hydrogen etc, with the provision to add other sectors in the future. The UK also plans to introduce a similar system of carbon taxation. Given that both carbon taxation (for addressing climate change) and trade protectionism (for boosting domestic industries) are global realities, the Indian government can ill afford to ignore this issue. It should provide help, be it in the form of seeking carve-outs in the ongoing negotiations for a free trade agreement with the EU, or in the shape of domestic policies that help Indian firms transition to cleaner technologies.

## On misuse of AI tools, Big Tech can't pass buck

THE NEW year began on a jarring note for many women on X (formerly Twitter) whose photographs were manipulated into sexually explicit images using the AI chatbot Grok. In the days since, the flood of objectionable content — including of minors — has done little to ease concerns about the misuse of this technology. Alarmed by the proliferation of non-consensual images, authorities worldwide have urged X to take action. These include the Government of India, which warned the company over its "serious failure" on enforcement of safeguards and about the violation of provisions of the IT Rules, 2021 and the Bharatya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita, 2023. X's response to the widespread outrage has been far from adequate. It posted on Sunday that "anyone using or prompting Grok to make illegal content will suffer the same consequences as if they upload illegal content", virtually shrugging off any responsibility for a tool that can so easily be turned into a weapon of harassment.

This is, however, a problem that goes beyond one company. The creation of non-consensual, sexually explicit imagery pre-dates AI, certainly. But what once required sophisticated software and at least some technical skill is now accomplished with a mere prompt. In October 2025, this newspaper reported on the existence of several accounts on X and Instagram that routinely share deepfake videos of celebrities, particularly women. In the case of Grok, which is integrated with X and therefore able to access information and share content in real time, the problem is magnified because of the ease with which such images can spread. While companies like Meta and Google have some form of AI labelling on their platforms, enforcement has been patchy. Most measures, including the taking down of flagged content, are reactive, and far too dependent on reporting by individual users.

AI can be transformative. Soon, it may even become indispensable. But the rapid scaling of technology must not come at the cost of users' safety and privacy. The "move fast and break things" attitude that has long characterised Silicon Valley is not compatible with the difficult task of building public trust. As it continues to seek "safe harbour protections", Big Tech must ensure that stronger safeguards are built into a technology that is rapidly getting integrated into the daily life of users. Until then, calls for legal immunity and public confidence will ring hollow.

## New colonial adventurer needs a licence

IN THE 18th and 19th centuries, collectors descended on artefacts from around the globe and took them home. Ancient sculptures from the acropolis of Athens became the Elgin Marbles. Often, it was an exercise in naked colonial violence, as in the looting of Tibet by the 1903-1904 Younghusband expedition. Even as the Great White Hunter stalled big game in the savannah, hunters of another sort plundered the tombs of the pharaohs. Today, there's still much diplomatic wrangling over many of these artefacts, still held in Western museums and private collections. But suddenly, there's a sense of *deja vu*. The British Museum is looking for a treasure hunter to recover stolen artefacts.

In 2023, it came to light that some 1,500 objects, including gold jewellery and semi-precious stones, had been stolen over the years, allegedly by the museum's former curator for Greece and Rome, with many items sold off online. Reportedly, the museum has recovered more than a third of these thanks to its staffers, but now it's seeking a dedicated hunter to track down the rest.

Just the job for an intrepid antiquarian or unslinking archaeologist? There's a caveat: The work will largely consist of contacting dealers, auction houses and collectors who might have clues about the items' whereabouts and making sure all the paperwork — such as export licences for recovered objects — is done. The treasure hunter will, alas, be more pen pusher than tomb raider. That's a bit of a comedown, as it should be. When there's a mounting backlash over colonial loot, perhaps it's also time to take the romantic sheen off the colonial adventurer.

## No red lines, a political free-for-all, in Maharashtra civic polls

THE BJP is in alliance with the Eknath Shinde-led Shiv Sena in city A, while the two parties are rivals in neighbouring city B, where Ajit Pawar's NCP has joined hands with rival Sharad Pawar's faction to challenge the BJP. Such is the political picture in Maharashtra ahead of elections to 29 municipal corporations to be held on January 15.

This is the second round of polls after smaller municipal councils elected their local representatives about two weeks ago. The current round will be followed by elections to zila parishads. Rightly dubbed "mini assembly elections", the urban body polls have revealed the ugly, unsavoury and unscrupulous aspects of Indian politics today. The absence of local elected bodies for the last six-seven years has also made the ongoing elections particularly appealing. The process has all the hallmarks of a third-grade Bollywood thriller. While elections are never simple due to the number of aspirants, what's happening in Maharashtra is simply unprecedented.

It's a free-for-all, literally. Except for the Congress, which has little stake in any of the battles, and the BJP, which aims to secure every election it participates in, every other party has partnered with every other party. It's political promiscuity at its best. Or, rather, at its worst. Maharashtra's three-party alliance government — comprising the BJP, Shinde's Shiv Sena and Ajit Pawar's NCP — hasn't prevented any of its constituents from seeking partners outside the alliance. It will require an exceptional exercise

of intelligence and memory to remember which parties are allied and which are against each other.

For example, Ajit Pawar's NCP is challenging the BJP's hegemony in Pune, though both parties are part of the ruling alliance. It was the BJP that helped Ajit step out of NCP founder Sharad Pawar's shadow. Ajit and his illustrious uncle were at loggerheads. Despite this, Ajit has sought Pawar Senior's help in challenging the BJP, which has publicly expressed regret for having an alliance with "Ajit dada". On the other hand, Ajit *dada* came out all guns blazing against the BJP for its "corrupt rule". Put simply, if A plus B equals C, in Maharashtra politics, B plus A could yield different results.

The equation between the BJP and its handpicked, home-grown Shiv Sena chief Shinde is similar. His party has allied with the BJP in Mumbai but is fighting against it in many other municipal bodies. In some municipal corporations, the SS-BJP are projecting themselves as the Mahayati (mega alliance) while elsewhere, they are at loggerheads.

This has triggered unprecedented political infidelity. Party hopping became so rampant that some candidates changed parties three times in one day. A case from Nashik in north Maharashtra is worth mentioning in this regard. Two local satraps loyal to the Uddhav Thackeray-led Shiv Sena celebrated the reunion of



GIRISH KUBER

the Thackeray brothers by publicly vowing to "drown the BJP in the Ganga". However, the very next day, they were found in the BJP camp supporting supporters that they would finish the Sena. The candidates are like their parties. No party has demonstrated any courage in rejecting such political promiscuity.

The BJP, which once flaunted the tagline "party with a difference", has been exceptionally welcoming. Its leadership in Maharashtra went overboard in accepting anyone from any party, depending on their winnability. In the bargain, it preferred strong local satraps from other parties while ignoring aspirants from within its ranks. Out of 29 municipal corporations going to the polls on the 15th, the BJP has fielded 337 candidates imported from other parties in 19 bodies. As a result of its leadership's eagerness to embrace defectors, the BJP faced unprecedented anger from its own cadres. In several cities, BJP offices were attacked and ransacked, and ministers' vehicles were blackened.

At one point, party officials responsible for distributing formal letters to official candidates had to flee as a large number of nomination hopefuls chased their vehicles. It's worth noting that there are history-sheets, habitual defectors and many with questionable reputations in the fray.

Equally, if not more concerning and shocking, is the complete absence of civic issues in the political conversation around the

municipal elections in one of the most urbanised states in the country. No single party or leader worth his/her salt is seen raising local issues that affect urban life. This is especially painful when haphazard, unplanned urbanisation has created cities with extremely poor living conditions. Even cities such as Mumbai, which had a touch of planning in the past, are showing signs of decay. This does not find mention in the high-voltage political drama being played out there.

The current election campaign also brings out another facet of Maharashtra's current political picture.

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## SC shift on stray dogs is welcome — and humane



RYAN LOBO

In his article ("To resolve the street dogs issue, use reason and compassion, not fear and cruelty", IE, January 3), D R Mehta uses misinformation under the guise of enlightened advocacy. Claiming to champion compassion, he ignores the fundamental rights violations and wildlife devastation caused by India's 80 million stray dogs. His defence of the Animal Control Rules — sterilise, release, and maintain strays on streets — worsens the problems he downplays.

Mehta questions the Supreme Court's "special attention" to stray dogs amid case backlog, implying bias. The Court is upholding Article 21, the right to life and a safe environment for India's citizens. Stray dogs bite millions annually, cause traffic accidents, deposit thousands of tons of pathogenic faeces daily, and spread diseases. This is a genuine public health and environmental emergency, not elitist hysteria. The SC has begun addressing it by mandating stray removal from public institutions and highways.

Mehta criticises the Court for issuing orders "without hearing the other side," parroting pro-stray lobbyists. But the Court need not consult NGO lawyers when safeguarding human rights at scale. Victims of mauling went unheard, too, yet Mehta ignores this. The issue is human health and safety, not animal rights. The Constitution grants no fundamental rights to animals (affirmed in the 2023 *Jallikattu* judgment) but to humans. Mehta absurdly elevates the Animal Welfare Board of India (AWBI) as the "executive authority", overriding the SC. This is legally baseless. The AWBI is merely an advisory body.

The Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act tasks the AWBI with ensuring unwanted animals are "destroyed" by local authorities when necessary. Section 11(3)(b) expressly excludes stray dog destruction from cruelty. Yet the AWBI has blocked such actions for decades, defying its own mandate. Mehta ignores this while championing ABC Rules that contradict over 60 laws (including municipal/panchayat acts) allowing stray dog removal/sterilisation.

Mehta invokes "compassion" as a fundamental duty and cites the Netherlands, but errs: Duties cannot override fundamental rights. The Netherlands manda-

torily imprisons all strays — with zero release and feeding. Its tiny stray population requires minimal euthanasia. Global success stories emphasise owned-dog sterilisation and impoundment/euthanasia for unwanted animals. Mehta's learning reveals a double standard: Developed nations impound and euthanise strays for safety, yet India is expected to show endless "compassion" by abandoning and maintaining dogs on streets via the ABC Rules, institutionalising homelessness and suffering for dogs, wildlife and humans.

Worst, Mehta repeats activist tropes: Sterilisation and feeding make strays "friendly," the poor "love" them, and critics are "elites." Yet the poor aren't protesting Supreme Court orders, hiring lawyers, or joining pro-stray protests. Instead, they're queuing at rabies clinics, dodging dogs on the roads, or grieving — like the elderly man in Bengaluru's Kodigehalli killed by strays released via the ABC Rules, after they killed a woman.

Mehta's "solution" — more ABC — ignores its failures. True compassion requires due constitutional action. Repeat the *ultra vires* ABC Rules and enact clear euthanasia protocols under Section 38(e), aligned with the AWBI's mandate, and more than 60 laws. Promote shelters to house unwanted animals and remove them from the streets as per the PCA Act/AWBI objectives. Impose a full ban on any public feeding to reduce territoriality, accidents, and bites. Authorise lethal measures by authorities and citizens in rural/wildlife areas — where strays threaten livestock or wildlife, as in most nations. Enforce pet licensing, leash laws, and owner liability to prevent pets from straying or being abandoned.

The solution to overcrowded shelters is humane euthanasia, or "compassion", constitutionally speaking — a quick end to unnecessary suffering. It is crucial to note that the PCA Act is against "unnecessary suffering" and not necessary suffering that may be caused out of human necessity or to protect human rights. Thus, butter chicken and euthanasia for unwanted dogs is legal. The Supreme Court's shift is welcome; full implementation is essential.

The writer is director, Humane Foundation for People and Animals

## To save the Aravallis, think like a mountain



GURUDAS NULKAR

THE ARAVALLI mountain range, an ancient geological formation that predates the Himalayas, is at the centre of a high-stakes legal and ecological battle. The hills have been subjected to intensive quarrying and mining in Rajasthan and Haryana, while construction and urban sprawl have shrunk them in the National Capital Region. Recently, the Supreme Court paused the controversial order identifying the mountains based on their height, which could have wiped out the legal protection of a large part of the range. However, the crisis persists. With over 1,200 active mining leases hollowing out hills, it is time our policymakers "think like a mountain" — a term coined by the ecologist Aldo Leopold.

In his classic, *A Sand County Almanac*, Leopold describes, how in his youth, hunting wolves was a celebrated sport — fewer wolves would mean more deer, a hunter's veritable paradise. On one such hunt, Leopold watched the "fierce green fire" in the wolf's eyes. It was then that realisation dawned upon him that the mountain did not agree with killing wolves. As more wolves are shot, the population of deer increases, and they strip the mountain of its vegetation. The over-grazed mountains lose their soil to erosion and, over time, face a total ecosystem collapse.

The current approach to the Aravalli hills mirrors Leopold's early mistake. Policymakers often fall into the trap of prioritising short-term objectives over long-term stability. The race for construction materials has

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To think like a mountain is to appreciate the profound interconnectedness of an ecosystem that is a result of evolutionary interdependence. The controversy over the 100-metre height rule is an example of short-termism. Defining a hill only by height is an oversimplification for the sake of convenience. The low-lying ridges outside the arbitrary height threshold are exposed to the risk of quarrying. Thankfully, the SC directed a new committee to study the Aravallis, stating that this definition might trigger quarrying in the ecologically sensitive areas. This leaves hope because decisions that have a long-term ecological impact must be based on interdisciplinary research.

To think like a mountain, policymakers must ignore administrative boundaries and treat the Aravalli range as a single system. District-wise mining plans must be replaced by a single management plan for sustainable mining that considers the integrity of the entire Aravalli ecosystem. Policies must value the work done in geological timescale. While forests can grow back in decades, a mountain range formed over millions of years is irreplaceable.

As Leopold's philosophy implies, prioritising for immediate gains often yields danger in the long run. If our leaders do not learn to think like the mountain, our future will be ecologically poor, and that would be most unfortunate for the people of a megadiverse country like India.

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## 40 YEARS AGO

January 7, 1986



## Vijay Mallya arrested

VIJAY MALLYA, chairman of the United Breweries group of companies, was arrested on arrival at Bangalore airport by ED officers for alleged gross violations under the Foreign Exchange Regulation Act.

Mallya, who arrived from Calcutta around 8 pm, walked into a trap laid by sleuths of the Enforcement Directorate, who were on his trail for the last two days.

## Vajpayee on Pakistan

ATAL BIHARI Vajpayee expressed concern over the Union government's policy towards Pakistan, especially when the neighbouring country was going ahead with its

nuclear programme. That the terrorists responsible for violence in Punjab were trained in Pakistan was an allegation government representatives themselves had levelled several times.

## Alibhai strategy

THE RULING Alibhai Dalai has devised a three-pronged strategy — political, administrative and religious — to fight the militants who plan to disrupt vehicular traffic in the state on January 10 and pre-empt by day the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabhandak Committee's "kar seva" of the Akal Takht on January 27. The strategy was the outcome of the collective call to the Barnala Government by a joint meeting of district Akali

jathedars, MLAs and MPs to take a bold stand and "defeat the nefarious designs of forces of disruption and destabilisation at this crucial hour of history".

## Shriram unit threatens closure

SHRIRAM FOOD and Fertilisers Industries has threatened closure and retrenchment of 700 workers from its full 1,400-strong workforce, in the event of being asked to shift out of its present premises into a more sparsely populated area, as recommended by the expert committee of the Supreme Court. The senior manager of the plant, Datta Roy, told newsmen that the company had implemented all but one recommendation of the Nilay Choudhary expert committee.



## The Donroe Doctrine and a dangerous new world



ILLUSTRATION: C.R. SASKARAN

AMITABH MATTOO

ODAY, VENEZUELA is more than a Latin American crisis. It has become a stage on which a new expression of American power is being articulated with unusual clarity. What is being called the "Donroe Doctrine" owes its name to two parents: The 19th-century "Monroe Doctrine" and the 21st-century worldview of Donald Trump. From President James Monroe, in 1823, came the assertion that the Western Hemisphere constitutes a special strategic space in which external powers have no legitimate role. From Trump in 2026 comes unapologetic primacy, readiness to use force, and the belief that the United States may not only intervene but also supervise political outcomes. This fusion produces the Donroe Doctrine: An explicit claim not just to influence, but to guardianship.

Three elements give this doctrine its distinctive character. The first is the reassertion of a sphere of influence. The Western Hemisphere is presented not simply as an area of primary concern, but as a privileged security space in which extra-regional actors are treated as intruders rather than ordinary diplomatic participants. Latin America becomes "our neighbourhood", external engagement is recast as trespass.

The second element is securitisation. It sees long-regarded as social or economic — migration, narcotics, organised crime and energy volatility — as redefined as national security threats. Once problems are narrated in these terms, coercive tools follow more readily. Boundaries blur between domestic governance in another state and US internal security. What was once a question of diplomacy or development is presented as a matter of homeland protection.

The third element is a shift in normative language. Democracy promotion, so prominent in the post-Cold War period, is no longer central. Stability, predictability and

control move to centre stage. In many ways, the "Donroe Doctrine" operationalises what the recent US National Security Strategy implied: Competition with major powers, control of strategic resources and the management of instability close to home will drive American behaviour.

The doctrine does not exist in the abstract. It is reflected in a willingness to claim oversight over political transitions and to blur the line between intervention and administration. Whether such ambitions result in sustained trusteeship or remain rhetorical is less important than the signal they transmit: That the US now reserves for itself a more explicit guardianship role in its hemisphere.

This shift carries serious implications for the international order. The first is the normalisation of spheres of influence. If major powers insist on special rights in their neighbourhoods, the framework of sovereign equality is weakened everywhere.

The second is legitimacy. Latin America is not a blank slate. It carries a long memory of external intervention and regime change. Any contemporary experiment in guardianship will inevitably be interpreted through that history. Force can alter governments; it rarely manufactures consent. The third is precedent. Once accepted on one region, doctrines of supervi-

Sovereignty and non-intervention have been central to Indian foreign policy, not out of sentimentalism but as practical safeguards for a post-colonial state

sion travel. Other powers will claim analogous rights in their own vicinity.

Venezuela's energy dimension intensifies the stakes. The country holds one of the world's largest proven oil reserves, and senior officials in Washington have spoken of a major role for American energy companies in revitalising its oil sector. For many observers in Latin America, this reinforces the charge of resource imperialism. The humanitarian burden is already immense; one of the largest displacement crises in recent history has reshaped politics far beyond Venezuela's borders. External stewardship may deepen internal polarisation if it is perceived as imposed rather than owned.

International law is directly implicated. However carefully framed, the military action and the idea of external oversight of governance strain core principles of the contemporary order of sovereign equality, non-intervention and the prohibition on the use of force except in narrowly defined circumstances. These are not abstract concerns. The UN Charter is built precisely on these pillars, limiting the use of force to self-defence or collective action authorised by the Security Council.

For India, the "Donroe Doctrine" poses dilemmas that cannot be addressed by slogans. The first concerns principle and precedent. Sovereignty and non-

intervention have been central to Indian foreign policy, not out of sentimentalism but as practical safeguards for a post-colonial state. A world relaxed about externally supervised transitions cannot automatically be assumed to serve India's long-term interests.

The second concerns partnership. A strong and enduring relationship with the United States is vital to India's interests. After all, India's convergence with the United States in the Indo-Pacific, technology, defence and maritime security is real and worth deepening. It reflects genuine alignment on many issues. Yet doctrines of guardianship underlie a familiar truth: American foreign policy is deeply shaped by domestic politics; tone and method can shift abruptly even when strategy remains constant. Partnerships must therefore co-exist with strategic autonomy and independence.

The third concerns identity and role. India is both an emerging great power in Asia and a principal voice of the Global South. These roles can pull policy in different directions. The challenge is to defend sovereign equality without theoretical moralism, and to pursue national interest without indifference to norms.

New Delhi's current approach, restrained, careful and measured, may be the right one. Silence in international politics is not always hesitation; it can be a strategy. By avoiding grandstanding, India has preserved the space for much-needed cooperation with the United States without endorsing the external management of another country's political future. But restraint should not become passivity. It should be matched by quiet diplomacy in support of regional mediation, humanitarian relief and economic stabilisation, and by a calm restatement in multilateral forums that guardianship carries long-term costs for the international system.

I still recall Hugo Chávez being welcomed like a rockstar at INU in 2005. Today, his successor may see little beyond a prison cell in New York. The arc of Latin American politics, as we know, has rarely been linear, and India must keep its balance.

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## Compassion for stray dogs reflects constitutional ethos



MADAN B LOKUR AND AMRITA NARLIKAR

THE SUPREME Court (SC) is the ultimate protector of our Constitution. Its decisions matter for all who live in its jurisdiction, and also internationally as India's power rises. The choice of *Vasudhaiva Kutum-bakam* (that the entire Earth — with all its human and more-than-human beings — forms one family) as the theme of its G20 presidency was a pioneering move, highlighting the importance of planetary rights. This is why the SC's *suo motu* writs with reference to stray animals matter more than ever.

The SC's motivation to balance public safety and animal welfare cannot be faulted. Accidents that result in suffering and fatal harm to both humans and strays should worry all of us. The pathway to hell, however, is often paved with good intentions, and we point to three serious risks that could follow from the rulings.

First, the SC's judgments make reference to a newspaper article's headline, "City bounded by strays, kids pay the price". Unfortunately, irrespective of the veracity of the reporting, such headlines tend to be misleading in the false binaries they create. As a polarising narrative gets picked up, crucial details get forgotten or are deliberately ignored. For instance, "kids pay the price" is, in fact, not a consequence of a city being "bounded" by strays; rather, fatalities and serious injuries occur because of the systemic failure of vaccination and sterilisation programmes. Such headlines also miss out on the other side of the story, which the defendants cannot utter because they are — literally — voiceless. Think of the countless acts of violence that are committed against animals, for which the penalty remains a meagre Rs 50. The SC's decision to use such a polarising headline as its "hook" risks exacerbating hate and violence against strays.

Second, as the rulings rightly note, the apparent conflict between humans and animals has arisen due to gross negligence and failure on the part of the authorities to implement ABC rules. What is needed is stringent action against municipal authorities that failed to do their statutory duty for over 20 years. But to now penalise stray animals for human failure, through incarceration and worse, is not justice. It is worth highlighting that stray dogs are territorial animals, often closely attached to their human feeders and friends. Relocating dogs from diverse spaces into small cages will result in grievous injuries.

Third, it is the credit of the Court that it recognises some of its positions. For instance, the ruling of August 22, 2025, recognised aspects of the "othering" such as referring to strays as a "menace" — are difficult to reverse. The Overton Window shifts, and animal-haters feel legitimised in taking vigilante actions against the voiceless. Some of the hate could be curbed if the SC were to issue firm rules — in the same words — against the abuse of animals by residents' associations, and also hold governmental bodies to account. A stay order on municipal corporations against the relocation of animals, until a solution that is "humane" for both humans and more-than-humans is found, would also help in reducing knee-jerk actions with irreversible consequences.

Finally, let it be thought that a humane solution is utopian, we stress that this is not the case. The Netherlands is the first country to have eliminated stray dogs, not by cruel methods of impounding and killing, but through strict implementation of animal welfare laws, encouragement of stray adoptions, and bans on puppy farms. Our neighbour, Bhutan, has become the first country in the world to have 100 percent sterilisation and vaccination of its stray dogs.

If others can do this, so can we. And indeed, so should we. For this is the country whose Constitution upholds compassion for all living creatures, and whose culture regards the dignity of all animals as sacred.

Lokur is a former judge of the supreme courts of India and Fiji, and is serving as chairperson, United Nations Internal Justice Council. Narlikar is honorary fellow of Darmi College, University of Cambridge, and distinguished fellow at the Australia-India Institute, University of Melbourne



SYED ATA HASNAIN

LT GEN Srinivas Kumar Sinha, known as Manmaya Sinha, belonged to a rare generation of Indian soldiers whose lives paralleled the making of the Republic. Born on January 7, 1926, he entered uniform as India transitioned from colonial rule to independence. A soldier, scholar, administrator, diplomat, and governor, Sinha represented a leadership tradition that valued intellect, cultural understanding, and moral confidence.

Sinha joined the Indian Army during the final phase of World War II and witnessed the upheavals of 1947 firsthand. His posting to the Military Operations Directorate during Partition and the tribal invasion of Jammu and Kashmir placed him at the centre of India's earliest security crisis. Kashmir remained a subject he understood deeply. His career spanned the full arc of soldiering. He commanded troops in the field, served in sensitive intelligence and staff roles, and rose to become Vice-Chief of the Army Staff. He also shaped minds as an instructor at the Infantry School and later at the Defence Services Staff College, Wellington, where he served with my father. Long before the term gained currency, Sinha embodied the scholar-warrior, treating history as an operational asset rather than an academic indulgence.

What set him apart was not merely erudition, but the ease with which he carried it. He could recall history, often linking present chal-

## A soldier, a scholar and a liberal

lenges to decisions taken decades earlier. I came to know him more closely years later, when I served first as Commander Uri Brigade and subsequently as General Officer Commanding Dagger Division at Baratulla during his tenure as Governor of J&K. In that role, Sinha was far more than a constitutional figurehead. He engaged deeply with the security situation and displayed an instinctive grasp of nuance.

In March 2005, I had the privilege of driving him to the Kaman Aman Setu on the Line of Control along the Uri-Muzaffarabad Road, where I briefed him on preparations for the opening of the Karvan-e-Aman bus service the following month. For Sinha, this was not a confidence-building measure but a strategic and civilisational moment. He understood that peace processes in Kashmir could not be sustained by force alone.

That instinct had revealed itself earlier, at a time when terrorism in the Valley was at its peak. Against prevailing caution, Sinha supported the organisation of a music festival on the banks of Dal Lake — a deliberate act of cultural assertion. The intent was clear: To signal solidarity with Kashmir's liberal traditions and deny radical elements a monopoly over public space and expression.

Sinha connected effortlessly across rank and regiment. I recall visiting a Gurkha unit with him along the LOC; what followed was

not an inspection but shared soldiering — Gurkha songs, laughter and rhythm. It was authenticity from an older tradition where command flowed from respect, not distance.

His engagement with the Kashmiri media was another lesson in leadership. The Valley's press, intellectually alert and relentlessly probing, unsettled many officials. He neither evaded questions nor sought to dominate the room. His knowledge and composure dissolved attempts at intellectual browbeating. The media recognised they were dealing with someone who could not be cornered and respected him. Senior officers shaped by prolonged counter-insurgency service often develop a distinctive capacity to manage complexity — balancing firmness with empathy, authority with restraint, and liberal values were the binding force.

After retiring from the Army, Sinha continued public service as Ambassador to Nepal, Governor of Assam and later Governor of Jammu and Kashmir. He also left behind books and columns reflecting lifelong engagement with India's strategic challenges. As India marks his birth centenary, S K Sinha epitomises this quality. Religion was never a divisor; professionalism and liberal values were the binding force.

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As India marks his birth centenary, S K Sinha epitomises this quality. Religion was never a divisor and it was not an ornament but a duty.

The writer is a former corps commander of the Srinagar-based 15 Corps and member of NDMA. Views are personal



SOURABH ROY

THE BOARD of Control for Cricket in India's (BCCI) decision to instruct Kolkata Knight Riders to release Mustafizur Rahman is not just a sporting controversy. By waiving cricket to signal political displeasure, the BCCI has weakened India's soft power in South Asia and narrowed one of the few remaining spaces for people-to-people engagement in a fragile region.

This is not to defend the Bangladeshi state or downplay the violence faced by minorities there. But targeting an individual cricketer, who has no control over state policy or law enforcement, is not accountable. It is coercion presented as moral action.

Kyamudin Ansari, Mumbai

## Expelling Mustafizur won't protect minorities in Bangladesh

India already faces a perception problem in its neighbourhood and is seen as a regional hegemon. For Dhaka, the Mustafizur episode is a reminder of the asymmetrical political power India wields in deciding who can play in the world's most lucrative cricket league.

For Bangladeshis, the symbolism is especially raw. Mustafizur is not just a cricketer; he is a national icon. They love seeing their players in the IPL, and when one represents Kolkata, the connection becomes personal. Language, culture and shared history bind the city to Bangladesh, making KKR a symbol of belonging. Removing him under political pressure is an emotional rupture.

India's experience with Pakistan offers a warning. Nearly a generation of Pakistanis have grown up without sustained sporting contact with Indian players. The result has not been moderation or reconciliation but

deeper alienation and radicalisation. It has hardened attitudes and increased India's long-term strategic risk.

Sidelining Bangladeshi players for political reasons risks repeating that mistake by letting resentment build among young Bangladeshis who see their heroes unfairly excluded. As that resentment deepens, minorities can become more vulnerable because anger rarely distinguishes between governments and citizens.

BCCI's sustained support for Afghanistan cricket through war and political upheaval shows that sport can be kept separate from politics when there is a will

will. In South Asian international relations, cricket boards are powerful non-state actors whose decisions resonate beyond the field.

This argument is not a call for silence or appeasement but a reminder that soft power works through attraction. Culture, cinema, language and cricket have shaped attitudes in this region more effectively. Kolkata, the IPL, Shah Rukh Khan and shared Bengali identity offer influence that arm-twisting measures cannot replicate. Forcing Mustafizur out of the IPL will not protect minorities or enhance India's moral standing, but cricket has often softened borders through informal and back-channel diplomacy when politics failed. Turning it into a political weapon is not strength. It is myopic.

The writer is a research fellow, Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy

## { OUR TAKE }

Looking beyond  
Trump's rhetoric

Hard-headed economic considerations should drive India's engagement with the US

**D**onald Trump has reiterated his tariff threat against India. The context is Russian oil. The fresh comments are as hypocritical as the additional tariffs were. Countries such as China do not face any such penalties. Trump's attitude to the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict itself is also whimsical, perhaps even ambivalent. His approach to the rest of the world, as the latest US intervention in Venezuela shows, is reminiscent of the Wild West, not the hegemon of a rules-based global order.

Where does all this leave India? What is the country's best response? There are no easy answers to this question. An amicable solution will require a pragmatic approach based on ground realities. Verbal provocations, unless they are matched by actual policy, should not be allowed to vitiate the ongoing economic dialogue over the trade deal in the works. This has to be driven by hard-headed economic considerations. Economically and strategically securing energy supplies has to be a part of this calculus.

The economic dialogue has to be conducted with the awareness that the US under Trump has made a decisive pivot from the days of a deep-rooted Indo-US strategic alliance. Trump is more transactional than value-based, and temperamental — sometimes deliberately so — than reasoned in his engagements. It will be difficult for countries to decipher the signal from the noise in dealings with him and his country.

Trump's mercurial and brazen approach is bound to create discord and a trust deficit in the world and eat into American power directly or indirectly. A transatlantic rupture, should he precipitate matters on things such as Greenland, could catalyse such a process. It is important for India to be invested in the cause of a rules-based order and keep multilateral engagement alive.

The three points flagged above may appear to be inconsistent with each other to some. There is a good reason to believe that the pursuit of one might need some compromise on the others in the short run. The only way this inconsistency can be ironed out is by adding to India's own economic and strategic prowess. Augmenting this will require radical and far-reaching reforms. India has done well on reforms in times of crises. There is good reason to treat Trump's threats and actions vis-à-vis India and the world at large as the latest one. In short, an internal focus on building a strong and prosperous India could well address several external challenges.

Ads in focus to keep  
junk diet under check

**T**here's a natal link between childhood/adolescent obesity and a range of diseases, including chronic conditions such as diabetes, endocrinological dysfunction, and sudden-onset life-threatening illnesses, in later life. So, government interventions to curb early-life obesity are central to national health strategies, especially in jurisdictions where the State funds health care entirely, or to a significant degree. It is against this backdrop that the UK has banned junk food advertisements from the online space and restricted their airing on television to only after 9 pm. The goal is to check their influence on children's dietary choices: Restricting the reach of commercials, some experts believe, can give a significant boost to healthy dietary choices and reduce the temptation to consume junk food.

The ad-controls follow a series of steps by the UK government to confront the country's childhood obesity crisis — prevalence of 22% among primary-age children — including higher taxes on high-sugar-content products and empowering local governments to bar junk food outlets near schools. India's situation may not seem as dire (NFHS-5 reported a prevalence of 3.4% among children under five years of age), but the trends are certainly worrying. Between the NFHS-3 (2005-06) and NFHS-5 (2019-20), under-five prevalence shot up by 12% and prevalence among adolescent girls and boys by 125% and 288%, respectively. Rising sales of ultra-processed food (a compounded annual growth rate of over 13% between 2011 and 2021), high-calorie/high-sugar foods likely explain these trends, too.

While India's food regulator has pushed for more direct and accessible labelling of nutritional value and ingredients of packaged foods, the government should consider more active interventions like the UK to induce healthy choices among the young. With a rising burden of lifestyle diseases, India will do well to remember the adage, "prevention is better than cure".

A seller-beware market  
for financial products

Instead of the current reactive strategy to address problems in the space, India needs to fundamentally fix the problem of toxic financial products and mis-selling

**T**he Financial Stability Report 2025 of the Reserve Bank of India has some damning evidence on the Indian insurance industry. Its data shows that commissions as a proportion of costs have been rising for both life and non-life for the private insurers. When matched with the growing evidence of mis-selling in life insurance and the unwillingness of health insurance to pay individual claims, it points to a broken marketplace. While the problem is acute in insurance, it is also true that some life products being sold in other parts of the retail market as well. The quick fix of banning a product or a distribution channel is not a long-term solution. India needs to be the first country to transition from a buyer-beware to a seller-beware market in retail finance. Only then will the household be a partner and not a victim of the financial sector.

*Caveat emptor*, or buyer beware, is the default rule in markets for goods and services. This places the burden on buyers to inspect goods and services

ahead of purchase. Consumer protections are built-in with regulations and disclosure. For example, a loaf of bread will have the ingredients and date of expiry printed on the packaging as the main disclosure, and the food regulator will certify that it is fit to eat. In such a market, where sales commissions are built into the price of the product, there is little conflict of interest at stake.

However, the buyer-beware premise breaks down completely in retail finance products and services. There are no protections for this.

One financial products are invisible and are described in the mind of the consumer by the seller. The seller then has the power to talk up the positives and hide the costs and risks. Two, the moment of truth can be far in the future. You know the bread is stale the moment you open the packet. But you will know the success of a pension plan 40 years later. Or the moment you get a medical plan when you visit the hospital some time in the future. Three, disclosures in their current form are meaningless and have a limited impact on the consumer. Anybody who has tried to buy a medical insurance plan, or take a home loan or avail of any other financial product can vouch for the fact that disclosures mean reams of legalese that will need degrees in law, finance, and futurology to decipher. Four, regulation does not work on the ground. India has multiple regulators that oversee different aspects of the market and investors are

left bewildered between ABC Mutual Fund, ABC Pension Fund and ABC Insurance, which all sell similar products. Worse, regulators such as the Insurance Regulatory Development Authority of India (IRDAI) allow products that place agent livelihood and insurance firm profits over consumer safety. Five, financial literacy efficacy is limited and cannot be scaled in real time. It can at best warn people about what not to do, but the financial sector is always ahead.

India can't be a buyer-beware market place.

This does not mean no returns. This means two things. One, ensure that the product being sold does no harm. For example, a seller-beware world will prevent a recurring regular premium life insurance policy being sold to an FD-seeking investor. Two, the product sold actually solves a problem. For example, suggesting a term life insurance plan to a 40-year-old non-smoking person rather than selling a unit linked insurance plan. We have forgotten that the entire industry that sucks in trillions of rupees of investor money is there to solve problems and not just enjoy commissions and bonuses. Two government reports (Swarup Committee and Bose Committee) have nailed the problem and suggested a roadmap to do this.

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seller of financial products with the financial well-being of the individual. The producer should reward the seller for the consumer having a better outcome. This is not difficult to do in finance. Right now the incentives, especially the insurance market, work against the individual. Second, ensure that the sales are suitable. Suitability would mean, for example, that a person with no emergency fund is not sold a risk product. Or an income seeking 70-year-old is not sold an endowment plan. Suitability ensures that consumer needs drive product sales and not only produce profits or seller commissions.

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“ What is the fault of cricketer Mustafizur Rahman? Will the situation in Bangladesh be better by removing him? On the contrary, they will get worse. So what has changed? ”

**OMAR ABDULLAH**  
Jammu & Kashmir Chief Minister



To see Delhi University now being literally destroyed feels like a tragedy. What we see in the US and elsewhere is that institutions take a very long time to build, but can be destroyed almost overnight

**AMITAV GHOSH**  
Author



Denying bail to Umar Khalid and Sharjeel shows a broken judicial system. Laws like UAPA and PMLA have routinely been used by the Modi govt to imprison those they dislike

”

## Disappointing verdict

**B**ail is the rule and jail is an exception. This forms the core principle of the criminal justice system, a position advocated by the Supreme Court itself on several occasions in the past. However, the latest order denying bail to Umar Khalid and Sharjeel Imam—despite their having spent over five years in prison without trial in the 2020 Delhi riots conspiracy case—contradicts the apex court's own dictum. This raises troubling questions about personal liberty, pre-trial detention, and due process. The SC has split the fate of seven people accused in the Delhi riots case registered under the stringent Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act. It granted bail to five, while denying the same to activists Khalid and Imam on the basis of what it called a “hierarchy of participation”. Those who have been denied bail stand on a “qualitatively different footing” from the others, the bench, comprising Justice Aravind Kumar and Justice NV Anjaria, ruled. The apex court held that the statutory restrictions on bail must prevail in the case of these accused when the prosecution material is taken at its face value. However, the key question that arises here is whether it is not a violation of the fundamental right to life and liberty, guaranteed under Article 21, if an accused is allowed to languish in jail for five years without any trial. Unfortunately, the court chose to reject the argument that prolonged incarceration automatically entitles an accused to bail, warning against treating delay as a “trump card”.

If bail is denied because the accusations are serious, then the trial must proceed with urgency. Ironically, the trial is yet to commence. The trials, especially under extraordinary laws, must be conducted swiftly, because justice delayed is not only justice denied but also justice mocked. The charges against Khalid rest on a sweeping theory of conspiracy, tying together speeches, WhatsApp groups, and a set of witness statements that have repeatedly been challenged for their credibility. No act of violence has been attributed to him. Irrespective of whether one agrees with his political views, it is a national shame that a young doctoral student has been deprived of liberty for half a decade without trial, held under a law with a conviction rate of just two to three per cent, based on evidence that many seasoned jurists, scholars, and civil liberties groups have described as tenuous and speculative. The continued use of UAPA to target dissenting voices reflects a disturbing pattern of repression and selective justice. The denial of bail under such circumstances has justifiably evoked widespread outrage, with several opposition leaders and social activists arguing that it amounted to a violation of principles of natural justice. On the other hand, Dera Sacha Sauda chief Gurmeet Ram Rahim, a rape convict, has been granted parole 15 times since his conviction in 2017.

By denying bail to Umar and Sharjeel, even after over five years in prison without trial, the SC contradicts its own dictum

**The geopolitical headwinds India faced in 2025 signal tougher times ahead, as global conditions are likely to worsen before stabilising**



**MONISH TOURANGBAM**

**T**he year 2025 proved to be a tumultuous one, to say the least, for interstate relations. Rapid shifts in strategic alliances and partnerships tested the responses of countries with differential negotiating powers. India was no different as practising strategic autonomy proved relatively more difficult with great power behaviours becoming more erratic. India's internal resilience was tested to the hilt by economic coercion, regional instability and as the terms of engagement in partnerships became more uncertain.

However, the geopolitical headwinds that India faced in 2025 are the same forces that should prepare the country for hard times ahead, as the external conditions that proved challenging in the past year are likely to become even more dire before they stabilise.

### Strategic Interdependence

While the economic parameters of India showed an upward trend, and the country seemed to have leveraged its G20 success to push ahead with its Global South narrative, 2025 proved that geopolitical forces beyond New Delhi's control could pose a daunting challenge. The primary objective of any foreign policy is to create an externally conducive environment for uninterrupted national growth, which includes, among other things, a stable political and security space conducive to predictability in economic relationships.

The year 2025 proved that the reverse is equally possible, as America's trade and tariff policies under the Trump administration took a path that nobody could have really prepared for. The “Liberation Day” tariffs proved that shaking up the economic relationship could have a cascading effect on the stability of political dynamics and



leadership chemistry. India's great power relations, particularly its Indo-Pacific strategies, had to adapt to the winds of change, sending strategic signals to Washington, doubling down on its partnership with Russia, and starting to reset its ties with China. Trump's own “hot and cold” relationship with Moscow, the complex dance of trade war and the “G2” reference to keep revisiting its great power playbook.

The new optics that emerged from the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Summit in Tianjin will go through a test of stability as India takes up the BRICS presidency in 2026. The logic of interdependence is undergoing its own churn, as the same economic linkages that once ensured relative stability in relations become weaponised as transactional tools of coercion. The downturn in the India-US “consequential” and “defining” partnership is a lesson that shared values and interests are not sacrosanct and can fall victim to the lure of short-term wins.

### Dilemma of Geography & History

By dint of both geography and history, India's destiny and its Viksit Bharat goals are tied to how it navigates its with its immediate neighbours in continental and maritime South Asia. Although not technically a South Asian country, developments in the politics, economics and security of a volatile Myanmar are also consequential for India's foreign policy and internal stability.

India's legitimate response to the heinous terror attacks in Pahalgam showed its strategic resolve to give a swift and proportionate response to the perpetrators plus supporters of such acts. However, the conflict and its aftermath also had lessons to follow in

terms of winning the perception and narrative wars in diplomacy beyond the battlefields. Despite “cautious optimism” and great power dynamics guiding the India-China relationship, structural tensions vis-à-vis the India-China border and China's influence operations in India's neighbourhood still pose significant challenges for any long-term stability in the relationship. Moreover, the year also saw rapid political changes in Bangladesh and Nepal, posing generational questions over the shape of things to come in these two neighbours with complex socio-political and economic linkages with India's border states.

The developments in Bangladesh, in comparison, have rapidly descended into acute security challenges, and 2026 will continue to test the nuanced disposition of India's diplomatic toolkit in a sub-region that remains consequential to the future of India's national growth and leadership potential in the broader Global South. India's immediate neighbourhood is the most consequential and nearest Global South, and will require much more dexterity and nuance to address active upheavals amid managing more structural dilemmas of asymmetries.

**Diversification Imperative**  
If a glossary of the most used words in

**The downturn in India-US “consequential” and “defining” partnership is a lesson that shared values and interests can fall victim to the lure of short-term wins**

international relations were made in 2025, the word “diversification” perhaps would rank very high on the list, as countries, big and small, responded to Trump's tariffs and economic arm-twisting with diversification policies suited to their own respective needs. Many strategic illusions came under test of fire, and India's diversification strategies with a more explicit aim for stronger self-reliance cut across multiple sectors, including trade, energy supplies, defence ties, and broadly broadening the basket of its multi-alignment policy.

Such an outreach involved cross-sectional issues and geopolitical regions in Europe, partners in the Indo-Pacific region, in Africa, West Asia and in Latin America. India's new drive and pace to negotiate tangible outcomes in free trade and comprehensive economic partnership agreements are testimony to this imperative to create new alternatives and traction. To what extent India can make its national goals “geopolitics-proof” will remain a pre-occupation for its foreign policy planners. This exercise in risk mitigation and management is simultaneous with creating opportunities.

Maintaining continuity in the chaos, absorbing and adapting in a tense global environment when older rules of the road become redundant and newer ones yet to materialise, without choosing sides and maintaining autonomy while engaging will test India's juggling skills to the core. Creating short-term traction with a firm eye on long-term resilience will require a whole-of-nation and a whole-of-government effort to navigate the shifting supply chains of goods and services. The new year will be no less, if not more challenging than the one gone by.

Fractures in global trading arrangements, domestic fissures producing foreign policy faultlines, ambiguity in great power tensions, and regional conflicts with global ramifications will see uncertain metamorphoses. India's growth parameters will most likely be on the upward trend, but it will still have to face the strategic consequences of power asymmetry with countries more materially endowed than itself. New Delhi's foreign policy in regions closer home will not come easy, as it attempts to create leverage for its own leadership role, more particularly in the Global South.

As India steps into a year filled with structural and tactical challenges, lessons from the past year would be critical in facing the shape of things to come. From a big picture perspective, 2025 has proved that practising strategic autonomy is a constant, round-the-clock negotiation with powers, both large and small, requiring India to constantly re-examine and reassess its foreign policy toolkit and how it is deployed.

*(The author is a Fellow at the Chintan Research Foundation [CRF], New Delhi)*

### Letters to the Editor

#### Peace through power!

The Venezuelan developments are widely perceived as part of a larger strategy by the US aimed at gaining control over the country's oil-rich resources, making the episode both astonishing and disquieting. Such actions have drawn sharp criticism from several South American nations and provoked strong reactions from global powers like Russia and Iran. Whatever the political justifications offered, unilateral interventions of this nature undermine the principles of diplomacy and international cooperation. Ironically, they also deal a severe blow to President Trump's avowed ambition of securing the Nobel Peace Prize, for peace cannot be achieved through coercion or geopolitical adventurism.

**RAJAKUMAR ARULANANDHAM,**  
Tirunelveli, Tamil Nadu

#### Levy politics

Donald Trump once again points the economic levy gun at India, mistaking diplomacy for loud theatrics and pressure tactics. His pattern of tariff threats and punitive rhetoric reflects a world-view grounded in intimidation and transactional advantage rather than mutual respect or long-term partnership. Such brinkmanship disrupts supply chains, weakens investor confidence, and erodes years of carefully built strategic trust. Claims of fairness ring hollow when rules are altered impulsively, and allies are treated as bargaining chips. India should not succumb to this noise; it should answer with calm firmness, diversification of markets, and deeper collaboration with reliable partners. Real leadership strengthens institutions and predictability, not volatility and fear. Trump's approach reduces policy to headline-driven coercion. India's steady diplomacy and economic resilience are the most effective responses to tariff blackmail.

**N SADHASIVA REDDY,** Bengaluru

#### Liberty and delay

The Supreme Court's refusal of bail to Umar Khalid and Sharjeel Iman raises difficult questions about liberty and delay. Five years of incarceration without trial is unusual in any criminal justice system. The court has relied on a prima facie standard under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act. Continued detention on this basis risks turning procedure into punishment.

**NAGARAJAMANI MV,** Secunderabad

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

#### Sovereign borders

The launch of ‘Operation Absolute Resolve’ and the subsequent capture of Nicolás Maduro mark a volatile turning point in international relations. What began as a domestic crisis of hyperinflation and institutional decay has now evolved into a precedent-setting event for global governance and national sovereignty. President Trump's assertion that the US will manage Venezuela's oil reserves during this transition raises legal and ethical questions. While the pursuit of accountability for alleged narco-terrorism is a significant legal objective, the unilateral nature of this intervention challenges the very foundations of international law. By installing an interim presidency while the US maintains operational control, the region enters an era of deep uncertainty. The international community must scrutinise these developments closely; the outcome will not only decide Venezuela's future but will redefine the limits of external intervention and the sanctity of sovereign borders for decades to come.

**VIDYASAGAR REDDY KETHIRI,** Hanamkonda

#### India in the hotspot

■ The Economist

#### A fragile thaw at the top of the world

It would once have taken a week to travel from Leh — the joint capital of Ladakh — to Tangtse, a village less than 50km from India's disputed border with China. Even five years ago, the trip would have eaten up a day. But when your correspondent made the same passage in November, the journey was zippy.

■ The Guardian

#### B'desh withdraws from T20 WC matches in India

Bangladesh will not play their Twenty20 World Cup matches in India, with the country's cricket board saying they are concerned for the safety of their players amid growing tensions between the countries. Bangladesh were scheduled to play three Twenty20 World Cup matches in Kolkata next month.

■ Japan Times

#### India's water crunch brews risks for beverage giants

In Rajasthan, some of the world's biggest beverage firms face the additional challenge of securing and managing dwindling water supplies while navigating strict government rules and grievances of local people who only get the resource piped-in once a week. Nearly two-thirds of Rajasthan is covered by Thar Desert.



## EDITORIAL

## LAYERS OF LEGACY

For more than two decades, Suresh Kalmadi stood at the heart of Indian sport—admired, criticised, powerful, and endlessly debated. His story was never linear; it was layered with ambition, controversy, achievement, and consequence. Born in Madras in 1944 and shaped in Pune, the city he would later represent and deeply influence, Kalmadi's journey was never confined to one role. Before politics and power, there was discipline and duty—ten years in the Indian Air Force as a commissioned pilot and instructor, retiring as a Squadron Leader. That ground him in precision and command, which would define the way he approached administration: assertive, driven, and unafraid to take ownership. Politics followed naturally. Sharad Pawar spotted the spark early, and Kalmadi rose rapidly through the Congress ranks, eventually becoming Rajya Sabha MP multiple times, Lok Sabha MP thrice, and a Union Minister. But it would not be Parliament that shaped his public identity. It was sport.

Kalmadi transformed himself into one of India's most influential sports administrators at a time when sport outside cricket struggled for structure, funding, and relevance. As President of the Indian Olympic Association from 1996 to 2011 and long-time Athletics Federation of India chief, he wielded immense authority—but he also used it to bring world-class events to India, a feat earlier thought improbable. The Afro-Asian Games, the Commonwealth Youth Games, multiple Asian Athletics Championships, and the World Half Marathon—all came to India on his watch. He revived the National Games, giving athletes domestic platforms that mattered. He pushed Indian athletics onto the Asian stage, introduced international competition circuits, and helped create marquee sporting moments that inspired a generation. Under his tenure as IOA president came India's breakthrough Olympic moment in 2008, when Abhinav Bindra won the nation's first individual Olympic gold. To pretend these milestones didn't exist would be dishonest. Kalmadi's tenure expanded India's sporting imagination, brought visibility to athletes beyond cricket, and helped position India as a capable global sporting host years before such confidence became fashionable.

Yet, legacies are rarely granted the luxury of being only celebratory. The 2010 Commonwealth Games altered everything. What should have been a triumph of national pride became synonymous with allegations, delays, mismanagement, visual, and ultimately, Kalmadi's arrest. Fairly or unfairly, he became the face of a scandal that embarrassed the nation and angered the public. The images linger still, overshadowing nearly everything else he had done. The Enforcement Directorate later filed a closure report, giving him a clean chit, but reputations in public life rarely recover fully. For years, his name became shorthand for excess, rot, and broken systems. That was the tragedy of Kalmadi—the same man who worked tirelessly to elevate Indian sport was also held responsible for its most humiliating fiasco. Somewhere between the outrage and the rhetoric, nuance was lost. He was neither a villain caricature nor a perfect reformer; he was a deeply consequential figure in a space that desperately needed both ambition and accountability.

When the news of his passing came, there was no single tone of remembrance. Instead, there was complexity—respect from those who worked closely with him, criticism from those who remembered only his fail, and reflection from those who acknowledged that modern Indian sports administration cannot be narrated without him. Perhaps that is the most honest way to remember Suresh Kalmadi. He embodied a phase of Indian sport that was bold, unapologetic, politically entangled, and deeply human. He expanded horizons, and he also invited scrutiny. His career is a reminder of how fragile reputations are in public life, how easily achievements are eclipsed by missteps, and how leadership in sport demands transparency as much as vision. As administrators today talk about professionalisation, governance reforms, and global ambitions, it is worth recognising that much of the error and messiness that occurred during Kalmadi's era—for better and worse. In the end, he leaves behind a legacy that refuses simplification: a legacy of scale, controversy, ambition, transformation, and undeniably impact.

## REFORM LENS



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**The Bill marks a clear departure from that inheritance, replacing regulatory excess with functional clarity and outcome-based accountability**

## Building Standards With Freedom

*The Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhikshan Bill marks a major higher-education reform, replacing fragmented regulation with autonomy, accountability, linguistic inclusion and globally credible accreditation*

India's latest higher-education reform, the Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhikshan Bill, is best understood not as an administrative reshuffle but as a philosophical recalibration of how a modern state relates to knowledge. For decades, India has governed its universities through a patchwork of regulators, approvals, and inspections that prioritised procedural compliance over intellectual consequences. The Bill marks a clear departure from that inheritance, replacing regulatory excess with functional clarity and outcome-based accountability.

At its heart lies a simple proposition: autonomy and accountability are not adversaries but complements. By separating regulation, accreditation, and academic standard-setting into distinct institutional functions, the Bill dismantles the structural confusion that previously forced universities to answer multiple masters for the same academic act. The result is not centralisation, as critics allege, but coherence—an essential prerequisite for any system that seeks both scale and credibility.

What distinguishes this reform from earlier attempts is its explicit rejection of permission-centric governance. Instead of micromanaging inputs, the framework insists on transparent disclosure, nationally synchronised minimum standards, and credible consequences for persistent failure. This shift reflects a mature regulatory philosophy: quality emerges not from constant surveillance, but from clear expectations and a serious enforcement approach.



**The Bill separates control from standards, authority from enforcement, and ideology from institutional autonomy**

Importantly, the Bill's conception of academic standards is neither univocal nor culturally evasive. By allowing institutions the freedom to exceed benchmarks while maintaining a common national floor, it accommodates diversity without diluting comparability. This space is particularly significant in a country where knowledge traditions have historically been multilingual and multi-epistemic. Indian Knowledge Systems—spanning philosophy, mathematics, medicine, linguistics, and the arts—have long evolved through diverse intellectual lineages rather than a single canonical mode. A standards-based, non-prescriptive

framework is precisely what allows such traditions to engage contemporary disciplines on equal scholarly terms, rather than being marginalised by rigid curricular templates.

The same logic applies to language. A higher-education system that aspires to mass excellence cannot remain linguistically exclusionary. While the Bill does not legislate pedagogy, its emphasis on institutional autonomy, outcome transparency, and curricular flexibility creates enabling conditions for teaching, learning, and scholarship in Indian languages—without compromising academic rigour or international comparability. In global terms,

this is not parochialism; it is cognitive inclusion. Advanced societies increasingly recognise that intellectual depth and linguistic plurality are mutually reinforcing.

Accreditation, too, is reconceived as an ecosystem rather than a bureaucratic bottleneck. By supervising multiple quality-assurance pathways instead of monopolising them, the framework allows India with international best practices where accreditation functions as a trust infrastructure, not a gatekeeping ritual. This is essential if Indian institutions are to be read credibly by global partners, ranking agencies, and research collaborators.

The Bill's enforcement archi-

ture deserves equal attention. Regulation without consequence invites indifference; consequence without due process invites fear. The proposed framework avoids both. It embeds proportionality, procedural fairness, and escalation, signalling that chronic non-compliance is a failure of governance rather than a paper-waste lapse. In doing so, it restores moral seriousness to the idea of regulation itself.

Concerns regarding governmental policy direction should be viewed through the lens of constitutional realism rather than ideological suspicion. Higher education is intrinsically linked to national priorities, including equity, scientific capacity, cultural continuity, and global competitiveness. A complete firewall between policy and regulation would be neither feasible nor desirable. The Bill's challenge and its promise—lies in ensuring that policy guidance remains strategic rather than intrusive, enabling rather than prescriptive.

Ultimately, the significance of the Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhikshan Bill lies in its quiet confidence. It assumes that Indian universities need not be governed through distrust, redundancy, or excessive proceduralism. Instead, it places faith in standards, transparency, and institutional responsibility. In an era where knowledge power defines national capability, this is a timely assertion: that a developed India must also be an epistemically self-assured one—open to the world, anchored in its intellectual traditions, and governed by frameworks worthy of both.

*Views expressed are personal*

## LIVING BETTER



NITESH BANSAL  
THE WRITER IS A  
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DEAN OF PUBLIC  
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DEVELOPMENT AT  
O.P. JINDAL GLOBAL  
UNIVERSITY

**India is witnessing a silent health emergency—fuelled by inactivity, long sitting hours and rising screen time. Movement, the simplest medicine, may be the strongest cure**

## A Call to Action

*With lifestyle diseases claiming most lives in India, experts warn that daily movement is no longer optional—it's a national health necessity*

In a nation struggling with obesity, heart conditions and several lifestyle diseases, simple daily movements can be a remedy, as well as a public health initiative for communities at large. There is strong evidence that physical activity can help reduce the risks of heart disease, diabetes, stroke, certain cancers and depression, while boosting energy levels, improving sleep quality, and enhancing mental sharpness. With these diseases claiming over 60 per cent of deaths in India, experts stress that 'moving more' needs to shift from a 'nice habit' to a 'national necessity'.

India faces an emerging reality. National surveys reveal that a large chunk of adults—often over 50 per cent in urban areas—do not move enough, while heart problems, high blood pressure, and diabetes are increasing at an exponential rate. Simultaneously, jobs are becoming increasingly sedentary, and daily screen time is on the rise, particularly in high-density urban areas. Interestingly, physical activity, a free, accessible intervention form of 'medicine', cuts these risks by up to 30 per cent, according to the WHO and ICMR, India's own premier health organisation. However, its use is on the decline—we use a remote to change the TV channel, we order food using an App, we use the car to go shopping, etc.

Any energy-burning action counts as physical activity, including walks to the local shop, stair climbing at home, gardening, cycling short distances, chasing kids in the park, or even dancing. These are not elite workouts but everyday motions that build muscle strength and endurance. Several Indian and international research studies have shown that even as little as 30 minutes of daily walking and/or exercise reduces obesity and stabilises blood sugar levels.

Beyond physical gains, body movement leads to changes in the brain. It triggers the release of neurotransmitters and endorphins that help combat stress and anxiety, sharpen mental focus, and alleviate insomnia. In a country where mental health issues have quietly risen, especially post-COVID, physical activity offers a cheap method of addressing mental health problems without the use of strong and expensive medicines.

**Clear Targets for Every Age Group**

India's Ministry of Health guidelines provide weekly goals for physical activity. Children aged 4–17 years need at least 60 minutes of daily fun and vigorous play—such as running, playing football, skipping rope—for growth, while also reducing the amount of time spent in front of screens. While adults aged 18–64 should aim for 150–300 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity per week, older adults over 65 years old, in addition to regular exer-



**Exercise isn't just for gyms; simple movements can improve both physical and mental health.**

cie, should also include balance drills, such as tai chi, which can help prevent falls that are common among seniors. The mantra across all ages should be to start small and build steadily. Secondly, "Zero activity worsens health; movement improves it."

**Barriers Holding India Back**

It is reported that awareness exists; however, action lags. Urban Indians often omit fitness footpaths, potholed roads and unsafe parks after dark as to why they do not go for a walk. Additionally, adults report that extended office hours and travel times leave little room for exercise. At the same time, kids complain of having no time due to after-school tuitions, homework, and time spent on social media. Monsoon rains, winter smog and pollution in Urban cities, and summer heatwaves further prevent outdoor physical activities.

National community research highlights screen time as a significant contributor to reduced physical activity, with adults averaging 7–8 hours of daily screen time and teens even more. In addition, pollution in Delhi often reaches an AQI over 300, making outdoor activities risky and leading to heart and breathing problems.

Knowledge and awareness about the benefits of exercise alone fail as a means to achieving a healthy lifestyle; success demands family cooperation and incentives, workplace nudges, and city planners building walking paths, cycling lanes, and/or green spaces.

**Everyday Hacks to Get Moving**

No gym fees required—incorporate activity into daily routines—exchange cards with market wallet bags to help reverse pre-diabetes. A Mumbai teen reading gadget use might not be a walk or skipping, which may lead him shedding excessive fat. For families, it is legacy-building: active parents raise physically and cognitively healthy kids. A fit India means vibrant youth, productive workers, and healthy elders dancing at weddings. Moving more is not elite advice; it is every citizen's affordable health shield for tomorrow. Start today—10 brisk minutes of walking, fewer chairs, more play.

If yes, track steps, gamify goals, and send reminders. Wearables, now priced under Rs 2,000, motivate users with badges and points, and have gained popularity among Delhi's young professionals.

**Active Neighbourhoods and Institutions**

Efforts to promote activities multiply when communities participate. Schools must revive mandatory Physical Education and assembly exercises, beyond cricket. Daily 30-minute exercise drills cut childhood obesity by 20 per cent, according to pilot studies conducted in Tamil Nadu. Corporations in Gurugram have pioneered "outdoor meetings and treadmill desks to ease 9-to-5 lethargy."

Resident groups in urban colonies organise early morning 'laugh' yoga sessions, and or park clean-ups, fostering a sense of community, sustainability, safety and habit. Governments have also stepped up: Haryana's park revamps and UP's cycle tracks are promising initiatives. When cities promote walkability—like Chandigarh's green belts and safe pedestrian pavements—activity rates and health improve organically. Policy also plays a significant role in promoting health through exercise. The National Health Mission pushes "Fit India" with workplace challenges and rural sports fests. Higher Education Institutions train future leaders to integrate physical activity into their curricula, linking it to public health goals.

**Small Steps, Big Wins**

India's health crisis demands urgency, but success lies in simplicity. A homeowner starting with market wallet bags might help reverse pre-diabetes. A Mumbai teen reading gadget use might not be a walk or skipping, which may lead him shedding excessive fat. For families, it is legacy-building: active parents raise physically and cognitively healthy kids. A fit India means vibrant youth, productive workers, and healthy elders dancing at weddings. Moving more is not elite advice; it is every citizen's affordable health shield for tomorrow. Start today—10 brisk minutes of walking, fewer chairs, more play.

*Views expressed are personal*

## WHO SAID WHAT



Aaditya Thackeray  
@AUTHackeray

**The BJP is out to destroy every bit of nature that exists in our country.**

**Today, the State Board for Wildlife approved a proposal that opens up a mining project in Lohardangari near the Ghodaraj Wildlife Sanctuary. The SBWL apparently briefed the Chief Minister that it is an important tiger corridor, and will increase human-animal conflict (and tiger conflict), but the CM pushed ahead with the plan.**

**This mine will offer only 120 jobs, only 23 permanent and the output is only 1.1 m tonnes in 12 months. There is NO study available on the influence it'll have on the wildlife and the forest but the BJP loves hacking down forests!**

**Likewise, the Board approved the minutes of the earlier meeting that allowed opening of the mines in Marki-Mangli near the Tadoba Andhari Tiger Reserve—another tiger corridor. Interested to see how the CM pitches this at the Mumbai Climate Week and to global agencies that will attend it.**

**The Vidarbha region that gave so many elected representatives to the BJP, is being destroyed by the BJP environmentally.**

**Coal washeries, mines, deforestation— and then the government gaslights citizens about human-animal conflict.**

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## Dangerous paradigm

Trump has lowered the threshold of norms for conduct on global stage

Following the kidnapping and removal to U.S. soil of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro and his wife, on the back of military action not authorised by Congress or supported by the UN, U.S. President Donald Trump has now made clear his intent to set the cross-hairs of American neo-imperial expansionism on other nations and territories including Colombia, Greenland, Mexico, Cuba, and Iran. The Trump administration surprised the world, and apparently Venezuelan military forces, when it launched an overnight strike on Caracas over the weekend, including likely use of artillery and special forces, to extract the Maduros to face federal drug trafficking and weapons charges – charges that Mr. Maduro pleaded not guilty to. Responding to media after the event, Mr. Trump appeared to be setting his sights on Colombian President Gustavo Petro, when he said that that country was being “run by a sick man who likes making cocaine and selling it to the U.S.” and “He’s not going to be doing it for very long.” Similarly, Mr. Trump has remarked that the U.S. has a “need” for Greenland from the perspective of its “national security”, that “something will have to be done about Mexico” to rid the nation of the scourge of drug cartels, that Cuba is “ready to fall” in the absence of revenue linked to Venezuelan oil, and that Iran would be “hit very hard by the U.S.” if it cracked down on protesters on its soil.

While the Trump administration has consistently lowered the threshold of norms and acceptable standards for the conduct of nations on the global stage and diverged from the positions of previous Democrat and Republican-led governments on the threat posed, for example by Russia to Europe, to directly engage in unauthorised and illegal interference of a brazen kind and seek regime change through the use of force in an established hemispheric power is a new low. The deeper danger of this so called “Dorothy Doctrine” – ultimately premised on seizing Venezuela’s cherished oil resources rather than any pretext of “restoring democracy” – is that it may embolden autocrats and nations with an appetite for fomenting conflict to engage in similar destabilising unilateral military action against perceived enemies, potentially resulting in full-fledged cross-border confrontations. Today’s Venezuela was yesterday’s Ukraine and might be tomorrow’s Taiwan, if Mr. Trump’s paradigm for settling scores propagates further. While the leaders of each potential future target of U.S. aggression and the UN leadership have protested such action by Washington, it might take nothing less than the major powers of today, including India, Europe, Australia, Africa and Latin America, speaking in one voice against this unhinged depredation by the Trump administration to halt this dangerous new paradigm in its tracks.

## At a crossroads

Iran must initiate reforms and re-engage with the world

What began as a strike by shopkeepers in Tehran on December 28 against the sharp fall in the value of the Iranian rial, has snowballed into the largest nationwide protest Iran has witnessed since the 2022-2023 unrest triggered by the custodial death of Mahsa Amini. While the government has promised to address the economic grievances of the traders, it has also warned of a harsh response to “rioters”. At least 12 people have been killed in the past week with the protests spreading. This renewed cycle of unrest comes amid the deepening economic vulnerabilities and political risks confronting Iran’s theocratic state, just six months after it survived a fierce 12-day war with Israel. What makes the protests challenging for Iran’s rulers is the perceived involvement of foreign powers. Mossad, Israel’s spy agency, claimed, on December 29, that its operatives were present “in the field” with the protesters. On January 2, U.S. President Donald Trump, who had ordered strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities during the June 2025 war between Iran and Israel, threatened Iran that the U.S. was “locked and loaded” to use force if protesters were killed.

The Islamic Republic is facing immense economic strain. In October, food inflation hit 64%, the second highest after South Sudan. The rial has lost 60% of its value since the June war, while oil exports in 2025 fell by about 7% from its 2024 average. Power outages have become a daily reality. The severity of the crisis was underscored in December when President Masoud Pezeshkian said his government was “stuck” and could not perform “miracles” to fix the problems. As the economy deteriorates and external threats mount, the regime’s greater response is creating a cycle of crisis. Mr. Pezeshkian has relaxed the grip of the morality police on public life. But when it comes to the economy or national security, his hands are tied. Washington’s policy of economic squeeze and threats is deepening the suffering of ordinary Iranians while turning the regime more paranoid. If the U.S. genuinely seeks to resolve the Iran problem, it should engage with and empower Mr. Pezeshkian, rather than threatening Tehran on Israel’s behalf. Iran’s rulers should also be open for reforms. The regime’s default response to any crisis has been to blame external forces, but it ignores a more fundamental reality. Years of shrinking economic opportunity and the erosion of political and personal freedoms have created a reservoir of public anger that could erupt. Religion and nationalism may no longer suffice in the face of an economic crisis. Iran’s leadership must initiate reforms, tackle corruption and re-engage with the world.

The U.S. and Venezuela

Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro’s removal is, in itself, not a tragedy. But if it brings greater chaos, as was seen in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya following the U.S.’s interventions, it will once again be an example of tactical success not translating into strategic gains.

R. Sivakumar, Chennai

If arresting Mr. Maduro

# The right to disconnect in an ‘always-on’ economy

In the digital age, our greatest tools of productivity – the smartphone, the laptop, the instantaneous email – have become our silent, 24X7 taskmasters. They have eroded the vital boundary between professional life and personal well-being, turning evenings, weekends, and even holidays, into extensions of the workday. This culture of constant availability is not a badge of dedication; it is a creeping sickness, and its diagnosis is writ large across the face of the Indian workforce. The time has come for India to officially legislate a fundamental right for its citizens: the right to disconnect.

As the proposer of a Private Member’s Bill advocating this very measure, I believe that this is not merely a piece of progressive labour reform. It is a national imperative for public health, long-term economic productivity, and social stability. We cannot achieve our aspirations as a global power if our most valuable resource – our people – are quietly burning out.

**An unsustainable pace of work in India**  
The data paint a grim picture. According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO), a staggering 5% of India’s workforce works more than 49 hours per week, placing the country second globally for extended working hours. This is an unsustainable pace. The human cost of this relentless cycle is even more alarming: 78% of employees in India report experiencing job burnout, leading inevitably to physical and emotional exhaustion.

This crisis of perpetual availability is not a matter of feeling fatigued; it translates directly into severe health conditions. The lack of a proper work-life balance contributes significantly to lifestyle diseases such as hypertension, diabetes, anxiety and depression. These are not just individual tragedies; they are a societal burden that drains our health-care system and severely impairs organisational productivity. A fatigued worker is less creative, more prone to error, and, ultimately, less productive. The current emphasis on measuring work by sheer duration over quality is archaic and self-defeating. The tragic death of Anna Sebastian Perayil (the healthy young E&Y employee who literally died of overwork in 2024) was a warning for the entire workforce. Furthermore, work-related stress, often fuelled by the expectation of 24X7 digital availability, is a significant contributor to the burgeoning national mental health crisis, accounting for 10%-12% of cases, as per the National Mental Health Survey. To ignore this silent epidemic is to wilfully neglect the well-being of the nation.

India’s current legal framework, despite recent attempts, remains insufficient to protect the average worker in the hyper-connected, modern economy. The Occupational Safety, Health, and



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Working Conditions Code, 2020, sets a maximum limit on working hours for traditional “workers”, but critically, it often fails to extend the same protection to all “employees”, particularly contractual, freelance, and gig workers. This gap leaves a large portion of India’s young, digitally-native, and highly vulnerable workforce exposed to exploitative working hours, without adequate safeguards. In a system where employees fear disciplinary action or termination simply for failing to answer a late night email, the power dynamic is inherently skewed towards the employer.

### A global issue

My proposed Bill aims to correct this foundational flaw. It is crucial that the Code is amended to clearly define and limit working hours for all employees. It seeks to enshrine the “right to disconnect” in law, ensuring two core protections: first, employees cannot be penalised, disciplined, or discriminated against for refusing to respond to work-related communication beyond their specified working hours. Second, a mechanism must be established to address and resolve grievances when the rights of workers are infringed upon. Both are fundamentally about restoring dignity and ensuring that the right to recharge is respected, allowing individuals to maintain their physical and mental well-being without fear of professional repercussions.

India is not alone in grappling with the challenges of the “always-on” economy. This is a global issue demanding a legislative response. Countries across the world have already recognised this necessity, setting a clear precedent that we must now follow. France, a pioneer in this area, introduced the “right to disconnect” as far back as 2017. Since then, Portugal, Italy, Ireland, and Australia have followed suit, embedding similar protections into their labour codes.

These laws mandate that companies negotiate specific protocols to limit after-hours digital communication. This is a clear signal that the most developed economies understand that respecting downtime is not an impediment to economic growth, but a precondition for sustainable growth. We must shed the myth that the world will stop turning if an email is answered the next morning.

The law, however, is merely a framework. The “right to disconnect” is defined as the employee being no longer compelled to remain available beyond their regular working hours, thereby blurring the lines between their personal and professional lives and exacerbating stress and burnout. The legislation provides the shield, but we must also wield the sword of cultural change.

The legislative momentum behind the right to

India’s legal framework is still weak and insufficient in protecting the average worker in the hyper-connected and modern economy

disconnect confirms its urgency, with pioneering States such as Kerala already introducing their own legislation for the local private sector. While these State-level initiatives are commendable steps, the complexity and national scale of the “always-on” crisis demand a uniform, central amendment to secure this protection for every Indian worker. My proposed Bill, by amending the Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code (2020), ensures that this right is foundational across all States and, critically, extends protection to the vulnerable contractual and gig workforce often left out by current definitions. This national approach embeds the right to disconnect as an essential pillar of occupational safety, including mandated health support, transforming it from a simple prohibition on employer action into a holistic mandate for employee well-being.

### Other interconnected steps to take

Still, laws alone are insufficient to facilitate meaningful transformation. For any legislation to be effective, it must be supported by comprehensive awareness programmes, advocacy and sensitisation workshops for both employees and management. It is especially important to address the organisational norms that perpetuate toxic work cultures – those where “presenteeism” is valued over actual output, and where the late night email is seen as a proxy for commitment. The provisions for proactive mental health support services, including counselling and psychological support for workers, must, therefore, become integral to the new workplace ethos.

The right to disconnect is an investment. It is an acknowledgment that well-rested minds are sharper, more innovative and more committed in the long run. By allowing employees to genuinely recharge and recover, we are not simply reducing working hours. We are dramatically enhancing the quality of those hours spent on the job.

Incorporating legal protections for a work-life balance – the right to disconnect and limiting working hours – will forge a holistic and vigorous approach toward improving the workplace environment in India. By focusing on the well-being of our employees, both their physical and mental health will improve, creating a more sustainable and, ultimately, more productive workforce for the future of India.

The choice before us is clear: to continue down the path of burnout, risking the health and potential of our young demographic dividend, or to embrace this reform, liberating our workforce and proving that India’s economy is built not just on speed, but on the strength and sustainability of its people. I urge the government to implement this necessary step towards a healthier, happier, and more productive nation.

## America’s Venezuelan actions are most unlawful

**T**he attack by the United States on Venezuela and the capture of the Venezuelan President, Nicolás Maduro, is yet another gigantic affront to international law, notwithstanding the authoritarian practices of the Maduro administration. This adventure comes on the heels of a series of illegal American strikes in the last few months on alleged Venezuelan drug boats in the Caribbean Sea.

**The subject of the use of force**  
It is axiomatic that Article 2(4) of the United Nations Charter proscribes the use of force in international relations. The UN Charter, as Oona A. Hathaway and Scott J. Shapiro argue, outlawed war and fundamentally reshaped international law, making war an illegitimate instrument for settling disputes. Article 2(4) permits only two narrow exceptions: force may be used in self-defence or with the authorisation of the UN Security Council. None is present in the extant case.

Legal scholar Nico Krisch has argued that the prohibition on the use of force is the most constraining aspect of international law. Hegemonic states such as the U.S. have consistently sought to overcome this constraint by adopting innovative solutions, including the broadening of the concept of self-defence. Arguably, self-defence is not limited to repelling an ongoing armed attack but also encompasses pre-emptive and anticipatory self-defence to combat cross-border terrorism. Moreover, the use of force has also been invoked to justify humanitarian interventions such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999.

In the Venezuelan case, the U.S. appears to have surpassed even these contested categories and identified new grounds for the use of force. Senior U.S. officials are on record as stating that this cross-border operation was done as part of a law enforcement measure, bringing accused



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criminals such as Mr. Maduro and his wife to face trial in the U.S. Other reasons offered are that the President was waging a ceaseless campaign of violence and subversion against the U.S. and posed a threat to the entire region. However, none of these reasons, even if true, passes muster to legally justify the U.S. using force against a sovereign state. The talk of this operation resurrecting the antiquated Monroe Doctrine of American foreign policy is not just an affront to the sovereignty of the countries of the Western Hemisphere but also a ploy in the face of the anti-imperial struggles of the Third World people.

### Leaders and immunity

The other legal issue this case has thrown up is the treatment of President Maduro. As the International Court of Justice held in the Arrest Warrant Case (Democratic Republic of the Congo vs Belgium), heads of state enjoy inviolability and *immunity ratione personae* (personal immunity) from the criminal jurisdiction of a foreign court. Accordingly, the U.S. courts lack jurisdiction to try President Maduro for the alleged criminal activities. The argument that Mr. Maduro is not the legitimate President of Venezuela because he came to office through rigged elections in 2024, or that the U.S. does not recognise Mr. Maduro as a legitimate President, cuts no ice under international law. Irrespective of how someone came to office, under international law, what matters is the test of effective control. The Maduro administration exercised effective control over Venezuelan territory. Thus, President Maduro, as the head, is entitled to personal immunity and inviolability under international law.

Holding otherwise would give states a licence to stop recognising regimes or heads of state that do not consider lawful, using their subjective criteria, thereby denying them immunity, which would wreak havoc in the international legal system. Moreover, forcibly taking the custody of a

The U.S.’s actions create a precarious precedent, surpassing even contested categories under international law

foreigner, let alone a head of state, on foreign land without that state’s consent or without a legal procedure, and physically bringing the person to face trial before a domestic court, is an internationally wrongful act. The U.S. endeavouring to “run” Venezuela – reminiscent of naked imperialism – is also unlawful, as it amounts to undue interference in Venezuela’s internal affairs.

### Strengthening international law

The U.S.’s actions create a precarious precedent. It is part of a series of flagrant violations of cardinal rules of international law, including the use of force, that have been observed in recent years. Thus, the larger question is whether the content of international law must change to address its abuse. As public international law scholar Marko Milosevic argues, the problem is not so much with the content of the law as with the complete lack of commitment to comply with it. The meteoric rise of authoritarian regimes, including in countries that were once regarded as the vanguards of liberal democracy, has meant that governments do not want to be constrained by any law, whether domestic or international. The weakening of the domestic rule of law has negatively impacted the efficacy of international law in constraining power. Thus, to strengthen the international rule of law, one must bolster the domestic rule of law and democracy.

While it is true that powerful nations use international law as an instrument to perpetuate their dominance, it is equally undeniable that several elements of international law are antithetical to authoritarianism. Article 2(4) of the UN Charter is one of them. Authoritarian regimes will continue to assault these norms and treat international law with utter derision. Therefore, it is incumbent on the democratic forces to come together to resist them with renewed resolve.

The views expressed are personal

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### The U.S. and Venezuela

Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro’s removal is, in itself, not a tragedy. But if it brings greater chaos, as was seen in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya following the U.S.’s interventions, it will once again be an example of tactical success not translating into strategic gains.

R. Sivakumar, Chennai

brings prosperity and freedom to Venezuela, the operation will be judged a great success. But if it brings greater chaos, as was seen in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya following the U.S.’s interventions, it will once again be an example of tactical success not translating into strategic gains.

R. Sivakumar, Chennai

The arrest of Venezuela’s President is also a disturbing reminder of how political sovereignty today is inseparable from digital sovereignty. A reliance on foreign-controlled communication platforms, navigation systems and digital infrastructure can expose political leadership to surveillance, tracking, and strategic coercion. This development carries

important lessons for India. The Venezuelan episode should, therefore, not be seen as a distant geopolitical event, but as a cautionary signal.

Niraj Kumar, Bakhti, East Champaran, Bihar

Salaried class, the Budget

As a salaried professional, I await Budget 2026 with measured optimism. Fixed incomes remain under

sustained pressure from inflation, housing, education and health-care costs. Many taxpayers expect a thoughtful surprise: raising the basic exemption limit to ₹5 lakh, or increasing the standard deduction to ₹1 lakh. Such steps would ease compliance stress for honest earners. Far from weakening revenues, this relief can spur consumption

and improve voluntary compliance. A Finance Minister’s credibility rests on recognising the salaried class as partners in growth. Budget 2026 offers an opportunity to reinforce fairness, discipline and sustainability nationwide.

Vivek M. Jain, Chennai

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

# India's academic openness under strain

The recent denial of entry to noted Hindi scholar Francesca Orsini from the U.K., despite holding a valid visa, has brought to light the need for a more balanced and thoughtful approach to understanding and assessing the role of critical academic engagement, and to recognising the broader value of scholarly exchange both within and beyond India.

It seems that a rather difficult situation is emerging for international scholars who have critically engaged with Indian society, politics, or history. Entering on a tourist visa and participating in academic events can expose them to procedural complications related to visa regulations, while applying for an academic visa may itself become challenging in light of their critical scholarly work.

The long-term consequence of this paradox is clear: independent and critical voices from abroad will gradually be silenced, rendered rare, and eventually made invisible in India's academic landscape. This situation raises a fundamental question about the spirit of inclusiveness in Indian academia. Universities and research institutions have historically thrived on exchange, critique, and intellectual diversity. The presence of global scholars – sometimes sharply critical, sometimes sympathetic – has enriched debates, introduced new frameworks, and helped Indian academics situate their work in global conversations.

**Sign of vitality**  
In a democracy, criticism is not a threat; it is a sign of vitality. From anthropologists studying caste to historians revisiting colonial legacies and economists questioning policy orthodoxy, these critical engagements in Indian academia have helped refine national self-understanding. India's reputation as a vibrant democracy has never been undermined by such scholarship.



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is a professor and writer based in Hyderabad. Views are personal.

On the contrary, it has been strengthened by the openness with which these voices were received and debated. It is important to recall that no government in India has ever fallen because of academic criticism. Universities and research programmes across the country have long demonstrated maturity in accommodating a spectrum of ideas, including those critical of state policies. Research funding agencies such as the UGC, ICSSR, ICHR, and DST have historically supported projects examining sensitive social and political questions without censorship or hostility.

#### Intellectual loss

The danger today is not only administrative. When international scholars with a critical perspective grow hesitant to apply for visas, when Indian researchers hesitate to engage with interrogative frameworks, and when conferences avoid certain topics to ensure permissions, academic life itself becomes impoverished. The loss is not merely institutional but intellectual and moral. Nations that have prided only conformity have rarely advanced in the long run, either in knowledge or in innovation. India, which has always projected itself as a civilisation rooted in dialogue, *samvad*, must not turn its back on this tradition.

Furthermore, academic collaboration today operates in a deeply interconnected global environment. Research in areas such as digital culture, climate change, migration, artificial intelligence, and postcolonial theory cannot be meaningfully pursued in isolation. When certain scholars are denied access, entire research networks fragment. Students lose opportunities to interact with international peers; projects lose comparative depth; and the overall quality of scholarship declines. The effect is cumulative, slow but lasting. Inclusiveness in academia, hence,

is not simply a matter of hospitality but of democratic responsibility.

#### Shape global view

The work of sociologists, historians, and anthropologists, both Indian and foreign, has shaped global understanding of caste, gender, religion, and modernity. These studies have sometimes been uncomfortable for those in power but have helped India appear as an intellectually vibrant society fearless of bureaucratic scrutiny. This pluralism is a hallmark of democracy, and it has always coexisted with patriotic commitment.

If it begins to appear that India is using visa restrictions as a means of selective control over academic engagement, the message sent to the world will be unfortunate: that India no longer welcomes the exchange of ideas unless they conform to official narratives. Over time, the space for independent thought would shrink, and universities would risk becoming echo chambers. What India needs instead is a renewed commitment to academic openness, a framework that differentiates between political subversion and intellectual dissent, that trusts scholars to engage in debate without ulterior motives, and that recognises the long-term benefits of a plural academic environment.

It is not that there are no initiatives to promote international academic collaboration; the Global Initiative of Academic Networks (GIAN) is a notable example of such efforts. However, for initiatives like GIAN to be truly meaningful, they must also create space for critical scholars to engage freely and thoughtfully with Indian academia, enriching dialogue through diverse and independent perspectives.

An inclusive and confident academic culture is the best reflection of a mature democracy, one that listens, argues, and learns.

India, which has always projected itself as a civilisation rooted in dialogue, *samvad*, must not turn its back on this tradition

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# Data shows Venezuela's pivot from the U.S. to China

Was the growing Chinese influence in Venezuela also a trigger behind U.S.'s invasion?

#### DATA POINT

**Sambavi Parthasarathy**

With close to 200 American troops entering Caracas on Saturday, the Trump administration's invasion of Venezuela and the capture of its President Nicolas Maduro was the most dramatic U.S. intervention in Latin America since the 1989 Panama invasion.

The U.S. military intervention has seen shock waves across the globe, with allies and adversaries condemning the U.S. action as a clear violation of international law. Experts suggest that the move was primarily aimed at reimposing the Monroe Doctrine to re-establish U.S. hegemony in the Americas and reducing China's influence in China.

It is interesting to note that Venezuela relied heavily on the U.S. for weapons till 1995 before diversifying largely to players like Germany and Russia.

However, since the mid-2000s, China has consistently emerged as one of its key partners for weapons imports. There were no recorded instances of arms exports, in the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI)'s database from the U.S. to Venezuela in the last two decades, except for a negligible share in 2015. (Chart 1). The trend became more apparent during the Maduro regime. Since 2014, China has accounted for 46% of all arms imports by Venezuela. (Chart 2)

Secondly, Venezuela is one of China's key trade partners in Latin America.

While Venezuela holds the world's largest proven crude oil reserves, it lacks the resources to effectively extract and refine them.

Consequently, the South American country has sought alternative economic alliances with nations like China and Russia, which has demonstrated a greater tolerance

for the financial and geopolitical risks involved. This trend is visible not just in the arms trade but also in oil exports.

While direct crude oil data was unavailable, this analysis relies on mineral export figures – a category in which crude oil is a primary component. China formed less than 1% of Venezuela's mineral exports in the early 2000s but reached a peak of 28% by 2018 (Chart 3). A Reuters analysis showed that for some months in mid-2025, almost all the oil exports from the country went to China.

China has also surpassed the U.S. as the primary source of imports for Venezuela. In 2023, the U.S. accounted for only one-fourth of Venezuela's imports, with China accounting for one-third in the same period. This, however, was not always the case. In the mid-1990s, the share of the U.S. in Venezuela's imports crossed the 40% mark consistently for many years. However, in the last two decades, the U.S.'s share had almost halved, compensated by the increase in China's share. (Chart 4)

Thirdly, one of the reasons behind the Trump administration's latest move is also supposedly to counter the Chinese influence in the region.

China's investments in the Latin America region, in forms of aid, loans and grants, total up to more than \$300 billion between 2001-2023. Of which more than one-third (\$106 billion) was invested just in Venezuela, making it the biggest recipient of Chinese investments in the region. (Chart 5)

Not only within Latin America, Venezuela is also the fourth-largest recipient of Chinese aid globally, figures from AidData, a research lab, show. China has committed to more than 170 projects in the country during this period. Almost all of these funds have been disbursed as loans, and over 26% has been invested in key sectors such as energy, mining and other related industries.

#### The Chinese factor

Data were sourced from Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Harvard Growth Lab and AidData.org

Chart 1: Countrywise share of weapon imports by Venezuela in the 1950-2023 period. Figures in %

■ China ■ Russia ■ Iran ■ United States ■ Others

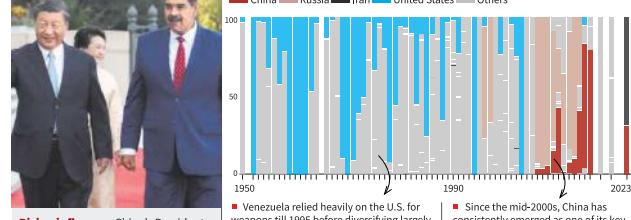


Chart 2: Countrywise share of weapon imports by Venezuela in the 2014-2023 period put together. Figures in %

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# Text & Context

THE HINDU

## NEWS IN NUMBERS

### Number of deaths in Manipur pick-up van accident

**4** Four persons, including three women, were killed after a pick-up van carrying 30-40 passengers fell into a gorge in Manipur's Churachandpur district. The vehicle, hired for a wedding, met with an accident near the remote Ngajlang village around noon. PTI

### Number of people killed in Iran's economic protests

**35** At least 35 people have been killed in violence linked to ongoing economic protests across Iran, according to a U.S.-based rights group. The toll includes 29 protesters, four children and two security personnel. PTI

### Value of international forex fraud racket busted in Maharashtra

**200** In ₹ crore. Maharashtra Police busted an international online fraud syndicate that cheated hundreds of victims of over ₹200 crore through fake Forex and gold trading schemes. Seven have been arrested. PTI

### Quantity of charas seized from inter-State drug supplier

**2.5** In kilograms. Delhi Police arrested a 39-year-old man for allegedly supplying charas from Himachal Pradesh to multiple States, including Delhi, Mumbai and Goa. The accused reportedly used multiple travel tactics to evade law enforcement. PTI

### Death toll in Siau Island floods in Indonesia

**16** At least 16 people were killed after torrential rains triggered a flash flood on Indonesia's Siau island, north of Sulawesi. A river inundated four towns, injuring 22 people and displacing nearly 700 residents. AP

COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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# Rethinking India's skilling outcomes

What prevents skilling from becoming a first-choice pathway for youth? Why has formal vocational training reached only a small share of the workforce? What limits industry participation in public skilling programmes? Why do Sector Skill Councils lack credibility with employers?

## EXPLAINER

Pravesh Dudani

### The story so far:

Over the last decade, India has built one of the largest skilling ecosystems in the world. Between 2015 and 2025, India's flagship skilling programme, Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana, has trained and certified around 140 crore candidates. Yet skilling has not become a first-choice pathway for most young Indians. Employability outcomes remain uneven, and Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) data show that wage gains from vocational training are modest and inconsistent, particularly in informal employment, where most workers are absorbed, offering limited recognition for certified skills and little visible improvement in quality of life.

### Why does skilling still fail to inspire aspiration?

India's Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) stands at 28%, but the National Education Policy 2020 aims to raise it to 50% by 2035. This cannot be done just by expanding traditional education; it must be integrated into higher education pathways in a way that makes it easier for people to learn new skills.

Despite years of investment, only about 4.1% of India's workforce has received formal vocational training, barely improving from about 2% a decade ago (PLFS; World Bank). In contrast, across OECD countries, about 44% of upper-secondary learners are enrolled in vocational programmes, rising to around 70% in countries such as Austria, the Czech Republic, the Finland, the Netherlands, the Slovak Republic and Slovenia.

The India Skills Report 2025 shows that post-degree skilling by graduates is not a mainstream or high-participation behaviour in India. If skilling is to scale



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meaningfully, it must travel through and alongside formal education.

### How can industry contribute meaningfully?

Industry is the single largest beneficiary of effective skilling and trained manpower. According to various industry reports, high attrition, long onboarding cycles, and productivity losses impose real costs, with attrition rates of 30-40% common across retail, logistics, hospitality, and manufacturing alone.

Yet, there is still not much participation from the industry. Most employers do not use public skilling certifications as hiring benchmarks; instead, they use internal training, referrals, or private platforms (NITI Aayog; World Bank). The National Apprenticeship Promotion Scheme (NAPS) has increased participation, but its effects are still unequal, particularly among bigger companies.

Industry is neither incentivised nor obliged to meaningfully contribute to relevant curriculum development, certification standards, or assessment rigour at scale. As long as skilling remains something industry consumes rather than

co-designs, it will lag labour-market reality.

### Why do Sector Skill Councils fail?

The most serious structural failure in India's skilling ecosystem lies with the Sector Skill Councils (SSCs).

SSCs were created with a clear mandate: to act as industry-facing institutions that define standards, ensure relevance, and anchor employability. In effect, they were meant to own the skilling value chain – from identifying industry demand to certifying job readiness. That mandate has not been fulfilled.

Today, responsibility is fragmented: training is delivered by one entity, assessment by another, certification by SSCs, and placement by someone else – if at all. Unlike higher education or technical institutions such as polytechnic diploma colleges, where reputational risk enforces accountability, the skilling system diffuses responsibility without consequence.

This fragmentation has eroded trust. Employer surveys frequently indicate that SSC credentials have limited signalling

value compared to degrees or prior work experience. Standards exist, but employers do not reliably hire against them. Industry-led certification models illustrate what is missing. Certifications from AWS, Google Cloud, or Microsoft work because the certifier's credibility is at stake. Assessments are fair and graded, not binary, and employers know what a certified candidate can do.

SSCs were meant to play this role at a national scale. Instead, they have largely limited themselves to standards creation, without owning outcomes. Until SSCS are held accountable for employability, certification will remain symbolic rather than economic.

The ongoing overhaul of standard-setting bodies must confront this directly.

### How can skilling drive sustained economic growth?

India's skilling challenge is a failure of accountability, not of intent or government funding.

Expanding NAPS and deepening industry integration can become one of the fastest levers to improve job readiness at scale by pushing skilling into the workplace. Initiatives like PM-SETU, the central scheme for modernisation of ITIs, point towards stronger execution models where industry ownership and accountability are built into programme design.

When skills are embedded in degrees, when industry is treated as a co-owner, and when SSCs are made answerable for placement outcomes, skilling moves from fragmented welfare intervention to a pillar of national economic empowerment.

That shift is not just about jobs. It is about the dignity of labour, productivity, and India's ability to convert its demographic strength into sustained national growth.

Pravesh Dudani is the Founder & Chancellor of Medhavi Skills University and an Advisor to NSDC

## THE GIST

▼ Despite PMKVY training around 1.40 crore candidates, employability outcomes remain uneven, wage gains are modest and inconsistent, and informal employment offers limited recognition for certified skills and little visible improvement in quality of life.

▼ Limited industry participation, uneven NAPS outcomes, and the structural failure of Sector Skill Councils – fragmented responsibility, weak signalling value of certifications, and lack of accountability for employability – have reduced skilling to a fragmented welfare intervention rather than a driver of sustained economic growth.

# What are biomaterials and how do they work?

How can indigenous biomaterials reduce dependence on fossil-based imports?

Shambhavi Naik

### The story so far:

A's countries look to shift to cleaner processes to manufacture consumer products, be it plastics or textiles, biomaterials will become the new frontier of materials engineering.

### What are biomaterials?

Biomaterials are materials derived wholly or partly from biological sources, or engineered using biological processes, that are designed to replace or interact with conventional materials. They are increasingly used across sectors such as packaging, textiles, construction, and healthcare. Biomaterials can be broadly categorised into three types: drop-in biomaterials, which are chemically identical to petroleum-based materials and can be used in existing manufacturing systems (such as bio-PET); drop-out biomaterials, which are chemically different and require new processing or end-of-life systems (such as

polylactic acid or PLA); and novel biomaterials, which offer new properties not found in conventional materials, such as self-healing materials, biodegradable implants, and advanced composites.

### Why does India need biomaterials?

For India, biomaterials address multiple goals, including environmental sustainability, industrial growth, revenue generation, and supporting farmer livelihoods through a single pathway. Indigenous biomaterials biomanufacturing can reduce India's heavy dependence on fossil-based imports for plastics, chemicals, and materials. It would also enable diversified value for agricultural feedstocks and residues, offering farmers new income streams beyond food markets. As global regulations and consumer preferences shift toward low-carbon and circular products, biomaterials position the Indian industry to remain competitive in export markets. Biomaterials also support domestic policy goals around waste reduction, such as the ban on single-use

plastics and climate action goals.

### Where does India stand today?

India's biomaterials sector, spanning bioplastics, biopolymers, and bio-derived materials, is rapidly emerging as a strategic industrial and sustainability opportunity, with the bioplastics market alone valued at around \$500 million in 2024 and forecast to grow strongly through the decade. Balrampur Chini Mills planned PLA plant investment in Uttar Pradesh is one of the biggest investments in India. Domestic innovation includes startups like Phool.co, converting temple flower waste into biomaterials and Praj Industries, who have their own demonstration-level bioplastics plant in progress. Although India has a rich agricultural base, in some sectors, there is foreign dependence for the technologies required for the transformation of feedstocks into market-ready final products.

### What is the way forward?

India has an advantage in building a

biomaterials industry, but some issues would need to be addressed first. If feedstocks also do not scale with increased demand, there could be feedstock competition with food sources. Similarly, aggressive agricultural practices could lead to water stress and soil deterioration. Further, weak waste-management and composting infrastructure could undermine environmental benefits. Fragmented policy coordination across agriculture, environment, and industry may slow adoption, and failure to move quickly could leave India dependent on imports as other countries scale faster.

To capitalise on this sector, policy actions include scaling biomanufacturing infrastructure (especially fermentation and polymerisation capacity), improving feedstock productivity for crops such as sugarcane, maize, and agricultural residues using emerging technologies, and investing in R&D and standards to develop both drop-in and novel biomaterials.

Clear regulatory definitions, labelling norms, and end-of-life pathways (recycling or industrial composting) are essential to build consumer and industry confidence.

Government procurement, time-bound incentives under frameworks, and support for pilot plants and shared facilities can help de-risk early investments.

Shambhavi Naik is chairperson, Takshashila Institution's Health & Life Sciences Policy

## THE GIST

▼ Biomaterials derived from biological sources are increasingly used across sectors and can reduce dependence on fossil-based imports while supporting environmental sustainability, industrial growth, and farmer livelihoods.

▼ India's biomaterials sector is emerging as a strategic opportunity, but scaling biomanufacturing infrastructure, feedstocks, waste-management systems, and policy coordination is essential to remain competitive as other countries scale faster.

FULL CONTEXT

# Privatisation and policy gaps threaten India's public health system

India's public health system struggles with chronic underfunding, privatisation, policy failure, and social inequities; doctors occupy a unique position of trust and moral authority, giving them the power to act as agents of social change and challenge policies that worsen disease and suffering

Parth Sharma

The state of healthcare in India has repeatedly been in the news. From fake medicines and unnecessary surgeries to unethical clinical trials, countless people have suffered across the country. At the same time, risk factors for disease are steadily rising due to policy gaps and systemic policy failures. The consumption of ultra-processed foods is driving an epidemic of non-communicable diseases, while unchecked air, water, and soil pollution, along with climate change, are pushing millions more into sickness. Access to good health and quality healthcare remains a privilege that only a few can afford. Class, caste, religion, gender, and other social markers profoundly determine how long one lives in good health and how much suffering one is made to endure.

## Existing problems

The situation from the perspective of those providing care is equally worrisome. ASHA workers continue to struggle for their rights, and working conditions for healthcare workers in most public hospitals remain abysmal.

Privatisation further compounds the problem. With private equity increasingly driving India's private healthcare industry, doctors are now expected to meet monthly targets, much like in any profit-driven sector. Through schemes such as AB PMAY and rampant public-private partnerships, public money is increasingly shunted to the private sector, further weakening the public health system.

Privatisation has also impacted medical education. With most private medical colleges charging upwards of ₹40 lakhs for undergraduate medical training, doctors are forced to shift their focus from understanding and acting on the social causes of disease to earning enough to recover the massive investment of money and time required to become doctors. Additionally, the medical education system has reduced medical training to MCQ-solving, producing doctors who are more focused on memorising facts and cracking exams than acquiring real clinical skills that can save lives. Today, "just an MBBs" is seen as having little value, and doctors are expected to pursue fellowships even after post-graduation to secure respectable practice or employment.

As health and healthcare increasingly become expensive commodities, and the public health system continues to erode, the future of India's health looks deeply worrisome. While increased public health funding, greater investment in primary care, and regulation of privatisation are frequently discussed as solutions, these remain largely abstract ideas. Their implementation depends on those in power, who repeatedly display apathy at every opportunity. What, then, can save India's crumbling public health system?

## Doctors as agents of change

Doctors occupy a unique position of power and trust in society, giving them an exceptional capacity to drive social change. They are among the few professionals who witness, firsthand and daily, how policy decisions translate into human suffering: how poverty becomes malnutrition, how unsafe roads become trauma, how weak regulation becomes



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cancer, kidney failure, or tuberculosis.

This proximity to suffering grants doctors moral authority that few other groups possess. Their voices carry credibility across social classes, in courts, in the media, and in policymaking spaces, precisely because they speak from lived clinical experience rather than abstract ideology.

The idea that the physician's responsibility extends beyond the clinic is not new. To undergraduate students in India, Rudolf Virchow, a German pathologist, is known primarily for his contribution to cell theory and the foundations of modern pathology. However, Virchow's role as a revolutionary physician is rarely discussed.

In 1848, he helped start Medical Reform, a weekly newspaper that promoted the idea that "medicine is a social science" and that "the physician is the natural attorney of the poor." He argued that disease was not merely a biological event but a political and social outcome shaped by poverty, poor housing, hunger, lack of education, and exclusion from power.

Virchow did not limit these ideas to academic writing. Convinced that lasting improvements in health required structural change, he entered active politics. In 1861, he co-founded the German Progressive Party and was elected to the Prussian Diet, where he emerged as a leading constitutional opponent of Otto von Bismarck's authoritarian and militaristic policies.

Virchow consistently argued that state resources should be directed away from military expansion and toward sanitation, housing, education, and public health infrastructure. For him, these were not welfare measures but essential medical interventions.

His political engagement continued in the German Reichstag from 1880 to 1893, where he advocated for urban sanitation systems, clean water supply, public education, and scientific freedom. Virchow used legislative spaces to translate epidemiological observations into policy, insisting that physicians had a duty to confront the social conditions that produced illness.

By stepping beyond hospitals and

laboratories into newspapers, parliaments, and public debate, Virchow exemplified the physician not as a passive technician, but as an active agent of social change.

Virchow's legacy is not an isolated historical exception.

In 1985, the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War, recognising how physicians mobilised their scientific authority and moral credibility to challenge nuclear proliferation and frame it as an existential public health threat. Their work demonstrated how medical knowledge could be deployed to confront global political violence and reframe security debates around human survival and health.

Similarly, doctors have played visible roles in struggles against oppressive political systems. During the apartheid era in South Africa, physicians organised to expose racial discrimination in healthcare, document abuses, and challenge the medical establishment's complicity with state violence. Groups of doctors openly opposed apartheid policies, asserting that neutrality in the face of injustice was incompatible with medical ethics.

India, too, has its own history of physicians as social reformers. Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy stands out as a powerful example, a doctor who used her medical training to challenge deeply entrenched social injustices. As one of India's first women doctors and legislators, she fought against child marriage, devadasi practices, and the exclusion of women from education and public life. Her work illustrates how medical authority can be leveraged to advance gender justice, social reform, and public welfare far beyond the clinic.

Together, these examples underline a critical point: the physician's role has never been confined to diagnosis and treatment alone.

Across history and geographies, doctors have stepped into public life to confront injustice, authoritarianism, and structural violence, affirming Virchow's enduring claim that medicine is inseparable from social change, and that physicians, by virtue of their work, are

uniquely positioned to act as its agents.

## Political accountability

It is high time doctors in India began questioning why their outpatient departments are increasingly crowded with patients presenting at advanced stages of disease; why the medicines they prescribe are unaffordable for most; and why, when affordable, those treatments are often ineffective.

Oncologists must ask why tobacco and alcohol continue to be aggressively promoted through surrogate advertising, why smokeless tobacco has become more affordable rather than less, why patients in India lack access to newer and potentially life-saving cancer therapies, and why so much suffering remains normalised. Trauma surgeons must confront why road traffic injuries are rising in India. Nephrologists must ask why the number of people requiring dialysis is rising so rapidly, and why access to dialysis remains so limited. Obstetricians must question why anaemia continues to be a major and persistent problem among pregnant women.

Pulmonologists must ask why we have failed to eliminate tuberculosis despite decades of sustained effort and resources.

Following these questions inevitably leads to the same conclusion: policy failure, either because effective policies do not exist or because existing policies remain confined to paper and are never meaningfully implemented. These answers also point to persistent complacency, and often complicity, among those in power. They lead us to multiple "industries" that prioritise profit over people's health, often enabled, protected, or even actively supported by the state.

India's health system can be compared to a bucket whose job is to contain suffering and keep the floor dry. Today, that bucket is overflowing, yet most of our attention is focused on finding better and more sophisticated mops to manage the spill. These mops, our diagnostic and treatment modalities, are themselves often flawed, while the flooding continues to worsen because of the holes in the bucket: public-private partnerships, unchecked privatisation, and chronic underfunding of public healthcare. Meanwhile, few are willing to look upstream at the tap and ask the more uncomfortable questions: Who benefits from the tap being left open? How can it be closed? Who is responsible for closing it, and why are they not doing so? Doctors must help shift the focus to the tap, even as they continue to question the tools used to keep the floor dry.

Doctors not only have the power to drive social change; they also carry a moral responsibility to stand up for the rights of those who suffer, the very people who entrusted them with their bodies and made it possible for them to become doctors in the first place. Silence, therefore, is not neutrality but a conscious choice to forgo influence. In a deeply unequal society like India, where many affected communities lack voice or power, doctors can amplify lived realities into public action. Their social standing, combined with ethical obligation, places them uniquely, not just as healers of disease, but as challengers of the structures that produce it.

Parth Sharma is a community physician and a public health researcher. Views expressed are personal



FROM THE ARCHIVES

## Know your English

S. Upendran

"What was all that commotion about last night?"

"A thief entered someone's house and ran away with their VCR. A couple of policemen are searching him now."

"The police have caught the thief already."

"That was pretty quick."

"I didn't say that the police had caught him. They are still searching him. Do you think...."

"I see. There's a big difference in meaning between searching for someone/something and searching someone."

"When you search for someone, I guess you are trying to find someone. In other words, you are looking for someone."

"Exactly! Here's an example. The husband went searching for his missing wife."

"In one of the movies I saw recently, the hero searches for an escaped convict in an underwater cave."

"When the news of the crash reached the village, the volunteers rushed to the crash site and spent the next twelve hours searching for survivors."

"That was nice of them."

"You can also search for something. For example, the pirates were searching for lost treasure."

"The scientists were searching for dinosaur eggs."

"I'm searching for peace."

"My, My! My! You sound like a philosopher. It doesn't suit at all."

"What do you mean? I am ...."

"Let's not get into an argument. Now tell me, what does search something mean?"

"When you search someone, you go through their pockets and see what they have on them. In other words, you find out what it is they are carrying. What ...." "...that is what the police do in the movies all the time."

"That's right! When you search someone, you find out what it is the person has on him."

"Exactly! Is he carrying a gun? Does he have drugs on him? Here is an example. When the constable finally caught the pickpocket, he searched him thoroughly."

"Before he entered the President's office, he was searched."

"The gang members searched me before they let me enter their boss."

"Gang members! I didn't know you were a member of a gang."

"Just an example, silly. You can also search something."

"The old man searched his son's room for cigarettes."

"Renu searched the files for the missing documents."

"Did she find them?"

"Search me! You mean you have the documents."

"No, no! When somebody asks you something and you reply search me; it means that you have no idea what the answer to the question is."

"Is it another way of saying 'I don't know'?"

"I guess you could say that."

"Every time my physics teacher asks me a question, I feel like saying Search me. Can I say that?"

"You can. But one thing you must remember is that search me is considered informal. So, don't use it in all contexts."

Published in The Hindu on March 23, 1999

## THE DAILY QUIZ

Recently, the U.S. forces landed in sovereign Venezuela and captured President Nicolas Maduro in a military operation. A quiz on CIA and its many 'interventions'

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

Mohammed Hidhayat

### QUESTION 1

The U.S. spy agency, Belgian authorities, and the U.K.'s MI6 were involved in the assassination of this African country's first democratically elected Prime Minister. Name the independence leader and the country he led?

### QUESTION 2

Which South American dictator seized power and ruled for 17 years after the CIA's involvement in the destabilisation of the democratically elected government of Salvador Allende in 1973?

### QUESTION 3

What was the most significant intelligence analysis failure related to the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq?

### QUESTION 4

The CIA devised several failed and unrealistic assassination plots, including poisoned cigars, exploding seashells, and contaminated diving suits, against which Latin American revolutionary leader?

### QUESTION 5

Although never established as a historical fact, X was alleged to have been a CIA agent. American journalist Seymour Hersh's 1983 book claimed that X received \$20,000 from the CIA as a spy, prompting a lawsuit in a U.S. court. While Mr. Hersh was cleared of the libel charge, Henry Kissinger testified that, to the best of his knowledge, X was not an informant. Identify X, a former Prime Minister of India.



### Visual Question:

Name this award-winning film that drew criticism as 'CIA hagiography', especially from journalists, for implying that torture yielded vital intelligence. AP

Questions and Answers to the previous day's daily quiz: 1. What was the intent of the Monroe Doctrine issued in 1823? Ans: To oppose European intervention in the Western Hemisphere and declare the Americas as a sphere of influence separate from Europe

2. What geopolitical crisis preceded the articulation of the Roosevelt Corollary? Ans: The Venezuelan crisis of 1902-1903, in which Britain, Germany, and Italy blockaded Venezuela over unpaid debts

3. How does the Roosevelt Corollary expand the Monroe Doctrine? Ans: It asserted the U.S. right to intervene in Latin American countries to preserve order and prevent European intervention, effectively making the U.S. a hemispheric "policeman"

4. What was one of the earliest uses of the Roosevelt Corollary in practice? Ans: U.S. intervention in the Dominican Republic to manage the country's debt and finances

5. Which U.S. political party renounced the Roosevelt Corollary's interventionist thrust? Ans: Franklin D. Roosevelt's Good Neighbor policy

Visual: The American intervention in which a Latin-American country is being depicted in this political cartoon? Ans: The Dominican Republic

Early Birds: K.N. Viswanathan | Tamal Biswas | Suddev Shet | Sumana Dutta | Sadhan Panda

## Word of the day

**Morass:**

an unpleasant and complicated situation that is difficult to escape from

**Synonyms:** trap, tangle, confusion

**Usage:** The project is stuck in a morass.

**Pronunciation:** newsth.live/morasspro

**International Phonetic Alphabet:** /məræs/

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

# Opinion

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 7, 2026



## AI RACE

Union Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw

Artificial intelligence is developing rapidly across the world. It is a proud moment for India that the Stanford AI Index has placed the country among the top three globally

## Defend deposits

A tax break on bank savings would ensure credit flows to the economy don't slow

**E**CONOMISTS HAVE LONG fretted about the slow pace of capital formation in India and the modest levels of household savings. It is true that gross household savings—financial and physical combined—are hardly buoyant. At around 24-25% of GDP, the ratio has remained largely flat in recent years. While this could certainly be higher, it also needs to be viewed in the context of rising incomes, growing household wealth, and changing lifestyle preferences over the past few decades. As wealth has increased, the propensity to save appears to have declined. Net financial savings have weakened as households increasingly borrow—both to meet basic expenses and to finance aspirations. Household debt has risen steadily, crossing 41% of GDP by March last year. As long as banks are underwriting these loans prudently, this by itself is not a cause for alarm.

The real concern lies in the sharp shift in the mix of household financial savings away from bank deposits and towards market-linked instruments. In 2016-17, bank deposits accounted for nearly 60% of household financial assets. That share has since fallen sharply to around 35%. Over the same period, equities and equity-oriented mutual funds have surged in popularity, with their share rising almost four-fold to about 15% in just five years. A deeper equity market is desirable in a developing economy, as it provides companies with access to growth capital. There is nothing inherently problematic about this shift. The problem is that banks are now facing an acute deposit shortage. The loan-to-deposit ratio is nudging 100%, an all-time high, constraining their ability to expand credit. The primary driver of this shift is the unattractive return on bank deposits. Interest rates have softened—three-year deposits fetch a modest 6.3%—and the interest earned is taxed at the individual's slab rate, which can be as high as 30%.

Equities, by contrast, enjoy a far more favourable tax treatment. Long-term capital gains on equities and equity-oriented mutual funds are taxed at 12.5% if held for over a year, with gains up to ₹1.25 lakh annually exempt. Short-term gains are taxed at 20%. With equities also delivering superior returns—often in the range of 8-9% more—the post-tax comparison overwhelmingly favours market-linked investments. Debt-oriented mutual funds fare little better, as capital gains are taxed at the slab rate regardless of the holding period, with no indexation benefit. On a post-tax basis, therefore, even modest equity returns often outperform fixed deposits, despite the higher volatility. Economists point out that this skewed tax treatment has materially altered household behaviour.

Bank deposits and fixed-income products have become distinctly unattractive for savers as few countries impose such a wide differential between the taxation of deposits and equity investments. A recalibration is warranted, particularly as weak deposit growth threatens to choke credit flows to the economy. The argument is not about privileging deposits over capital markets. A vibrant equity market is essential for a growing economy, and policymakers have rightly encouraged financial diversification. The concern is about balance. Not taxing deposit income at the slab rate would entail some revenue loss for the exchequer. But impairing banks' ability to lend poses a far greater risk. Credit is the lifeblood of economic growth, and any sustained slowdown in credit expansion would have far more damaging consequences for the broader economy.

## The Fed's six big challenges in 2026

**I**N COMING MONTHS, markets will undoubtedly obsess over President Donald Trump's choice to lead the Federal Reserve and whether this will give him the control he sees over interest rates. Yet that's not the only challenge the world's most powerful central bank will face in 2026.

I see six big ones.

**Independence:** Markets are right to worry. If President Trump manages to undermine faith in the Fed's commitment to containing inflation, the repercussions could be disastrous. That said, even if the next Fed chair wants to lower interest rates further in line with Trump's preferences, that outcome is far from guaranteed. The chair must also convince the policy-making Federal Open Market Committee, and risks losing credibility in the event of failure. Simultaneously retaining the confidence of the FOMC, the Fed staff, investors and the president will be a difficult task. The unsettled case of Fed Governor Lisa Cook, whom Trump has sought to fire "for cause," still matters a lot. If the Supreme Court effectively expands the president's power to remove Fed officials, including FOMC members, it will significantly enhance his ability to influence monetary policy decisions—and potentially to stack the committee.

**Interest rates:** Politics aside, the Fed has ample reason to hold steady, with monetary policy now judged by Chair Jerome Powell as "within a range of plausible estimates of neutral" following last year's three 25-basis-point rate cuts. There should be less tension between the goals of maintaining a stable labor market and reaching the 2% inflation target. It'll take quite some time for evidence to accumulate to justify further interest rate adjustments. The economy's momentum looks sustainable, with AI investment, tax cuts and very easy financial conditions all providing tailwinds. The inflationary effect of tariffs should subside by mid-year—and should be smaller than feared thanks to various carve-outs and renegotiations.

Housing inflation has also moderated, in part because the Trump administration's immigration crackdown has contributed to a collapse in household formation.

**The Fed's \$6.6 trillion balance sheet:** The central bank is expected to keep buying Treasury securities, maintaining a portfolio large enough to ensure that banks have ample cash reserves and that short-term lending markets operate smoothly. Some Fed chair candidates, however, have argued for reducing the balance sheet sharply. If attempted, this would complicate the conduct of monetary policy, increasing both interest-rate volatility and contagion risk within the banking system.

**Bank supervision:** The 2023 regional banking crisis revealed severe shortcomings in supervisory process and culture. Vice-Chair Michelle Bowman has argued for focusing on issues material to bank safety and soundness, and for streamlining overly complex and duplicative regulations. The goals are sensible, but how they'll be translated into practice remains to be seen. More loosening could put taxpayers and the broader economy at undue risk.

**Stablecoins:** Governor Christopher Waller has proposed that the Fed offer "skinny accounts" to fintech firms that have obtained limited bank charters—allowing issuers of stablecoins, for example, to park their reserves at the central bank. As opposed to traditional Fed accounts, these would pay no interest and offer no daylight overdrafts or access to loans from the Fed's discount window. How this gets resolved will help determine the future of the US payment system.

**The Fed's monetary policy framework:** The central bank's communications need reforming. Its quarterly summary of economic projections, for example, emphasises the modal forecast and obscures what's driving disagreements about the appropriate interest rate path. A better approach would be to publish a staff forecast accompanied by alternative scenarios. This would help market participants understand how the Fed would react if the economy deviated from the baseline forecast and thus make monetary policy more effective. Yet despite Chair Powell's suggestion last May that changes could be forthcoming, nothing has happened so far.

The challenges facing the Fed run both deep and wide. It'll be fascinating to see what unfinished business the new charters take on.

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DISMANTLING A MODEL THAT KEPT IT AFLOAT WILL NOT IMPROVE SAFETY OR AFFORDABILITY

## Why IndiGo still matters

AMIT KAPOOR  
RICHARD DASHER

Respectively Chair, Institute for Competitiveness,  
& Director and Professor at US Asia Technology  
Management Center, Stanford University



**I**NDIA IS NOW becoming an unusually crowded graveyard of airlines. Carriers have repeatedly expanded and collapsed in a market that ought, by size alone, to be among the most lucrative. The usual explanation points to poor management or excessive ambition. The truer diagnosis is, however, structural. India is one of the world's highest-cost aviation environments. Yet it is pressured to maintain lowfares. This combination has acted as a prolonged stress test. Every major airline operating in India has faced the same cost-price contradiction, and most have failed to resolve it.

IndiGo operates squarely within this contradiction. It is often described as a low-cost carrier, but India does not permit such a thing. Aviation turbine fuel is benchmarked to global prices and then burdened with -24% in central and state taxes. Nearly 70% of an Indian airline's cost base including fuel, aircraft leases, maintenance, and spares is effectively dollar-linked, leaving carriers exposed to currency depreciation. Aircraft, landing, and navigation charges have climbed steadily, even as fares are nudged downwards by public pressure and schemes such as UDAN cap tariffs on low-density routes, often without fully compensating airlines for the losses incurred. IndiGo is therefore better understood as a low-price airline operating in a high-cost system.

That distinction matters, particularly after the operational chaos IndiGo experienced in December. A more careful reading suggests that while the airline deserves criticism for how it handled the crisis, the episode does not demonstrate that the underlying economics of the model have broken. Undermining the operating logic that has allowed it to survive would therefore be a mistake.

IndiGo has built one of the lowest average fare structures in global aviation while remaining, by the government's own admission to Parliament last year, India's only consistently profitable major airline. It has done so not by compromising safety, but by relentless efficiency. A single-type narrow-body Airbus fleet sim-

plices training and maintenance. High aircraft utilisation and quick turnarounds reduce unit costs. Roughly 80% of the fleet is leased, keeping maintenance predictable and capital flexible. Overheads are lean. The airline also employs an unusually high proportion of women, exceeding 50% of its workforce in an industry not known for diversity.

In a market where airlines, on average, lose money on each flight they operate, IndiGo's low fares are the result of superior unit economics rather than cutting corners. In fact, its safety is serious, measured by serious incidents and fatal accidents, compare favourably with peers in India and other high-growth aviation markets.

IndiGo's domestic market share, now above 60%, looks intimidating in isolation, but it is not the product of regulatory protection or market foreclosure. India's aviation sector has remained open. Multiple airlines have entered, expanded, and, in several cases, failed or retreated. Passengers have repeatedly chosen IndiGo because it offers reliable schedules, clean cabins, and fares that align with household budgets.

The December meltdown has nonetheless exposed real weaknesses.

Changes to Flight Duty Time Limitations (FDTL) were framed by critics as proof that IndiGo runs "too lean." In fact, the airline was compliant with the core set of FDTL rules introduced in July, and operations through November remained broadly stable even after additional prescriptions including a wider definition of "night

duty" took effect on November 1. The breakdown in December was the result of cascading shocks hitting a tightly run but still functioning system. Dense late-night schedules, adverse winter weather, congestion, and digital disruptions in crew rostering combined with the new rules to remove any remaining slack.

One provision proved especially destabilising. If a pilot's duty crossed midnight by even a few minutes, the entire duty was reclassified as "night duty" and limited to two landings. Flights that were legal when delayed, forcing last-minute cancellations and leaving aircraft and crews out of position for subsequent rotations. The longer night-duty window also meant pilots cumulatively limit faster, triggering mandatory rest periods that rapidly exhausted reserves.

Operational buffers that would normally absorb disruption were effectively removed. None of this absolves IndiGo. Communication with passengers and staff was slow and inadequate. Crisis handling was visibly poor. As the backbone of India's aviation grid, the airline must accept that its failures ripple across the system. It must invest in resilience, not merely efficiency, if it is to justify its scale.

To characterise the episode primarily as a safety failure is, however, an oversimplification. IndiGo was compliant with the applicable rules; the disruption arose when prescriptive regulations met the operational complexities of a dense airline network. This is not an argument for

it is not flawless. However, dismantling the model that kept it afloat, while leaving hostile economics and structural rigidities untouched, will not improve safety or affordability. It will simply add another name to India's airline graveyard. India can either build airlines or keep writing their obituaries.

The deeper story extends beyond IndiGo. For much of the past 15 years, Indian airlines have spent more per seat-kilometre than they earned. The challenge lies not in whether the state should intervene, but in aligning mandated outcomes with transparent and adequate funding rather than relying on hidden cross-subsidies or price controls. IndiGo adapted to this reality by becoming a low-price, high-efficiency airline. For decades, India has effectively subsidised foreign hub carriers as Indian traffic flowed abroad. IndiGo stands apart as the only Indian airline to have built scale, discipline, and resilience on an Indian platform.

None of this absolves IndiGo. Communication with passengers and staff was slow and inadequate. Crisis handling was visibly poor. As the backbone of India's aviation grid, the airline must accept that its failures ripple across the system. It must invest in resilience, not merely efficiency, if it is to justify its scale.

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## Navigating through a Fractured Age



N CHANDRA MOHAN

The author is an economics and business commentator based in New Delhi

**L**OOKING AHEAD, INDIA'S strategic challenge is to navigate through a world economy that is fragmenting broadly into US- and Sino-centric blocs. Due to the hegemonic struggle for dominance between Washington and a resurgent Beijing, trade and investment flows between these blocs are declining by more than within these blocs since the last four years. How India leverages the opportunities thrown up by global fragmentation has a major bearing on its higher levels of ambition on the trade and investment front to become a developed nation by 2047. India's policy choices in this regard are not doubt complicated by the stress it is currently facing with the US despite a strategic relationship and continuing face-off on the border with China.

Although the fracturing of the global economy along geopolitical lines has been observed by the International Monetary Fund and World Trade Organization (WTO), this process has been authoritatively examined in Neil Shearing's new book, *The Fractured Age*. At the outset, he argues that fracturing does not imply de-globalisation as trade flows continue to increase and cross-border capital flows remain high. The vast majority of global trade is broadly unaffected by US-China fracturing which impacts only 15% of flows of strategic goods like high-tech electronics, green technologies, and critical minerals. In this milieu, non-aligned countries may wish to engage with both blocs but Shearing makes the point that

they will have to pick a side.

The big question naturally is, which side will India take? The temptation naturally will be to align with the US with whom India has a strategic relationship and a shared interest to limit the power and influence of China. The foundation of the Indo-US relationship is obviously economics. America's deepening engagement with the world's fastest-growing economy is underpinned by trade and investment flows. As India's largest export market, it has purchased 48 times more of our merchandise than China did in FY21 November. The US has also cumulatively invested 28 times more in India than has the dragon from April 2000 to March 2025. An equally important factor is the growing profile of the Indian diaspora—which is perhaps the wealthiest ethnic community—that has registered its presence on the political front in FY26 November.

The big question naturally is, which side will India take? The temptation naturally will be to align with the US with whom India has a strategic relationship and a shared interest to limit the power and influence of China. The foundation of the Indo-US relationship is obviously economics. America's deepening engagement with the world's fastest-growing economy is underpinned by trade and investment flows. As India's largest export market, it has purchased 48 times more of our merchandise than China did in FY21 November. The US has also cumulatively invested 28 times more in India than has the dragon from April 2000 to March 2025. An equally important factor is the growing profile of the Indian diaspora—which is perhaps the wealthiest ethnic community—that has registered its presence on the political front in FY26 November.

However, India's shift away from leaning to the US appears inevitable thanks to the America First disruption of President Donald Trump. He has spent decades of progress in nurturing this strategic relationship by slapping 25% reciprocal tariffs on Indian goods and another 25% for purchasing Russian oil. Trump has again threatened higher tariffs if these purchases continue, bedeviling prospects of a trade deal. Although we secured a portion of Apple's smartphone production shift from China, similar fracturing-driven opportunities appear highly unlikely. India, for instance, is out of the US-led strategic initiative, Pax Sifca, to build a secure supply chain for critical minerals and energy inputs for advanced manufacturing and semiconductors.

Along with China is equally problematic.

Although tensions have descended on the border, de-escalation and disengagement of troops has not begun. Like the US, the dragon has used coercive economic measures to impose its will on an economically weaker India, like blocking shipments of rare earths, fertilisers, and tunnel boring equipment. Although there are possibilities of exporting more to China—like the reverse-trade model for drugs—India's trade imbalance is massive and accounts for 35% of its global trade deficit. The dragon is also uncomfortable with Apple's shift of a part of its smartphone production to India and has filed multiple disputes at the WTO challenging India's schemes in electronics.

Unfortunately, there are no easy solutions for the fraught border situation that can restore normalcy in bilateral economic relations. Over the long haul, it can be resolved by narrowing the economic power differential between India and

China. The fact remains that the dragon is five times larger than India as the second-largest economy in the world. This is reflected in relative military strength, with India in a disadvantageous position to resolve the issue through force. India must steadily build up its economy through rapid growth to narrow this differential. By amassing troops and making border incursions as well, China only recognises India as only a weaker neighbour and not as one with whom it can persuade to join its bloc as an ally.

The upshot is that the option of opportunistically aligning with either bloc does not appear feasible. The most efficacious course of action, however, is for India to concentrate on building its strengths to remain the world's fastest-growing large economy and improving its trade prospects and investment inflows through a network of free trade agreements with important developed powers like the European Union, and the Global South and mega regional groupings like the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership. Shearing notes that India may not have the lefft to challenge the US and China but its growth and will encourage it to play a more strategically autonomous role in world affairs. The prospect then is for Washington and Beijing making efforts to court its support on key issues as India copes with a fractured age.

*Views are personal*

## Keep calm

Apropos of "Tariffs as theatre" (FE, January 6), the editorial captures well the theatrical element in President Trump's latest tariff threat over India's Russian oil imports. Such public posturing may serve domestic political ends, but it complicates a partnership with both countries very highly. India's oil purchases are guided by practical considerations rather

than geopolitical alignment alone. We have, in fact, steadily raised imports from the US. A more productive course would be to pursue quiet, sustained dialogue on trade balances, energy collaboration, and investment opportunities. Steady engagement, not reactive rhetoric, will best protect and strengthen bilateral ties.

—M. Barthal, Bengaluru

*We write to us at [feletters@expressindia.com](mailto:feletters@expressindia.com)*

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Energy diplomacy

Apropos of "Tariffs as theatre" (FE, January 6), Donald Trump's renewed threat to impose higher tariffs on India over its Russian oil imports, framed as a test of loyalty and punctuated by the claim that Modi acted "to make me happy," is not just a trade provocation but a symbolic affront to India's strategic autonomy. Despite a recent dip in Russia's crude intake,

India remains Moscow's top oil buyer, a position driven by sovereign energy needs. India must assert that its energy diplomacy is rooted in civilisational statecraft, not transactional appeasement. This is a moment to reject asymmetrical pressure and affirm that India is not a client state but a civilisational power navigating turbulent geopolitics with dignity, resilience, and clarity.

—Amarjeet Kumar, Hazaribagh

## This is sheer American bullying!

Venezuela has the world's largest reserves of crude oil. In 2025, Venezuela sold 900,000 barrels of crude oil. US President Trump is known for taking action first and then providing justifications later. Apparently, Trump complained that large quantities of narcotics were being smuggled into the US from Venezuela, and that the US would not tolerate this trafficking. Using drug trafficking as a pretext, the US launched a unilateral attack on Venezuela. American soldiers captured Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro and his wife, Cilia Flores, and took them to the United States. The pretext of drug trafficking continued, so the US stated that they had imprisoned them in the Drug Enforcement Administration office. Now, Venezuelan President Maduro is spending his nights in a New York prison, and Vice President Rodríguez has been given command of Venezuela. The US has leveled accusations of narco-terrorism and has also threatened Rodríguez, warning him that if he doesn't comply with their demands, he should be prepared to pay a heavy price, just like Maduro. At the same time, the US has seized control of Venezuela's oil reserves. Donald Trump says that the US will operate the oil reserves until the situation normalizes. In reality, all the major wars currently raging in the world are driven by the control of mineral resources. Wealthy countries are trying to seize these resources from those who possess them. Ukraine is also facing conflict with Russia because of its abundant natural resources. The same applies to Venezuela. This action by the US has also been condemned by New York City Mayor Jumaane Williams. They protested to Trump that a unilateral attack on a sovereign nation like Venezuela is an act of war. China has also openly condemned this move by the US. As far as India is concerned, our policy is to maintain good relations with everyone. India emphasizes resolving issues through dialogue and promoting peace and stability. India has stated that we are monitoring the evolving situation and are concerned about the well-being and safety of the Venezuelan people. India supports the people of Venezuela. As for the role of the United Nations, it doesn't have much influence these days, but the UN did hold a meeting on this issue. The US had accused Venezuela of narco-terrorism back in 2020. The situation remained tense afterward, but now the US has finally entered Venezuela and arrested President Maduro and his wife. It is quite clear that Venezuela's control over its oil reserves was not acceptable to the US. The US itself is an oil producer! That is why it also has strained relations with Russia. This is also why the US has imposed a 25 percent tariff on India, in addition to a 25 percent penalty, because India is buying large quantities of crude oil from Russia. The international community has been unable to stop the war between Russia and Ukraine for three years, so who will openly condemn this blatant bullying by the US? The saying, "Might makes right," seems to be coming true. But voices should be raised against the US throughout the world for attempting to seize Venezuela's oil reserves under the pretext of narco-terrorism.

Abhishek Vij

## Impact of the US-Venezuela Conflict on India

The US has finally seized control of Venezuela's oil reserves. Venezuela's oil business is currently under US control. Since India is a major importer of crude oil and has to import 85 percent of its crude oil needs, it is reasonable to consider the impact of such actions on India when such a crisis arises. We are examining the benefits and losses for India from the perspective of Venezuela being an oil-supplying country. A report from the economic research institute GTRI has been released, which states that the US control over Venezuelan oil wells will not cause any significant harm to India. Previously, India imported a large quantity of crude oil from Venezuela, but when the US imposed sanctions on the sale of Venezuelan oil, India also reduced its crude oil imports from Venezuela by 81.3 percent in 2024-25. Now, India is importing oil worth only \$2.55 billion. However, India also exports goods worth \$9.53 million to Venezuela. Trade between India and Venezuela was continuously declining due to US sanctions, reduced trade volume, and the long distance. India exports pharmaceuticals, medicines, machinery, and textiles to Venezuela. We import crude oil from them. At one point, Venezuelan oil accounted for 10.6 percent of our crude oil production, but after the sanctions, it has fallen to only 3.6 percent. A digital agreement was also signed to increase this trade, but the situation has now changed. Now, everything will happen according to the US's wishes. However, experts say that India owes Venezuela \$1 billion. If the US gains control of the oil reserves, it could potentially revive the Venezuelan oil industry completely and allow India to recover its outstanding billion-dollar debt. Currently, this seems like a long shot. There are many hopes, but whether they will be fulfilled depends on the circumstances. For now, the way the US has intervened in Venezuela and arrested the president has jeopardized the digital agreement recently concluded between India and Venezuela.

## CHINA'S "DARK FACTORIES": THE DAWN OF 24/7 AUTOMATED MANUFACTURING



Parneet Sachdev  
Chairman of Real Estate Regulatory  
Authority and a leading author

Arthashastra

The industrial skyline of China is changing in profound ways. Across the country, manufacturing plants once filled with human labour, fluorescent lighting, and repeated shifts are being replaced by "dark factories", fully automated facilities that operate without human presence or traditional lighting. Visitors to some of China's industrial zones describe walking beside conveyor belts for nearly a kilometre, the only movement coming from machines, and finally seeing a truck drive out carrying finished products. That surreal scene is no science fiction. By 2024, China's deployment of industrial robots surged from approximately 189,000 units in 2014 to over two million (Business Today, 11 November 2025). The term "dark factory" has emerged to capture the essence of a production line that requires neither workers nor lights and works around the clock in darkness. (FT, 2 September 2025).

These factories are built on the convergence of several technological advances. At the heart are robot arms that weld, paint, assemble, inspect and polish. They are supported by autonomous guided vehicles (AGVs) that move components around the plant, sensors that continuously monitor status and defects, and artificial-intelligence systems that optimise flow and predictive maintenance (IEN, 27 August 2025). The elimination of the human shift structure means the factory can run 24/7, with no breaks for meals, no lighting needed once machines are programmed and no wage shifts to worry about.

**HOW THE MODEL WORKS: MECHANICS AND ECONOMICS OF THE DARK FACTORY**

**First comes the input side.** Machines receive raw materials from upstream suppliers, often via automated logistics. Conveyors move parts to robotic stations where arms perform very specific tasks: welding, bolting, painting, inspection and packaging. Meanwhile autonomous vehicles shuttle components between cells, sometimes even from one building to another. These vehicles operate using laser-navigation, simultaneous localisation and mapping (SLAM) or vision-based guidance. The lighting requirement is minimal because

machines do not require human visibility; sensors and cameras do the quality checks.

**Second, the connective layer:** Internet of Things (IoT) sensors, edge-computing nodes and central AI systems monitor performance in real time. Deviations trigger immediate corrective action, robots are recalibrated, predictive maintenance executed. The shift to "Autonomy 2.0" (machines that scale with data and compute rather than simply adding more engineers) drives large economies of scale (Wu et al., 2023).

**Third, the cost structure.** Although the upfront capital investment is high (robots, AGVs, sensors, software, infrastructure), the marginal cost of production falls sharply. Labour costs decline nearly to zero per unit of output, and the precision reduces defects, rework and scrap. Domestic robot makers now meet about half of China's robot demand and undercut global rivals on price (FT, 2 September 2025).

From an economic perspective, labour costs, once a key competitive advantage for manufacturing in China, are being gradually eroded by automation. Through automation, yield improvements of 20-30% are common. A factory producing electric-vehicle chassis in Sichuan described how automation allowed it to win contracts from both Africa and Southeast Asia due to lower costs and higher consistency (FT, 2 Sept 2025). China is now producing can produce high-quality goods, even in labour-intensive sectors, at cost levels traditionally associated with lower-wage countries. For global buyers, this is attractive.

Historically many manufacturing firms moved from high-wage zones (Europe, Japan, Korea) to China, then to lower-cost countries like Vietnam, Bangladesh or India. But if China offers near-low-cost production with high automation and high quality, the incentive to locate elsewhere erodes. The dark factory becomes a new competitive frontier.

China's robot installation surged to

some 280,000 units in recent years

representing more than half the

global total (FT, 2 Sept 2025).

In 2024 alone China installed 295,000

robots, nearly ten times the U.S.

number of 34,200 (NY Post, 29 Sept 2025).

With such capacity, China's

manufacturing output can expand

rapidly and at lower marginal cost.

**INDIA'S CATCH-UP IMPERATIVE: WHY "CHINA PLUS" MAY NEED RETHINKING**

For India, the emergence of China's

dark factories raises urgent

strategic questions. India's aim of

being a manufacturing hub; often

expressed as the "China Plus"

strategy (that is, companies locating

manufacturing in India in addition

to or instead of China) may face a



new pathways. Dark factories require reliable 24x7 power, predictable logistics, minimal downtime. India must invest in energy infrastructure, stable grid supply, smart factories' connectivity, and logistics corridors. Without these, automation premiums cannot be realised.

### GLOBAL PRODUCTION AND THE CHINA PLUS NEXUS

Looking ahead, global production will still be multi-polar. Not all goods warrant a dark-factory build. India can still carve a role, especially if it combines automation with flexibility, small-batch customisation, regional supply-chain access (to Africa, Middle East, South Asia) and services-led manufacturing ecosystems.

The rise of China's dark factories marks more than a technological milestone. The window to claim the next wave of manufacturing expansion is narrowing because China is transforming the playing field beneath its feet. That does not mean India is doomed to second-tier status. If India accelerates its adoption of smart manufacturing, invests in its robot ecosystem, builds the infrastructure and skills necessary for 24x7 production, then the China Plus strategy can still succeed.

Over the past few years, China's industrial machine has played a surprising role in bolstering Russia's defence-industrial base even in the face of sanctions. A detailed study by Carnegie Endowment for International Peace reports that China became the supplier of roughly 90% of Russia's microelectronics imports and a majority of high-priority machine-tools needed for missiles and armoured vehicles by 2023 (US-China Review Commission). That shift has eroded the bargaining power and market share of Western machine-tool suppliers and chip-vendors in those geographies.

Meanwhile, in the United States and Europe, the so-called "China shock" effect has been widely documented: for example, studies estimate that from 2000 to 2007, U.S. regions most exposed to Chinese imports lost between roughly 550,000 to 2.4 million manufacturing jobs. More recently, the European Central Bank flagged that increased competition from Chinese manufacturers has contributed to job losses in the euro-area automobile and chemical industries, and that Chinese exports to Europe surged between 2019 and 2024 by up to 150% in some sectors (The Wall Street Journal).

In a world where factories maybe no longer need lights and human shifts vanish, the new frontier is speed, precision, cost and scale. The question then is: will India build its dark factories, or watch them be built around it?

(Views expressed are the author's own).

### THOUGHT OF THE DAY

The best way to predict the future is to create it.

-Peter Drucker

## How climate change is altering food production patterns

Climate change is no longer a distant environmental concern for India; it is a direct threat to food security. Rising temperatures, erratic rainfall, and extreme weather events are disrupting agricultural cycles, reducing crop yields, and deepening inequalities between regions and social groups. The impact is being felt not only by farmers but also by millions of consumers facing rising food prices and nutritional insecurity. India's agriculture remains heavily dependent on the monsoon. Any deviation—delayed onset, uneven distribution, or sudden cloudbursts—has immediate consequences. In recent years, heatwaves during critical crop stages have damaged wheat, rice, and pulses. Unseasonal

rains have destroyed standing crops, while prolonged dry spells have reduced soil moisture and groundwater recharge.

Small and marginal farmers, who make up the majority of India's agricultural workforce, are the most vulnerable. With limited access to irrigation, crop insurance, and institutional credit, a single failed season can push families into debt. Climate shocks often force farmers to sell assets, reduce food consumption, or migrate in search of work. These coping mechanisms weaken long-term resilience and trap households in cycles of vulnerability.

The effects extend beyond rural areas. Urban consumers are increasingly exposed to food inflation driven by climate-related supply disruptions. Price spikes in vegetables, cereals, and edible oils hit low-



income households the hardest, forcing them to cut back on protein-rich and nutritious foods. Malnutrition, already a persistent problem, risks worsening as diets become less diverse. Government responses have largely focused on short-term relief—compensation packages, minimum support price adjustments, and food grain distribution. While these measures provide immediate support, they do not address structural weaknesses. Climate-resilient agriculture requires

investment in research, water management, crop diversification, and extension services that reach farmers on the ground.

There is also a growing need to rethink cropping patterns. Water-intensive crops continue to be promoted in regions facing severe water stress, driven by procurement policies and political considerations. Encouraging climate-appropriate crops, millets, and pulses could improve resilience while enhancing nutritional outcomes. However, such shifts require market support and consumer acceptance. Technology is often presented as a solution, but its benefits remain uneven. Weather advisories, satellite monitoring, and climate-smart practices can reduce risk, but only if farmers have access to information, inputs, and financial support.

# Congress Government Survey In Karnataka Debunks Rahul Gandhi's Vote Chori Narrative!

**A** survey commissioned by the Congress government in Karnataka decisively affirms public trust in EVMs, VVPATs, and the fairness of India's electoral process, puncturing the opposition's manufactured narrative.

**Lok Sabha Elections 2024 - Evaluation of Endline Survey of Knowledge, Attitude and Practice (KAP) of Citizens** study to assess the outcomes of the Systematic Voters' Education and Electoral Participation (SVEEP) programme implemented by the Office of the Chief Electoral Officer. A representative sample of 5,001 individuals was drawn across all four divisions of Karnataka - Bengaluru, Mysuru, Belagavi, and Kalaburagi - encompassing rural, urban, and reserved constituencies, with careful stratification by age, gender, and social category.

The results of the survey, however, debunk the entire narrative of tampering with EVMs, Vote chori, and the supposedly "hydrogen bomb" that he has been claiming to drop ever since.

Across all regions, confidence in EVM accuracy is overwhelming and consistent, 83.61% of respondents strongly agree that EVMs provide accurate results. Kalaburagi region shows the highest trust, with 94.48% agreement.

Public confidence in the fairness of Indian elections is broad, deep, and consistent across regions. A combined 84.55% of respondents believe elections in India are conducted freely and fairly. Kalaburagi shows the strongest confidence, with a 94.86% agreement, the highest among all regions. VVPAT awareness is widespread and exponential, reinforcing the credibility of India's electoral process. 85.39% of respondents are aware of VVPAT

## Opinion on Trust in EVM Accuracy

Region	Strongly Agree (%)		Neither Agree nor Disagree (%)		Disagree (%)		Strongly Disagree (%)		Total (%)
	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	
Belagavi	21.43	63.90	4.29	9.14	1.24	20.59			
Bengaluru	9.28	63.67	15.67	9.44	1.94	35.29			
Kalaburagi	11.24	83.24	2.19	2.19	1.14	20.59			
Mysuru	17.92	70.67	3.33	5.83	2.25	23.53			
<b>Total</b>	<b>14.22</b>	<b>69.39</b>	<b>7.65</b>	<b>7.04</b>	<b>1.71</b>	<b>100.00</b>			

## Opinion on Free and Fair Elections in India

Region	Strongly Agree (%)		Neither Agree nor Disagree (%)		Disagree (%)		Strongly Disagree (%)		Total (%)
	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	
Belagavi	19.24	69.62	3.24	6.00	1.90	20.59			
Bengaluru	7.17	67.11	12.50	9.67	3.56	35.29			
Kalaburagi	10.19	84.67	3.14	1.43	0.57	20.59			
Mysuru	15.08	72.08	4.42	5.83	2.58	23.53			
<b>Total</b>	<b>12.14</b>	<b>72.41</b>	<b>6.76</b>	<b>6.31</b>	<b>2.37</b>	<b>100.00</b>			

## Opinion on Electoral Literacy and VVPAT

Division	Yes, have seen one in electoral literacy sessions (%)		Yes, have heard/read about it (%)		No (%)	Total (%)
	Yes, saw it when I cast my vote (%)	No (%)	Yes, have heard/read about it (%)	No (%)		
Belagavi	74.76	6.29	3.43	15.52	20.59	
Bengaluru	42.72	12.89	23.06	19.33	35.29	
Kalaburagi	82.48	4.10	5.33	8.10	20.59	
Mysuru	73.25	3.92	10.42	12.42	23.53	
<b>Total</b>	<b>65.39</b>	<b>7.61</b>	<b>12.39</b>	<b>14.61</b>	<b>100.00</b>	

while casting their vote. Nearly two-thirds (65.39%) have personally seen

VVPAT. In kalaburagi 82.48% saw VVPAT during voting. By referring Karnataka's Mahadevapura and Alanda Assembly constituency Rahul Gandhi Raised a serious question about authenticity of Indian Democracy and Election commission. Even he termed it as Hydrogen bomb. But the survey conducted in Karnataka is holding a mirror for his allegations.

Kalaburagi, a hometown of AICC chief Mallikarjuna Kharge, and a Karnataka cabinet minister Priyank Kharge, who is very much vocal against BJP and RSS, for father and son duo this survey has turned to a night mare for them as people of Kalaburagi showed more trust on EVM and Election Process. Whether it is confidence in EVM accuracy, belief that elections are free and fair, or direct awareness of VVPAT verification. Kalaburagi consistently records near-consensus endorsement of electoral integrity. Data from Congress-ruled Karnataka presents a reality that completely dismantles the Congress narrative and exposes it as a political excuse rather than a democratic concern. Congress leaders speak of institutional collapse. Citizens report the opposite. This is not a fearful or coerced electorate. It is a confident, orderly, and participatory democracy. When trust survives scrutiny from the ground, allegations collapse into noise. And in this case, the loudest allegation has been silenced by the quiet confidence of the Kanandigas in their own Congress-ruled state. As 91.31% citizens believe that elections conducted are fair and free, the congress allegations of 'Democracy in Danger' has lost its relevance. By Winning 83.61% citizen trust, Finally EVM had a smile. 90.16% of voters finding the voting experience as "Convenient". This result shows that the voters want

convenience, not conspiracy theories of losers.

Technology has brought transparency, and the voter knows it, since 2018, with over 67% citizens now aware of VVPAT's verification mechanism.

According to Congress, rural, Dalit, and backward communities are being misled during elections. The reality is that these very voters show the highest faith in the system, with 81.39% believing that every vote counts. Even congress raised question about integrity of the polling officials but 95% of voters clearly rejected this claim by saying polling staff to be cooperative or very cooperative, none of them has worked under any political pressure. The Karnataka Congress administration commissioned the complete study.

The results of the survey, however, debunk the entire narrative of tampering with EVMs, Vote chori, and the supposedly "hydrogen bomb" that he has been claiming to drop ever since.

The results of this survey are very apparent. Voters have complete faith in the electoral commission because it conducts elections in a transparent manner. Voters themselves strongly reject accusations of Vote Chori, EVM tampering, and other things.

## Why community sports matter more than elite competition

**W**hen sports dominate headlines, the focus is usually on elite athletes, major tournaments, and medal counts. Yet the most lasting impact of sports is often felt far from stadiums and television screens, in neighbourhood grounds, school fields, and community spaces where people play for enjoyment rather than glory. Community sports create opportunities for physical activity that are accessible and inclusive. Informal football matches, local cricket leagues, running groups, and recreational games allow people of all ages and abilities to participate. These activities encourage regular movement, which improves cardiovascular health, strength, and overall fitness without the pressure of competition.

The social benefits are equally significant. Playing



sports together builds relationships across age, gender, and economic divides. Team activities promote cooperation, communication, and mutual respect. For children and adolescents, community sports offer structured environments that teach discipline, teamwork, and resilience—skills that extend beyond the playing field. Mental wellbeing is another important outcome. Physical activity releases stress and improves mood, while shared play reduces isolation. For adults juggling work and family responsibilities, community sports provide a break from routine and a sense of belonging. For older adults, regular activity

helps maintain mobility and social connection, supporting healthier ageing. Community sports also play a role in inclusion. Women, people with disabilities, and marginalised groups often face barriers in formal sports systems. Local initiatives that prioritise safe spaces, flexible formats, and supportive environments can broaden participation. When sports are designed around community needs rather than elite pathways, more people benefit. Economic impacts, though modest, are meaningful. Local tournaments support small businesses, coaches, and facility managers. Shared infrastructure such as playgrounds and sports grounds enhances neighbourhood value and livability. These spaces also encourage intergenerational use, maximising public investment. Despite these benefits, community sports are frequently underfunded.

## Rethinking work-life balance in an always-connected world

**A**dvances in technology have transformed how people work. Remote access, instant communication, and flexible schedules promise efficiency and freedom. Yet they have also blurred the boundaries between professional and personal life, making work feel constant and inescapable for many. Work-life balance is often framed as a personal time-management challenge. In reality, it is shaped by organisational culture, expectations, and policies. When availability is assumed at all hours, employees struggle to disconnect, leading to burnout, stress, and declining job satisfaction.

Sustained overwork carries measurable costs. Chronic stress affects physical health, increasing the risk of heart disease and weakened immunity. Mental health suffers as constant pressure erodes focus and motivation. Productivity declines over time, even as hours increase, creating a cycle that benefits neither workers nor organisations.

Healthy work-life balance supports better performance. Rested employees are more creative, attentive, and resilient. Time away from work allows for recovery, reflection, and learning. Families and communities also benefit when individuals are present and engaged outside professional roles.

Organisations play a crucial role in shaping work-life balance. Clear expectations around work

hours, respect for personal time, and supportive leadership make a significant difference. Flexible arrangements can improve balance, but only when accompanied by trust and reasonable workloads. Individuals also have agency. Setting boundaries, prioritising rest, and recognising limits are essential skills in modern workplaces. However, these efforts are most effective when supported by workplace norms that value wellbeing rather than constant availability.

As work continues to evolve, redefining success beyond hours worked is essential. Sustainable productivity depends on recognising that people are not machines. Balancing work with rest, relationships, and personal growth creates healthier individuals and stronger organisations.

Haryana—India's agricultural heartland—depends on Himalayan rivers for irrigation. Declining river flows threaten food security at a time when groundwater reserves are already over-exploited. As surface water becomes unreliable, farmers dig deeper borewells, pushing aquifers closer to collapse.

Despite the warning signs, policy responses remain fragmented. Climate adaptation plans often focus on urban flooding or heatwaves, while mountain-specific strategies receive limited attention. Glacial monitoring stations are few, and early-warning systems for GLOFs are still inadequate. Local communities, who are the first to experience these changes, are rarely included in planning processes. The crisis also carries geopolitical

## Melting Himalayas and the silent water emergency in North India

**T**he Himalayas, often called the "Third Pole," store the largest reserve of ice outside the Arctic and Antarctic. For decades, this vast cryosphere has quietly sustained rivers that millions in South Asia depend on. Today, that stability is cracking. Accelerated glacial melting is no longer a distant climate warning—it is a present-day water emergency unfolding across North India.

Scientific studies show Himalayan glaciers are melting at nearly double the rate recorded at the start of the century. Rising temperatures, erratic snowfall, and prolonged heatwaves have disrupted the natural balance that once allowed glaciers to accumulate snow in winter and release meltwater gradually in summer.

Instead, rapid melting is causing sudden surges followed by long dry spells, destabilizing river systems like the Indus, Jhelum, Chenab, and Ganga. In Kashmir, the impact is already visible. The Jhelum river, lifeline of the Valley, has recorded abnormally low water levels in recent years even during peak summer. Wetlands that once acted as natural sponges—absorbing excess water and releasing it slowly—have shrunk drastically due to encroachment and neglect. With glaciers retreating and wetlands disappearing, the Valley faces a paradox of floods and droughts within the same year. This pattern is not unique to Kashmir. Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand have witnessed repeated glacial lake outburst floods (GLOFs), washing

away bridges, roads, and villages. These disasters are often described as "natural," but experts argue they are climate-induced events intensified by human activity. Unregulated hydropower projects, deforestation, and aggressive road construction have weakened fragile mountain slopes, amplifying the damage when disasters strike. Downstream, the consequences are equally severe. Punjab and

implications. Rivers originating in the Himalayas flow across international borders, making water security a shared concern for India, Pakistan, Nepal, and Bangladesh. As flows become unpredictable, existing water-sharing agreements face new stress. Climate change is quietly becoming a security issue, though it is rarely acknowledged as such in official discourse.

Addressing this silent emergency requires more than disaster response. Protecting high-altitude ecosystems, restoring wetlands, regulating construction in fragile zones, and investing in climate-resilient water management are critical. Equally important is shifting the narrative—from seeing glaciers as distant ice masses to recognizing them as active systems sustaining everyday life.

# The Shiny Appeal of Mr T's Boorish Bling

Trump still resonates with bottom-of-pyramid

Donald Trump's tele-magnetism has never been about policy sophistication or intellectual rigour. It's about shooting from the hip and debunking the napkin-folding, champagne flute-holding etiquette of elites. To think his 'billionairism' would be a turn-off for those straddling America's bottom-of-the-pyramid — the economically anxious and culturally sidelined — misses the point. Familiarity gained by speaking in a vernacular that's unfiltered,reckless, even rude, has not bred contempt here, but assurance.

Trump's pugilistic way of going about things may be uncouth. But like a young, perfectly middle-class Mick Jagger putting on cockney 'airs' to up his street cred as an anti-establishment performer, Trump has embraced boorishness as bling, discarding the careful euphemisms of 'People Like Them'. His language mirrors the barstool gripe, factory-floor complaint, kitchen-table frustration, and resonates through middle- and working-class America. What he does in the process is appropriate 'redneck' pride to serve up the new Republican red.

This resonance extends beyond the economically marginalised to anyone who seeks sociopolitical capital by aligning with the proactively unsophisticated — much like eschewing Mozart for country music, California white for pool-table Bud. In the end, whether it's Making America Great Again, or conflating 'decency' in politics or geopolitics with eye-rolling 'woke', Trump's appeal has become a badge of Authentic America®, making a stand with him a stand against elite condescension and the effete worship of nuance and splitting hairs. As a result, the real-estate developer-president is seen by those who can't find Venezuela on the map, let alone care about airy-fairy notions like 'nation-state sovereignty', as someone who has provided the 'real people' (proxy) entry into a till-now exclusive club. Like it or not, by coming across as 'one of us' — and not part of the donor dinner set — Mr T has empowered a whole set of Americans by using the oldest trick in the book: an unapologetic show of power shared.

## Bias Against Bail A Battle of Egos?

Supreme Court's recent bail orders in the 2020 Delhi riots cases expose a strange double standard. Seven accused were in detention for over 5 yrs. Five were granted bail on Monday. But Umar Khalid and Sharjeel Imam, branded 'masterminds', remain in prison — without trial. In its bail order, the top court clarified that all seven were charged under UAPA. The five released faced material relating mainly to specific, localised involvement, rather than shaping or steering the alleged larger conspiracy. That led the top court to grant them conditional bail, while denying it to Khalid and Imam because the prima facie material against them met the statutory bar under Section 43D(5) of UAPA. The difference in outcomes stems from how the court assessed individual roles and prosecution material.

Their supposed 'leadership' role in the 2020 anti-CAA protests has turned prolonged detention into de facto punishment. Police investigation has been, on more than a few occasions, been criticised for lapses. But the court has — again, strangely — not questioned it. For example, claim in the chargesheet that on Jan 8, 2020, Khalid and two co-accused met to plan riots to coincide with Trump's visit turned out to be false.

By letting subjective assessments of 'centrality' override empirical evidence, the court makes it seem that a battle of ego is brewing between the state and those it has identified as enemy — rather than critic of the government. A trial can not morph into a contest of prestige and posturing. Justice demands separating evidence from power asymmetry. Legal merit — not perceived prominence — must determine bail. Denying it on this basis risks undermining the principle courts exist to uphold: that law is blind, and justice impartial.



### JUST IN JEST

The Mogambo doctrine is asymmetrical politics at its simplest form

## #MakeMeHappy, an Easy Policy Directive?

Geopolitical works would know what most folks won't — that when the most powerful man with yellow hair in history had said, 'Mogambo khush hua,' he had predicted this uttering of satisfaction with: 'He's a good guy. He knew I was not happy. It was important to make me happy.' Making strongmen happy is something that all strong men instinctively understand, even those who aren't too happy trying to make a fellow strongman happy. But, essentially, if there's something that's as simple in geopolitics as it is in politics — or, indeed, in any narcissistic relationship — it is the 'pleasure principle'.

'Me First' is a set of policies that emphasise taking foreign, domestic and personal policy decisions that serve interests of the person before the interests of all others. 'Make me happy' is actually a simple directive. The problem arises if it comes into contestation with the happiness of those expected to please. Such a one-way epicurean decree is likely to have libidinal sources, the fount of all power dynamics. But where Mogambo is unique is not only in that he makes the importance of his being 'happied' a policy, but that he makes it a *stated* one. The onus, then, becomes on others to determine what could happen if Mogambo khush *nahn* hua, despite attempts to flatter, which are interpreted by the Yellow-Haired One as attempts to deceive.

Praggya Das & Ashish Das

CPI is a vital statistic to measure pulse of the economy. It helps RBI decide interest rates. It helps the govt. in planning its budget. To make sure this data reflects today's consumption, Gol is updating the index's base from 2012 to 2024 through a reformative and consultative process.

Within this update, the methodological approach to measuring housing services is of strategic importance. It carries a significant weight of 10% in all the weights basket and a commanding 21.67% in urban CPI. Recomending its prominent role, MoSPI released a discussion paper in October 2025 to propose a significant overhaul of the housing index compilation methodology. Proposals include:

► Expanding housing index coverage to include rural areas will fill in a significant data gap.

► Rent of employer-provided dwellings were being measured by house rent allowance surrendered, plus licence fee paid. As these didn't

represent market rental values and caused distortion in housing index, excluding employer-provided dwellings from the sample is suggested.

► Use of a 6-month moving frame will not only provide detailed frame of dwellings, but also ensure inclusion of weight of employer-provided accommodation in housing index (part of rented dwellings), and implicitly provide rental equivalence for employer-provided dwellings.

The current methodology has been criticised for being static and 'introduced an unexplainable movement' in the index. These have propelled a drastic methodological change in the compilation of housing index. But the existing methodology is scientifically robust and its analysis shows:

► Sharp rise in index observed in

Indexing is where the heart is

June 2013 was not a methodological flaw, rather, it was an 'implementation choice' to hold the index fixed at 100 for the first 5 months of the series despite the significant availability of rental data.

► Current chain-based method is mathematically equivalent to the fixed-base method — it's transitive. This establishes that the chain-based approach could not have introduced the rhythmic, 6-month dips in the index. The dips likely stemmed from an initial calculation error that was not corrected in the methodology.

► Existing 6-month moving panel survey used for collecting house rents is a robust and standard international practice for measuring rent changes, while minimising costs and respondent burden.

A major change suggested is to survey over 24,000 dwellings every month, instead of the current approach of 4,000 dwellings covering about 4,000 renter households by visiting a dwelling every 6 months. This would lead to a sharp upsurge in data collection costs, and increase in respondent burden with minimal informational gain, given that rent prices don't change frequently.

Visiting a sample dwelling every month for rent collection is neither supported by sampling theory nor good practice. If data points are available, it's better to increase coverage of dwellings, instead.

If dwelling availability is a con-

cern, a shift to 3-month moving panel would be more efficient than a complete overhaul. The proposal is to use geometric mean for the first 5 months and then use arithmetic mean thereafter. But to arrive at the elementary index, geometric mean is the recommended metric for aggregating rent-relatives (current month rent to 6 months ago) from different dwelling categories and ownership categories.

Geometric mean accurately captures the true overall rent relative.

► Rent relatives in different ownership categories are skewed. This significant benefit is lost with an arithmetic mean, which can be heavily skewed by isolated, large rent-relatives in certain categories of dwellings, and thus, distort the index for the average consumer.

The existing panel-based methodology for housing index compilation is theoretically sound. The proposed changes are based on a theoretical misreading of historical issues. Given the significance of housing component in CPI, and importance of correct measurement of inflation, the proposed changes need to be methodologically robust. This will preserve the accuracy of India's inflation measurement, which informs monetary policy.

P Das is former sub-secretary, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation. Ashish Das is professor, Department of Mathematics, IIT Bombay

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► Rent relatives in different ownership categories are skewed. This significant benefit is lost with an arithmetic mean, which can be heavily skewed by isolated, large rent-relatives in certain categories of dwellings, and thus, distort the index for the average consumer.

The existing panel-based methodology for housing index compilation is theoretically sound. The proposed changes are based on a theoretical misreading of historical issues. Given the significance of housing component in CPI, and importance of correct measurement of inflation, the proposed changes need to be methodologically robust. This will preserve the accuracy of India's inflation measurement, which informs monetary policy.

P Das is former sub-secretary, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation. Ashish Das is professor, Department of Mathematics, IIT Bombay

June 2013 was not a methodological flaw, rather, it was an 'implementation choice' to hold the index fixed at 100 for the first 5 months of the series despite the significant availability of rental data.

► Current chain-based method is mathematically equivalent to the fixed-base method — it's transitive. This establishes that the chain-based approach could not have introduced the rhythmic, 6-month dips in the index. The dips likely stemmed from an initial calculation error that was not corrected in the methodology.

► Existing 6-month moving panel survey used for collecting house rents is a robust and standard international practice for measuring rent changes, while minimising costs and respondent burden.

A major change suggested is to survey over 24,000 dwellings every month, instead of the current approach of 4,000 dwellings covering about 4,000 renter households by visiting a dwelling every 6 months. This would lead to a sharp upsurge in data collection costs, and increase in respondent burden with minimal informational gain, given that rent prices don't change frequently.

Visiting a sample dwelling every month for rent collection is neither supported by sampling theory nor good practice. If data points are available, it's better to increase coverage of dwellings, instead.

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## CONTRAPUNTO

Nobody gets justice. People only get good luck or bad luck

- ORSON WELLES

## A Puzzle From SC

In denying bail to two Delhi riots' undertrials, top court walks back on its own stand

The sense of disquiet following Supreme Court's refusal of bail to Umar Khalid and Sharjeel Imam, accused under UAPA, is born out of the sense that apex court has walked back on its consistent precedents and repeated calls for adhering to the principle of 'bail not jail'. SC, on earlier occasions, had held this to be true even for UAPA and PMLA, despite negative bail provisions in these stringent laws. Equally worryingly, SC's departure from its own stand will likely confuse trial courts.

Ironically on Tuesday, SC in another case said, "It is well settled if prosecuting agency, including the court" can't "provide to protect fundamental right of an accused to have a speedy trial then, plea for bail can't be denied on the ground that the crime committed is serious." In appeal after appeal – over refusal of bail – SC had implored judges not to make the process a punishment. In Antil vs CBI (July 2022), SC included directives to expand scope of bail. In bailing Sidosa

in Delhi's liquor-policy PMLA case, SC said "prolonged incarceration" and "delay in trial" should be read into bail provisions. In a UAPA case of a retired Bihar constable, SC said denying bail would violate rights under Article 21.

All of this was set aside in Khalid and Imam's cases. Two points especially are puzzling. First, SC said the two had not been imprisoned beyond "constitutional impermissibility". What is a trial court to make of this? How subjective is "long" pre-trial jail? Is five years, as is the case for Khalid and Imam, not "long" enough? The second puzzle is why SC dealt with the definition of terror while considering bail for the two of the seven who'd applied for relief. It thereby created a hierarchy of offenders at the *pre-trial* stage itself. This is inconsistent with SC saying on many occasions that "inference" is not "evidence". The court had also repeatedly held that probe agencies cannot argue against bail basis "evidence" that would only come into play once trial begins.

True, Khalid and Imam can apply for bail after a year. But a year is an especially long time when judged by judicial sentiments expressed in SC's numerous earlier decisions.

## Don's Base Instincts

Trump's geopolitics: His fans, mostly from the broad base of US social pyramid, love raw assertion of power

When Trump says, "It was important to make me happy", but don't express shock. Modesty never was his strong suit – recall how he described himself as a "very stable genius" eight Januaries ago. Among Macron, Starmer, Merz, and other polite leaders, his bombast may amount to diplomatic nose-picking, but what does he care? Psychiatrists who have tracked Trump for years suggest he's solipsistic – completely self-centred. But there's more to his tariffs, immigration crackdown, Maduro extraction, and other actions, than that.

Although Trump's actions seem arbitrary, they are consistent with his own long-held views. Tariffs? "A lot of people are tired of watching the other countries ripping off the US," he said in a 1987 interview. America First? Pick up his 2000 book, *The America We Deserve*: "With the globalisation craze in full heat, unions are about the only political force reminding us to remember the American working family. Does that make me an America First-er?"

Venezuela isn't a surprise either. In the very first year of his first term – Aug 2017 – he hinted at a "possible military option" to deal with Maduro. A year later, he said he was considering military action, and US officials hopped with Venezuelan rebels regarding their plans to oust Maduro. So, Saturday's action was just part of his unfinished agenda.

Trump has dumped diplomatic etiquette because his supporters – base of the American social pyramid – don't care for it. They prefer raw assertion of power to pussyfooting because it is more transparent than committees. For long, this MAGA base felt cheated and disenfranchised. Economically, it has borne the brunt of inflation and unemployment. So, by abandoning niceties – whether economic, military or diplomatic – Trump has earned its trust.

The problem with this Trump-First, America-First worldview, however, is that, while it may do some good, it is harming global economy and institutions. And the bigger danger after Venezuela is that other world leaders – depending on their capacity – might start approaching geopolitics the same way. That would turn the clock back on 80 years of a largely peaceful world order.

## Buy-buuy Pakistan

Both US and China could turn our neighbouring state into real estate

Jugnu Suraiya

Donald Trump's Chief of Staff greets her boss.  
Cos: Boss, I've got good news and good news.  
Trump: Gee, that's great. What's the good news?  
Cos: The good news is that we're buying of Greenland is a done deal, and we're all set to make it the 51st state of the United States of America, or the 52nd if before Greenland you notch up Canada as the 51st as you've been offering to do. And the good news is that there's another piece of real estate, which is also up for grabs... Pakistan.

Trump: I thought Pakistan was a country run by Field Marshal fella.  
Cos: It's not so much a country as a country club, in which the army and three per cent of the people are privileged members, and the rest are flunkies.  
Trump: Hey, that sounds just like my Mar-a-Lago! You're it's up for sale?

Cos: Yeah, we can buy the place anytime we like. All we gotta do is give them more of those fighter planes and missiles that they keep wanting to do their jihad number on their neighbour. There's only one small problem, it's called China.

Trump: China? How does China come into it?  
Cos: China comes into it because it's Pakistan's all-other friend, as in I'll be your buddy

whether you like it or not. So, we'll have to share Pakistan with China.

Trump: Damn! I hate sharing things, like having to share America with those stinko Pomo Democrats! May be I can have them all deported, like these illegal immigrants.

Cos: We could work on that in your third term in the White House, but let's do the Pak deal first along with China.

Trump: How do we do that? On a time-share basis? China has it for one month and we have it the next month?

Cos: No, we'll just divide the place in two.

Trump: Won't the Pakistanis mind if we divide their place in two?

Cos: No, they're quite used to it – they call it Partition...



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If entropy is what runs loose, enthalpy

is what stays. That is where Shiv enters.

Shiv is often misunderstood as passive – a

God who sits while Kali dances herself into

cosmic necessity. But Shiv's stillness is not

absence of power; it is under control.

He does not leak energy. He stores it. He is

thermodynamic restraint made visible.

In physics, enthalpy becomes

crucial during transitions.

Phase changes. Reactions.

Moments when form alters

without vanishing. Ice does

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enough enthalpy has been

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Shiv is God of transitions. He lives in

cremation grounds – places where

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If wars are too important to be left to the generals, surely prisoners' rights are too precious to be left to the jailors

Justice V R Krishna Iyer

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

— Ramnath Goenka

## ENSURE SPEEDY TRIAL FOR KHALID, IMAM AFTER DENIAL OF BAIL

**U**MAR Khalid suffered a major setback as he lost his much-anticipated bail plea in the Supreme Court in the 2020 Delhi riots case, amid a high-decibel international campaign to free him. The bench also barred him and another activist Sharjeel Imam, both 37, from filing a fresh appeal for a year. It, however, released five others on conditional bail. All of them had been arrested under the stringent Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967 and are facing trial for the alleged 'plot' they hatched ahead of the riots in the wake of widespread protests against the 2019 Citizenship Amendment Act. The bench observed that the material before them showed a central and formative role of Khalid and Imam, and "involvement in the level of planning, mobilisation and strategic direction extending beyond episodic and localised acts". It attracted Section 43D(5) of the UAPA, which says an accused shall not be released on bail if there are reasonable grounds to believe *prima facie* that the charges are true. While 43D(5) does not totally bar judicial scrutiny on the evidence, defence arguments are not to be examined at the bail stage, the bench comprising Justices Aravind Kumar and N V Anjana ruled. Though the accused have been in custody for more than five years, their "continued detention has not crossed constitutional impermissibility to override the statutory embargo as against them". Besides, delay in trial under the UAPA does not automatically offer as a trump card for bail, the bench ruled.

The court examined each individual's role separately. Considering all seven together would risk needless pre-trial detention, it reasoned. For example, the bail application of Gulfisha Fatima, who was among the five set free, was listed 90 times. However, the matter was not taken up 25 times due to the unavailability of the bench and was remitted 26 times, her counsel told the court. Days before the verdict, a letter to Khalid from New York City's new mayor Zohran Mamdani became a media spectacle. Eight US lawmakers wrote to the Indian envoy in the US urging bail for all the accused till their trial is over. All that came to naught for Khalid and Imam, as the custodians of law took their own course. The least that the prosecution can now do is, in accordance with the Supreme Court's instruction, ensure that the trial is not unnecessarily prolonged.

## CRICKET STANDOFF BAD AUGURY FOR BIG EVENTS

**T**HE week past was one of the most volatile in subcontinental cricket. Just as India was getting ready to co-host the T20 World Cup, a Bangladeshi poser disrupted the well-laid plans. What's even more disconcerting is that it involved another neighbouring country after

Pakistan, who are playing all their matches in Sri Lanka. The controversy started when the Board of Control for Cricket in India reacted to right-wing protests against Kolkata Knight Riders for hiring Bangladeshi bowler Mustafizur Rahman. This came when public opinion was inflamed over a Hindu worker's lynching in the neighbouring country. A day later, Bangladesh, who are scheduled to play three matches in Kolkata and one in Mumbai, officially refused to travel to India citing diplomatic tensions. They have requested the International Cricket Council to shift their matches out of India. The Bangladesh Cricket Board explained that the step was necessary for the safety of its players and officials. If that was not enough, on Monday, the interim government in Bangladesh barred the airing of the Indian Premier League in the country.

Once again, cricket has become a geopolitical weapon. With elections due soon in West Bengal and Assam, the matter has taken a political turn. This is not the first time the IPL has faced such a situation. In 2013, IPL's governing council stepped in when tensions flared between Sri Lanka and Tamil Nadu over the treatment of Tamil people in the neighbouring country. The council decided not to allow Sri Lankan players to play in Chennai. Though the circumstances were completely different then, an alternative solution should have been found other than barring players' travel. We must remember that the BCCI has already postponed a series with Bangladesh and that Mustafizur's deal was done at last December's auction.

If the ICC agrees with Bangladesh's request, the entire T20 World Cup schedule would have to be rearranged, putting other teams in discomfort. Going by the tensile ties between Bangladesh and India, diplomacy is unlikely to find a solution. At a time India are preparing to host the 2020 Commonwealth Games and has bid for the 2036 Olympics, not being able to host neighbouring countries is unhelpful. Sri Lanka is an option, but with the World Cup just over a month away, the ICC and the BCCI must find a solution soon.

### QUICK TAKE

#### INCREDIBLE INDIAN HERITAGE

**A**MONG the many things confrontational geopolitics marred in 2025 was tourism. Last month, the government admitted that foreign tourist arrivals had dipped by an eighth during April-September 2025, weakened mainly by the worsening relations with Bangladesh in the region and other tensions around the world. This comes at a time foreign arrivals are still struggling to match the pre-pandemic levels despite a recent surge. Amid this gloom, West Bengal—which emerged as the second-most preferred destination after Maharashtra—showed what can be possible if India's rich intangible heritage is promoted. Festivals like the Durga puja can be an even bigger draw if we position them attractively with another major draw like the early 2000s' Incredible India.

**A**S the new calendar year begins, let me get the rhetoric going with a question. What's the biggest challenge India faces today? Is the news that we see every day defining it? Or must we look beyond, into what we don't see? Is it the challenge from a fast-souring relationship with Bangladesh, an already-soured relationship with Pakistan, or is it the one that ferments slowly in a large pot with China and its geopolitical intent? Is it the fast depreciating relationship between the rupee and the dollar? Is it that long, unresolved and contentious issue of tariffs between the US and India that's been troubling us for a while now? Well, this is what we see.

And what is it that we don't see enough of? I believe there is a big one. We hear of it now and then, and we push it under the carpet of comfort. The big four-letter issue in our midst today is jobs. The lack of enough jobs for a whole nation of hungry and aspirational job seekers. An entire country of educated people, well nigh the size of one of our bigger cities, are on the daily active lookout for jobs that seem to be elusive, if not entirely missing. That's the volume dimension. Add to it the fact that all of them are looking for a full day's work. That's depth of work. And every one of them is looking for work that matches what they bring to the table as a competency. In the mismatch of these many dimensions lies the gory story of missing jobs.

Current government numbers tell a different tale though. A really big number of 17 crore new jobs were created between 2017 and 2024, as per the Niti Aayog. These numbers can't be wrong, but seem woefully inadequate when compared to the current need for bigger numbers, and more importantly, the addition to this demand-number every passing year as graduates pass out from our very many educational institutions. At last count, those joining the job market every year exceeded 1.5 crore young people.

In the market for jobs, there is the existing job. The central government and every state government have a standard set of jobs. Each is filled with typically small and incremental vacancies that arise every year. The number of applicants for every job announced is mind-boggling. The Railways Recruitment Board had 64,197 vacancies announced in 2025. Over 1.87 crore candidates applied.

While a fair number of these jobs ex-

ist in the government sector, a very robust number of private sector jobs exist as well. Out here, water finds its own level. As corporate business grows, investment grows. Every new investment creates many new jobs. Well, that is the way it should go. If one does, however, peek into the investment mindset of Indian business today, one witnesses a rather lethargic wait-and-watch sentiment. This sentiment has been worsened within export-oriented businesses that have been delivered a sucker punch with the Trump tariff at hand. Add to it the role of artificial intelligence in bringing in non-human agents as colleagues into the work environment, and the cocktail of depression is complete.

There are traditional jobs of the brick-and-mortar kind, and then there are the new-age jobs. There are jobs

that demand expending physical energy as opposed to exercising the mind. And now there are the gigs. Gigs are not really jobs. They are defined more as entrepreneurship where the performer of the task is the owner.

There is a gig worker in each of our lives. You get your grocery delivered by a gig worker, your cab to the airport is driven by an owner-partner gig worker, and there are dozens of other gig categories in India. The gig economy was estimated to be as large as 77 lakh people in 2020-21 doing their own thing and writing their own salary cheques based on how many days they work and how many hours they choose to work across those days. The gig and platform economy is the new work-buzz in India, one that has made livelihoods happen for a whole host of people.

## THE DEVIL IN CRYPTO DETAILS

**T**HE global cryptocurrency market operates on a fragile foundation of faith. Investors pour billions of dollars into digital exchanges, assuming that the bitcoin or ethereum they see on their screen actually belongs to them. They believe that the exchange is merely a digital vault, a custodian that holds their assets for safe-keeping. But what happens if that company fails? Or if the vault is breached?

The Madras High Court's recent judgement in *Rhutikumar vs Zamzam Labs* has brought these frightening questions to the fore. In a significant ruling involving a cyber-attack on the platform of WazirX, a trading app, the court challenged the fatalistic view that investors are helpless. When the court observed that the virtual digital assets are 'meant to be held in trust with a fiduciary duty owed to their owners', it did much more than resolve an investment dispute.

The judgement is best understood as part of a broader global conversation about what happens when crypto platforms fail. The central legal inquiry that the courts are wrestling with is: whether the relationship between a cryptocurrency exchange and its users is fiduciary in nature, thereby creating a 'trust', or whether it is merely contractual in nature, thereby creating a 'debt'? This distinction is not just a matter of semantics but of asset survival.

The High Court of New Zealand's decision in *Ruscon & Moore vs Cryptopia* (2020) anchors the pro-investor perspective. Viewing the inquiry practically, the court confirmed that cryptocurrencies are a form of 'property' and satisfied the three certainties required for establishment of a trust. On the certainty of the subject matter and objects, the court had observed that online exchange Cryptopia had segregated coins into currency-specific wallets and the internal database recorded precisely how many units of currency stood in each account.

On certainty of intention, the court relied on Cryptopia's customer service manuals, financial statements that excluded user coins from the company's assets, and terms explicitly stating assets were 'held on trust'. Taken together, the court ruled that these demonstrated a custodial, trust-based relationship, as opposed to a debtor-creditor arrangement.

In stark contrast, the jurisprudence emerging from Asian financial centres has prioritised the contractual terms much to the detriment of the retail invest-

or. In the decision rendered by the Hong Kong Court of First Instance in *Gatecoin* (2022), although it acknowledged that cryptocurrency could theoretically form the subject matter of a trust, it ruled that in that case, the certainty of intention to create a trust was absent. The court's reasoning hinged on a rigorous analysis of the company's terms and conditions.

The terms explicitly permitted the platform to commence customer funds with its own and, critically, to use those funds for its own proprietary purposes.

pany's terms, the court held that the customers retained both legal and beneficial title with the digital exchange operator merely facilitating transactions on their instructions. The judgement reaffirms that mere trust labels in the exchange's documents cannot dispel a carefully drafted allocation of proprietary risk.

The classification of digital assets—as trust property or unsecured debt—is the decisive factor governing financial recovery during insolvency. For investors, this distinction dictates their standing within the rigid hierarchy of India's Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code (IBC). The outcome hints at what other assets fall within the corporate debtor's 'liquidation estate' under Section 363.

If the contract-trust view prevails, users will be classified merely as unsecured creditors, and their assets will be absorbed into the company's general pool of assets. Consequently, under Section 53's 'waterfall mechanism', these investors would stand relegated to the bottom of the distribution ladder. In the event of a crypto exchange collapse, where customer assets often represent the only remaining value, this subordination would typically result in a total loss of capital.

However, if the trust interpretation is adopted, as strongly indicated by the reasoning in the *Rhutikumar* and *Cryptopia* judgements, the trajectory of recovery changes fundamentally. Section 364(3) of the IBC specifically excludes 'assets held in trust for any third party' from the liquidation estate. In this scenario, the investor's funds stand fully protected and they cannot be diluted to form part of the company's assets.

Therefore it is clear that 'trust' is not a default protection but a specific legal construct that must be explicitly engineered. For investors, this creates a perilous landscape where their recovery rights hinge on the specific jurisdiction and the granular drafting of user agreements they likely never read. As the crypto insolvency wave continues, it serves as a stark reminder that in the eyes of the law, the fine print is often all that matters.

(Views are personal)

## REWRITING THE BOOK OF JOBS

HARISH BIJOOR



Brand guru & founder of Harish Bijoor Consults Inc



SOURAV ROY

ist in the government sector, a very robust number of private sector jobs exist as well. Out here, water finds its own level. As corporate business grows, investment grows. Every new investment creates many new jobs. Well, that is the way it should go. If one does, however, peek into the investment mindset of Indian business today, one witnesses a rather lethargic wait-and-watch sentiment. This sentiment has been worsened within export-oriented businesses that have been delivered a sucker punch with the Trump tariff at hand. Add to it the role of artificial intelligence in bringing in non-human agents as colleagues into the work environment, and the cocktail of depression is complete.

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that demand expending physical energy as opposed to exercising the mind. And now there are the gigs. Gigs are not really jobs. They are defined more as entrepreneurship where the performer of the task is the owner.

There is a gig worker in each of our lives. You get your grocery delivered by a gig worker, your cab to the airport is driven by an owner-partner gig worker, and there are dozens of other gig categories in India. The gig economy was estimated to be as large as 77 lakh people in 2020-21 doing their own thing and writing their own salary cheques based on how many days they work and how many hours they choose to work across those days. The gig and platform economy is the new work-buzz in India, one that has made livelihoods happen for a whole host of people.

people looking to work and make their lives happen. This economy is slated to grow by a multiple of three by 2029-30. It's an arena of robust growth.

But even as I write this, there is tumult out here. Gig workers of Zomato and Swiggy, to name just two platforms, have threatened to strike work on crucial big delivery days. The peak Christmas and New Year season was chosen to showcase their demands. A whole bunch of delivery-partners were stopped from doing their jobs and a fair bit of chaos ensued. The political classes of both the 'champagne' and 'tody' socialite kind have jumped into the fray supporting the needs, desires and aspirations of grocery and food delivery workers.

As the fire rages on that count, let me quickly jump to a thought that is rather important to flag. The point is a simple one. Were we meant to work for others? Were we meant to sell our time to employers? Or is there an older model of work, possibly a pre-British-era format where everyone worked for himself or herself? Were we meant to be in regimented jobs? Or were we meant to work in our own fields to grow food that was important for our lives? Were we meant to offer the excess through a spirit of direct entrepreneurship, either through a retail outlet of our own, or through a process of 1:1 buyer-seller connect? Are we meant to be doing our own thing really?

The gig-economy today comes closest to this model of work. As India grapples with the issue of not enough jobs for all, must we abolish the thought of jobs itself? Must we go back to become the entrepreneurs each one of us is meant to be? Must we debunk the thought of industrial society that brings in factory workers that work for the collective good of the factory owner? Must we work for others at all? Must we work for ourselves and maybe offer jobs to a small number in the ecosystem who we can touch with a benign job that trains for a short while and then unleashes them into entrepreneurship?

India today equally grapples with issues that relate to the volume of employment and the quality of employment on offer. Must we then look at a reverse movement in the jobs mindset of our people? Must we go back to an era of working for ourselves? Must that be something we teach in our schools, for a start?

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MAIL BAG

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### America's thuggery

Ref: Power trumps principle (Jan 5). Comparing this military action to historical atrocities highlights the peril—the US has effectively declared itself the arbiter of regime change in the western hemisphere. This is not leadership; it's thuggery masquerading as foreign policy, prioritising short-term gains in oil and border security over international law and human rights.

KJ Haroon Basha, Trivupuram

### Venezuela's precedent

Nicolas Maduro's capture marks a volatile turning point in international relations. What began as a domestic crisis has now evolved into a precedent-setting event for global governance. The region has entered an era of deep uncertainty. This will redefine the limits of external intervention and the sanctity of sovereign borders.

Vidyasagar Reddy Kethri, New Delhi

### Justice delayed

Ref: Antony Raju verdict (Jan 5). The conviction highlights serious flaws in our legal and cumbersome legal system. While the final victory of the rule of law is commendable, waiting 31 years for justice significantly reduces the effectiveness of our legal penalties.

Shamini Nazer, Kozhikode

### Synergic music

Ref: Ali, who unites the believers (Jan 5). The column was intellectually engaging and its exploration of cultural synthesis demonstrates how spiritual unity can arise from discord, offering a meaningful model for harmony in today's divided world.

Muhammed Minhal, Kozhikode

### Sporting principle

Ref: Bangladesh refuse to travel to India (Jan 5). Cricket has always been a unifying force that transcends national and political boundaries. Dragging diplomatic or political disputes into sports undermines its true spirit and harms international harmony.

Holding players responsible for political rift sets the wrong example for millions of fans.

Hamad Noon, Araria

### Hazardous design

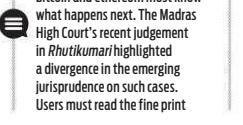
Ref: Medans posing risk? (Jan 5). While on one hand, low designer designs can explain some recent incidents, the other extreme is equally dangerous. One can take a drive along the Vridhachalam bypass in the same district to understand the point. The fully-walled median is too high, blinding drivers to the incoming traffic from the other direction.

Janardhan, Cuddalore

With cryptocurrency exchanges failing in various jurisdictions, owners of digital assets like bitcoin and ethereum must know what happens next.

The Madras High Court's recent judgement in *Rhutikumar* highlighted a divergence in the emerging jurisprudence on such cases.

Users must read the fine print



This contract-first doctrine was also reinforced by Singaporean courts. In *Quoine* (2020), the country's Court of Appeal overturned the high court's finding of a trust, holding that the platform's business model—operating as a 'market maker', freely trading and lending pooled customer assets and expressly warning in its risk disclosure statement that assets might not be returned on bankruptcy—was fundamentally inconsistent with an intention to create a trust. Similarly, in *Taylor* (2025) the Singapore High Court declined to entertain the plea that the exchange operator held the assets in trust. Despite the 'custodial asset' language being used in the com-



THE GOAN EVERYDAY

There is little that can withstand a man who can conquer himself.

Louis XIV

## Debate needed in Assembly on the 'burning' issues

The Goa Assembly's Business Advisory Committee (BAC) meeting on Tuesday was a damp squib. It is a sad reflection of a growing disconnect between the State government's priorities and the pressing issues of the people. The Speaker declined to permit special discussions at the forthcoming winter session of the Legislative Assembly on the burning issues of the State — the horrific fire at Birch by Romeo Lane nightclub that claimed 25 lives, the resumption of sealed nightclubs, and the alleged environmental destruction, while allowing a special discussion on Vande Mataram.

The refusal to allow discussions on these critical issues while permitting a discussion on Vande Mataram has sparked widespread criticism and raised questions about transparency and a lack of intent to hold accountability.

The gashly Birch nightclub fire and the series of illegalities of nightclubs that have surfaced subsequently are a stark reminder of the deficiencies in safety protocols and regulatory failures. Questions continue to be raised over systemic collusion involving people in top positions. The opposition's demand to table a detailed inquiry report followed by a comprehensive debate is justified, given the seriousness of the issue. Along with common citizens, the families of the victims deserve justice, not token discussions that serve political optics.

Four nightclubs out of the six sealed during December began operations during the festive season and hosted mega parties on New Year's Eve. Senior fire officials have maintained that NOCs were not granted to any of the sealed clubs. This brings forth a key question: How were these clubs allowed to reopen, especially when there were compromises on safety? The government of the day has to hold accountability and come up with clear answers because this is a troubling trend of disregarding regulatory mechanisms.

Goa's biggest concern currently has been over environmental and ecological destruction. The landscape is undergoing a rapid change with unchecked development and illegal activities. On Tuesday, the TCP Department issued a stop-work order following Chief Minister Pramod Sawant's intervention on a mega construction project at Carambolim, against which local residents had been protesting. The Chimbol landscape is on the boil over the controversial Unity Mall project, with the CM stating that he is ready for a dialogue. The government recently revoked the provisional zone change permission for a large parcel of land in Arambol following angry protests from people across the spectrum.

These are issues that not only define what Goa is about, but also test the mettle of the people. Facing scrutiny and showing transparency is a hallmark of good governance. Ignoring such issues and opting for symbolic discussions on nationalistic songs like Vande Mataram reflect a poor commitment to sustainable development and responsible governance. Public trust is being further eroded.

The opposition's pledge to unite and hold the government accountable is a positive sign, but with a minuscule minority in the House, and an uncertainty of a united front, as witnessed in the monsoon session, the challenge appears herculean.

The 5-day Assembly session, beginning from January 12, must transcend political theatrics and focus on substantive issues that impact the lives of people. Legislative sessions must be fruitful, and a government, which is at its peak strength in terms of numbers, is expected to engage in meaningful debates rather than resorting to selective discussions. Elected representatives, irrespective of which party they belong to, must prioritise the welfare of their constituents over political convenience.

### OPEN SPACE >

## Land, identity, and justice: Goa's silent struggle

While public agitations have historically been led by South Goa's Catholic community, the larger Hindu peasantry, particularly women aligned with the Maharashtra-based Gomantak Party (MGP) and now the BJP, must awaken to the realities of present governance. Take the case of Mopa Airport, where land was acquired from poor farmers at throwaway prices, only to be handed over to cronies for profit. In Sanguem, displaced families still await fair compensation years after their lands were taken. Across Goa, scarce land is appropriated under the guise of "development projects" that rarely materialise, later sold to private interests at inflated rates. The Bahujan Samaj, Scheduled Tribes, and Scheduled Castes of North Goa must raise their voices. Equally pressing is the Special Status issue, once promised by the Prime Minister during Panikar's tenure. Instead of safeguarding Goa's fragile land and culture, the floodgates have been opened to rampant acquisition by builders, aided by the complicity of the present dispensation. It is time for the people to unite in demanding accountability, fair compensation, and protection of our scarce land resources. Only then can we preserve the unique identity of Goa for generations to come.

ASSIS EVERETTE TELLES, Margao

## Kushavati and the khushal mundkar

The problem confronting mundkars is not the absence of statutory protection. It is the chronic failure of adjudication and enforcement



The writer is a Doctoral Researcher working under the Alliance of European Universities and has presented his research works at various Academic Conferences.

ADV. MOSES PINTO

The creation of Kushavati, Goa's third district, has been presented as an administrative intervention intended to improve governance in the southern hinterland of the State. The talukas forming this district have historically been marked by relatively lower levels of infrastructural penetration, limited industrial concentration and a demographic composition distinct from the coastal and urban centres shaped during the colonial period. These constituencies have long contained significant populations belonging to Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes, many of whom have remained peripheral to Goa's dominant economic and political narrative.

Viewed in isolation, the decision to carve out a separate district from South Goa cannot be dismissed as inherently regressive. A dedicated district administration promises proximity, visibility and the possibility of targeted welfare delivery in regions that have often lagged behind in social upliftment indicators. From a governance perspective, such territorial reorganisation of structural disparities that have persisted within the State for decades.

The formation of Kushavati under a ruling dispensation that openly foregrounds nationalist symbolism invites a broader reading. The use of culturally resonant nomenclature, the elevation of a new district headquarters and the reconfiguration of administrative frameworks together generate a perception of renewed attention and future promise. In political theory, such interventions are rarely neutral. They recalibrate voter expectations and subtly reshape political loyalties, particularly in regions that have historically experienced marginalisation.

The electorate of a newly constituted district may reasonably come to associate the promise of development with the political formation responsible for its creation. Over time, continuity in governance may be viewed as necessary for the realisation of that promise, regardless of individual candidate performance or manifesto commitments.

### Mundkar origins

The discourse surrounding the so-called khushal mundkar must be examined against this administrative backdrop. The colloquial reference to a happy mundkar draws from the Konkani term, itself derived from the Portuguese expression mundares, found in colonial records. The



enactment of the Goa Mundkars (Protection from Eviction) Act, 1975 was a transformative legislative moment. From its appointed date, families residing on the dominant tenement of a bhalkar were entitled to security of residence and, subject to adjudication, to purchase a defined plot of land, generally measuring up to 300 square metres, as recognition of past service relationships.

It was envisaged that declarations of mundkar status under Sections 8 and 8A would be promptly adjudicated by mandatdars at the grassroots level, followed by applications for purchase and, where necessary, appellate scrutiny. In a State with a relatively small population, it was reasonably expected that such claims would taper off within a finite period.

That expectation has not been realised. Instead, mundkar cases continue to dominate the rosters of mandatdars courts across Goa. Claims dating back to the 1990s remain undecided, not merely at the appellate stage but even at the level of initial declaration and purchase.

### Adjudication failure

The persistence of mundkar litigation has produced unintended consequences. Over time, increasingly expansive interpretations of heritability have emerged, often fuelled by inadequate legal guidance. Claims have been advanced seeking multiple independent entitlements arising from a single mundkar right, notwithstanding settled principles that such rights devolve proportionally and not cumulatively. The resulting adjudicatory complexity has left mandatdars burdened and parties embroiled in protracted disputes.

The problem confronting mundkars is not the absence of statutory protection. It is the chronic failure of adjudication and enforcement. The State has possessed the legislative tools necessary to resolve mundkar claims for nearly five decades. What has been lacking is administrative resolve, procedural efficiency and time-bound disposal

against this background, the proposal to introduce legislation restricting the sale of land until mundkar rights are finally adjudicated raises difficult questions. Such a measure does not acceler-

erate adjudication. It does not address institutional delay. Instead, it freezes property transactions across entire tenements on account of unresolved claims, some of which have remained pending for decades due to systemic inertia.

### Electoral comfort

The effect of such a proposal is predictable. Mundkars facing prolonged uncertainty are offered immediate reassurance through the promise of occupation. Bhalkars, on the other hand, find their proprietary and inheritance rights further constrained, not by adjudication but by legislative embargo. Two distinct classes of electorate are thus created, one experiencing perceived protection and the other experiencing deepening grievance.

This bifurcation carries electoral implications. Measures that prolong the status quo tend to generate short-term political comfort among beneficiaries, even when long-term resolution remains elusive. The assurance of continued occupation, framed as protection, becomes an attractive proposition in the months preceding an election.

The constitutional sustainability of such an approach remains uncertain. Interference with property rights, particularly when untethered to procedural reform or time-bound resolution, invites scrutiny under established principles of proportionality and reasonableness. Whether such legislation would withstand judicial review is a question that cannot be lightly dismissed.

### Demands for governance

Structural reorganisation and welfare assurances are foregrounded, while underlying adjudicatory failures remain unaddressed. Past performance, rather than present promise, becomes the most reliable predictor of future outcome. The true measure of commitment to social justice lies not in symbolic district creation or legislative announcement, but in the quiet work of clearing backlog, enforcing timelines and restoring certainty to legal relationships. Until that occurs, the idea of the khushal mundkar risks remaining an electoral comfort rather than a substantive resolution.

### THE INBOX >

#### All Delhi based parties and their role in illegalities

To start off with the Delhi headquartered BJP Party has proven to be the worst amongst the national parties in terms of allowing rampant real estate destruction in Goa, either by looking the other way on illegalities, passing legislations like 17/2, 39/A etc to convert large ecological areas including forests/trees/hills/Non Development Zones etc or working around/interpreting existing laws, all which is done to favour mainly urbanite real estate companies. Saying that, I also had similar experience with Congress ministers as regards to real estate nexus with outstation politicians/real estate companies. On AAP, I note a clear hypocrisy. While AAP politicians are very active in protest in other parts of Goa on issues particularly related to real estate development; they allow massive illegalities in constituencies they have been voted to power: In Colva for instance there are at least 3 cases of massive environmental violations. All Delhi based national parties must commit to zero tolerance of illegal and environmentally destructive development.

ARWIN MESQUITA, Colva

#### India-Bangladesh politics playing out on cricket field

The uncertainty surrounding the T20 World Cup schedule has revealed how closely cricket in the subcontinent is entangled with politics and diplomacy. This time it is Bangladesh that is playing truant by not playing to play in India and asking the venue be shifted to Sri Lanka instead. The present crisis started when KKR owner Shahrukh Khan was forced to release Bangladesh fast

bowler Mustafizur Rahman from its squad in view of anti-India sentiment in Bangladesh. Yielding to Bangladesh by shifting matches to Sri Lanka may defuse immediate tensions. But it sets a precedent that tournament plans can be overridden by political discomfort. Cricket has historically functioned as a rare bridge in South Asia where formal diplomacy often failed. That tradition has been steadily dismantled. What remains is a weaponised version of sport, deployed to signal ideological loyalty rather than sporting excellence.

GREGORY FERNANDES, Mumbai

#### Time for the world to rein in Trump

The dastardly attack on Venezuela and capture of President Nicolas Maduro and wife by the US military raises several questions as to why the entire world, including the UN and Security Council is silent and powerless to rein in President Donald Trump and his dictatorial attacks on smaller countries. If international law has been violated by the abduction of the head of state and its sovereignty, then how is it that nothing is being done to put Trump under arrest by the International Criminal court of Justice? Are we going to experience another one-man show of dictatorial madness being unleashed on other smaller countries like Cuba, Colombia and Greenland as well, which are now on the hit list of Trump? We have had enough of destruction in Iraq, Kuwait and Afghanistan under earlier US presidents. It is therefore high time for countries of the world to unite to save the world from American hegemony and destruction by actions of a single individual.

AF NAZARETH, Alto Porvorim

#### A wake-up call for India's democracy

The recent decision of the Raipur Sessions Court granting bail to six Barjirao Dal members arrested for vandalising Christmas decorations, followed by their "hero's welcome" and anti-Christian slogans outside the jail, is deeply disturbing. Such incidents raise serious questions about the state of secularism and law and order in India. The silence of the ruling BJP in such cases is viewed by many as tacit approval, further emboldening extremist groups. These actions damage India's democratic image and have wider consequences, as innocent Indians face backlash abroad due to the behaviour of a few. If intolerance continues unchecked, it threatens national unity and undermines the values that define our country.

RONNIE D'SOUZA, Chandor



Send your letters to us at [editor@thegoan.net](mailto:editor@thegoan.net). Letters must be 150-200 words and mention the writer's name and location



### Editor's TAKE

## India, as the rice bowl of the world

India has overtaken China as the world's largest rice producer – a powerful symbol of national strength and agricultural resilience

There is a silent revolution taking place in India – not in the realm of space technology or IT, which are now ubiquitous, but in the fields of rural India. Yes, we are now the world's largest producer of rice, and Basmati has become a brand that represents India in 172 countries where our world-famous Basmati rice is imported.

As of 2020, India's rice reaches more than 172 countries. India remains the world's largest rice exporter, accounting for approximately 40 per cent of the global rice trade.

This is no mean achievement. There was a time when India was dependent on food imports and food sovereignty seemed a distant dream. As the most populous country in the world, food security is our primary concern. With the Green Revolution, things changed forever: India became self-reliant in foodgrain production – mainly wheat and rice – and, over time, thanks to research and development in agriculture, we have reached a stage where we can not only feed our own people but are also net exporters, earning precious foreign exchange. For decades, China held the top position, backed by scale, technology, and state-led planning. Then India has now surpassed it as a testament to sustained policy focus, farmer resilience, and the quiet but transformative role of agricultural science. Rice is the staple food for a majority of India's population and the backbone of rural livelihoods across vast regions. To lead the world in its production, is, therefore, both symbolically and materially significant.

This feat reflects the cumulative impact of investments made since the Green Revolution – and their constant upgrading. It has not happened overnight. Persistent efforts – high-yielding seed varieties, improved irrigation coverage, mechanisation, and assured procurement through the Minimum Support Price system – have created a stable production ecosystem. The recent release of 184 new crop varieties by the Indian Council of Agricultural Research – many of them climate-resilient and pest-resistant – is proof that India is adapting to contemporary challenges rather than resting on past successes. The fact that over 3,200 high-yielding varieties have been notified in the last decade alone highlights the momentum behind this transformation.

From a food security perspective, the implications are profound. Adequate foodgrain stocks provide a buffer against global supply shocks, climate-induced crop failures, and geopolitical disruptions. Domestic food self-sufficiency is a strategic asset, not merely a welfare concern. However, there is still a long road ahead to true food sovereignty.

India's food basket remains skewed. Pulses and oilseeds – critical for nutritional security and import reduction – continue to lag behind.

Self-reliance in food production cannot be measured by volume alone; it must encompass diversity, nutrition, sustainability, and farmer incomes. We now need a second-generation Green Revolution – one that is more environment-friendly and sustainable.

## Nepal elections: Litmus test for Gen Z

Nepal's streets continue to reverberate with slogans of revolt, even as doubts persist over whether the forthcoming elections will mend the deep fractures left by months of upheaval, arson and political vacuum



ASHOK K  
MEHTA

Nepal is moving full steam ahead towards the March 5, elections, which are a referendum on the performance of traditional parties and the key outcome of Nepal's fifth revolution (Jan Andolan) last September. Elections are due a month earlier in Bangladesh after its fourth revolution, where violence is manifest between the old and new guard. In Nepal, too, cadres of the ousted KP Oli - CPN (UML) – government have clashed with Gen Z (Z) revolutionaries; 120 days on, graffiti across Nepal still reads 'No to Oli'.

I spent all of December in Kathmandu, Pokhara, and villages near Pokhara, where people are asking how their lives will change after elections – especially after the arson and vandalism during the protests cost \$5 billion (the government's estimate is \$572 million). On September 9, all state institutions had collapsed, forcing Oli to resign; in the prolonged vacuum that ensued, the Army was unable to protect government property. The Army, in its response to the government enquiry, has said it had to make a choice between protecting people (leaders and officials) and property. The Gen Z protests were "not all that spontaneous", as initially reported; I found sufficient anecdotal information and documented evidence that the US stirred the pot – something Oli hinted at recently in a party convention speech. Further, some doubt lingers about the likelihood of elections being held on time, though interim PM Sushila Karki is confident there will be no delay.

Gen Z protests were ostensibly against the internet ban, which escalated after police firing killed 17 protesters. That figure rose to 77 martyrs. I saw damaged iconic buildings in the Kathmandu Valley being restored. The people's uprising that piggy-backed on the Gen Z protests expanded the latter's demands from good governance, elimination of corruption, and job creation to constitutional amendments that would restore political stability and voting from abroad. Around 2,000 youth (7 lakh annually) leave the country every day for employment.

About the outcome of its Andolan, Gen Z says: "We'd gone to shoot a chicken but we killed a tiger." Gen Z is a collective of 49 disparate groups, whose public face is Sudan Gurung, a rock band musician turned head of a humanitarian organisation. He has signed at least three significant agreements with Karki, most notably the Ten-Point Agreement (akin to the July Charter in Bangladesh) in December, which includes constitutional amendments that, according to Nepal advocate Radhesham Adhikari, will be difficult to implement and may become a hurdle to timely elections.

After the agreement, Karki said: "My government was formed to address issues that arose from the



Eswar

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RESTORED

The writer, a retired Major General, served as Commander-in-Chief (South), Sri Lanka, and was a founder member of the Defence Planning Staff, now the Integrated Defence Staff

@dailypioneer  
The Pioneer

Gen Z uprising: all political parties (126) must take a view that elections will be held on time. We are not enemies of political parties, though we are the result of the Gen Z uprising and their issues." Although the two biggest parties, Nepali Congress and CPN (UML), have filed writ petitions for restoration of Parliament, they will fight the elections. While Gen Z has not formed a political party, some members are joining Bibeksheet, Ujjyal Nepal and Rastriya Swatantra Party, the election symbols of the last two being the Bulb and Bell. Further, the enigmatic RSP President Rabi Lamichhane, jailed for fraud cases, has been released. Ujjyal Nepal was formed by former Chairman of Nepal Electricity Board and serving minister, the dynamic Kulman Ghising, who rid Kathmandu of 18 hours of load-shedding. Bulb and Bala – the effervescent Mayor of Kathmandu, Bala Shah – struck the mother of mergers with Bell, with Shah as the PM face of RSP. Gen Z leaders are backing RSP, which will become formidable. Poll alliances and mergers are the new normal, which even older parties (NC and UML) are reconsidering after the boost to RSP – precisely the virus of political instability Gen Z wanted to remove.

Despite being ousted from government, four-time PM Oli won a landslide third-term chairmanship of UML. Given his party's strong grassroots organisation and most government officials being his appointees, Oli could spring a surprise. While five-time PM and NC leader Deuba will step down as party president, he will fight elections an unprecedented eighth time. The party is divided: India-backed Shekhar Koirala, US-supported Gagan Thapa, and the Bimalendra Nihal/PSP Sitaula groups. Thapa has unilaterally ordered a special NC convention on 8 January to be elected President.

Four-time PM Prachanda, minus the Maoist tag,

remains the great survivor and coordinator of the reminted Nepal Communist Party, consisting of ten Left parties. Except for the RSP, the new crop of parties will not make a significant dent in older parties, which are likely to return but with smaller vote-share and seats in Parliament. The royalist Rashtra Prajatantra Party, while saying the failed democratic system led to the Gen Z revolution, has not sought a referendum on restoration of monarchy but decided to wait until there is "broad political consensus". Yogi Adityanath's name resonates perennially over formation of a Hindu Rashtra and revival of monarchy. The outgoing Chinese Ambassador Chen Song met Karki and made the unusual diplomatic request to keep the

Chinese company that built the USD 216 million Pokhara International Airport out of the commission investigating corruption. Oli's fall was a big setback for Beijing, given his nationalistic (anti-Indian) that resulted in his signing the BRI, the Transit Agreement, authenticating the One China policy, attending the last SCO summit, attending the PLA victory parade, calling Tibe Xizang, and endorsing the Global Security Initiative and Xi Jinping Thought. Still, the Left's 60 per cent majority in Parliament is expected to reduce to less than 50 per cent post-elections.

India has been quietly proactive, backing elections and providing assistance in electoral logistics. China's likelywaning influence in Parliament is good for India. Instead of the usual anti-India sentiment, China is bearing the brunt for encroachments in the North. Elections will be held on March 5, which could run in phases, otherwise the unknowns of a constitutional void will kick in. Koirala has said that if elections are not held, Parliament must be restored. Either way, nothing may change for ordinary Nepalis without a constitutional amendment. It is unlikely to be a happy new year for Nepal.

**The Pioneer** SINCE 1865

## When dreams disturb us: Finding peace through faith



AJIT KUMAR  
BISHNOI

### 2ND OPINION THE PIONEER

Dreams are a familiar yet mysterious part of human experience. They are commonly defined as a series of thoughts, images, and sensations that arise in the mind during sleep. Unlike daydreams – which are conscious fantasies born of desire – dreams occur involuntarily and often feel vivid and real. Although dreams can appear at any stage of sleep, the most intense and memorable ones usually occur during REM (Rapid Eye Movement) sleep, when brain activity is high and the eyes move rapidly beneath closed lids.

Dreams tend to become more frequent and intense during periods of stress, anxiety, or emotional disturbance. Unfulfilled desires and unresolved concerns that

dominate our waking thoughts often surface in our dreams. Broadly, dreams can be divided into pleasant and unpleasant ones. Pleasant dreams are rarely remembered because they do not disturb the mind; they leave behind a fleeting sense of comfort or joy. Unpleasant or frightening dreams, however, linger in memory because they disrupt sleep and leave a residue of fear or unease. At times, one may wake up deeply unsettled. Children, too, often experience such dreams, and this has sometimes been cited – rightly or wrongly – to explain claims of memories from past lives, as young children have limited experiences in their present one. What, then, do dreams signify?

From personal experience, dreams often reflect one's inner state. When I am troubled, I tend to dream of being far from home, desperately trying to return but unable to find the way. At other times, I dream of inadequacy – such as appearing for an examination without sufficient preparation. These dreams surface when I am confronted with a problem for which I cannot find a solution. In contrast, my pleasant dreams usually place me in good company or in a temple. The surroundings and people feel partly familiar, though often unknown.

This brings us to the crucial question: how should one deal with truly disturbing dreams? Occasionally, such dreams may seem like ominous warnings of something

undesirable. While this possibility is rare and difficult to verify, the presence of familiar people or situations can lend such dreams an air of authenticity.

If we momentarily accept that a dream might indicate some future adversity, the question remains: what can we do about it? The most logical and comforting response is to take refuge in God. It is God alone who has the power to grant relief from the karmaphala – the fruits of past actions. True devotees do not live in fear; they are confident that divine grace will carry them through all difficulties. Rather than being shaken by bad dreams, they take them as reminders to deepen their surrender. After all, dreams themselves do not cause misfortune; it is past actions that bear fruit, and liberation from their adverse effects lies in divine grace. As Lord Krishna assures in the Bhagavad Gita: "Having taken refuge in Me, you shall, by My grace, overcome all obstacles" (18.58).

In conclusion, bad dreams should serve as a wake-up call – not to panic, but to strengthen one's spiritual shelter. Every individual has committed some errors in the past. By sincerely taking refuge in God, the future becomes secure, and the burden of past misdeeds is gently and compassionately lifted.

The writer is a spiritual teacher



Skaters glide across an ice rink on a winter morning in Shimla.

PHOTO: PTI

### DIGITAL EXPERIENCE

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### WHEN CLEAN CITIES HIDE DEADLY ADMINISTRATIVE FAILURES

Pipelines are being inspected and flushed, and households have been advised to boil water before use. Proceedings have also begun against municipal officials whose neglect allegedly contributed to the crisis. Indore is not an isolated case. When civic systems weaken, even cities that appear immaculate can become dangerous. Lives have already been lost, and many families remain anxious as loved ones recover. Cleanliness must be more than cosmetic. It should begin below the ground, with sound engineering, honest supervision, and a genuinely accountable administration that treats water as a fundamental right for every household, in every season and crisis.

DATTAPRASAD SHIRODKAR | MUMBAI

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

### Hard lessons from Venezuela crisis

America's recent military action in Venezuela forces an uncomfortable reconsideration of the global order, and for India the message is stark. When crisis erupts, neither great powers nor multilateral bodies will arrive as rescuers. The UN lacks the will and capacity to restrain a determined power acting in what it claims is the national interest, and moral appeals seldom alter outcomes. In such a world, self-strengthening becomes the only credible insurance.

India must therefore deepen security and economic resilience. Defence spending of four to five per cent of GDP should be seen as prudent insurance, matched by technological self-reliance, strong diplomacy, and political consensus on national security. Venezuela ignored gathering signals. The American operation launched in September 2015 against alleged drug-linked vessels, followed by repeated maritime strikes, was not an isolated incident but an escalation. History shows that signals dismissed eventually become confrontations. What we now witness is less a rules-based order than a jungle logic in which might shapes outcomes. For India, the imperative is preparation, layered deterrence, and steady economic strength – the real guarantees of survival and influence in the decades ahead.

KV CHANDRA | MYSURU

### Congress demands justice over water

The Congress in Madhya Pradesh has intensified its campaign against the BIP government, announcing a 'Niyay Yatra' in Indore on January 11, to demand accountability for the city's contaminated-water tragedy. The party seeks the resignation of Urban Administration Minister and local MLA Kailash Vijayvargiya, whom it holds directly responsible for the crisis in Bhagirathpura, one of the worst-affected localities. With another health report this week, fatalities linked to polluted municipal water have reportedly reached 30, while more than two hundred residents have been hospitalised after sewage is believed to have leaked into drinking-water pipelines. Thousands suffered severe diarrhoea and vomiting during the outbreak, exposing a shocking collapse of urban governance. Congress leaders argue that the episode amounts to premeditated neglect rather than mere administrative failure, and they neglect criminal cases against those responsible for supplying unsafe water. The march is intended both to honour the victims and to insist on transparency, compensation, and credible remedial measures. Until responsibility is fixed, public trust will remain fragile – and the tragedy will stand as a grim warning of complacency's price.

BHAGWAN THADANI | MUMBAI

### Parole misuse undermines judicial trust

Recently, Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh, head of Dera Sacha Sauda, convicted of rape and murder and serving a prison sentence, was granted parole for a record fifth time this time for forty days. Why does our judicial system permit such apparent favouritism, which is then openly exploited by ruling political parties? In a democracy, the judiciary is a central pillar of the Constitution, ensuring that law and order are upheld impartially. Yet repeated concessions to the powerful weaken credibility and public faith. When those with influence appear to receive leniency, the message to ordinary citizens is disheartening: justice bends for the wealthy, while the poor must endure the full weight of the law.

This perception is corrosive. It risks normalising the idea that punishment can be negotiated through political connections rather than determined by courts alone. To preserve trust, every parole must be transparent, reasoned, and clearly separated from political convenience.

Ultimately, democracy rests on the integrity of its institutions. Parliament, the Executive, and the judiciary must act with independence and honesty if the spirit of justice is to survive.

JITESH MORI | GUJARAT

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR



# Why India cannot afford gender-blind trade policies any longer

In an economy where exports are expected to drive growth, jobs, and global relevance — and where female labour-force participation remains among the lowest in the G20 — the gender dimension of trade policy can no longer be treated as incidental



SHISHIR  
PRIYADARSHI

For much of its post-reform history, India's trade policy has been guided by a focus on growth, competitiveness, and market access. Questions of social inclusion, including gender, were largely addressed through parallel policy tracks—labour laws, welfare schemes, and social programmes—rather than through trade itself. This division was understandable when trade policy was viewed primarily as a technical instrument for expanding markets. Today, however, that separation has become increasingly difficult to sustain.

In an economy where exports are expected to drive growth, jobs, and global relevance — and where female labour-force participation remains among the lowest in the G20 — the gender dimension of trade policy can no longer be treated as incidental. Evidence from India and across the Global South shows clearly that trade affects women and men differently. Ignoring this reality does not make trade policy simpler or more efficient; it makes it less effective.

#### The Limits of Gender-Neutral Trade

The multilateral trading system was built on the assumption that trade rules apply uniformly to all economic actors. WTO agreements do not explicitly mention women or gender equality, reflecting the belief that markets would allocate opportunities efficiently and that distributional concerns lay outside trade policy's remit. India too broadly shared this worldview. During its early engagement with the WTO, India focused on safeguarding development space, agricultural interests, and equity between countries — not addressing inequalities within them.

Yet this neutrality has proved illusory. In India, women account for a significant share of employment in export-oriented sectors such as agriculture, textiles, garments, leather, and certain services. According to Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) data, women constitute over 60 per cent of employment in apparel manufacturing and a large share of informal agricultural exports. Despite this, gender has



**THE DEEPER CHALLENGE LIES NOT MERELY IN JOB CREATION, BUT IN VALUE CAPTURE. ACROSS INDIA AND THE GLOBAL SOUTH, WOMEN CONTRIBUTE A SUBSTANTIAL SHARE OF LABOUR EMBODIED IN EXPORTS YET CAPTURE A SMALLER SHARE OF DOMESTIC VALUE ADDED**

remained largely absent from trade strategy.

Firm-level and labour-market studies now show that trade outcomes are shaped by pre-existing inequalities — unequal access to land, skills, finance, technology, mobility, and time. Markets do not erase these constraints; they interact with and often magnify them. Trade policy, whether policymakers intend it or not, operates within these social structures.

#### How Trade Hurts and Helps — Women in India

The gendered impact of trade in India operates through several channels. Women are disproportionately concentrated in sectors that face higher trade barriers and intense competition. Agriculture and food processing encounter stringent sanitary standards; textiles and garments face tariff escalation in developed markets; leather exports confront regulatory and sustainability barriers. These constraints limit firms' ability to upgrade, thus keeping wages low and productivity gains uneven.

India's textile and apparel sector illustrates this clearly. While it employs millions of women, most remain confined to low-skill, labour-intensive roles. Tariff escalation discourages higher value-added exports, while better-paid functions - design, branding, logistics, and management - remain male-domi-

nated. As a result, women's employment expands without commensurate economic mobility.

Non-tariff measures further compound the problem. Certification requirements, customs procedures, and compliance costs impose fixed burdens that fall hardest on micro and small enterprises, where women are overrepresented as entrepreneurs. Studies across South Asia suggest that women-owned firms experience longer border-clearance times and higher transaction costs even after controlling for firm size and sector. In India, where over 95 per cent of women-owned enterprises are micro-scale, these frictions prove decisive.

At the same time, trade has also been one of the most powerful engines of women's paid employment in the developing world. Exporting firms consistently employ a higher share of women than non-exporters — roughly one-third compared with one-quarter on average. Global value chains have created formal jobs for women in garments, electronics assembly, agri-processing, and IT-enabled services, often offering better wages and conditions than informal domestic work.

India's experience, however, reveals a paradox. Despite export growth, female labour-force participation fell from about 37 per cent in the mid-2000s to around 23 per cent by 2019, with only a modest recovery since. This decline

reflects broader structural constraints — care responsibilities, skill mismatches, safety concerns, and social norms — that trade alone cannot overcome.

#### Jobs Are Not Enough: The Question of Value

The deeper challenge lies not merely in job creation, but in value capture. Across India and the Global South, women contribute a substantial share of labour embodied in exports yet capture a smaller share of domestic value added. They remain concentrated in low-skill, low-wage tasks, while men dominate micro-scale, these frictions prove decisive.

This pattern limits both equity and competitiveness. Evidence from India's manufacturing and services exports suggests that firms upgrading technologically tend to demand new skills — yet women are less likely to access training or promotion pathways. Global value chains can act as ladders into formal employment, but without deliberate policy support, women will continue to remain stuck on the lowest rungs.

An economy that systematically underutilises half of its talent pool cannot sustain productivity growth or move decisively up the value chain. Gender inequality in trade is therefore not a niche social issue; it is a structural economic constraint.

#### What India Must Do Now

The way forward does not lie in turning

trade policy into social policy, but in aligning trade more closely with labour-market realities. Export-oriented strategies have expanded women's access to formal employment, but this participation remains fragile. Trade reforms must therefore be complemented by domestic measures — skills development, access to finance, childcare infrastructure, safety mobility, and workplace standards — so that women can progress rather than stagnate within global markets.

Reducing the asymmetric trade costs faced by women-led enterprises is equally important. Simplifying customs procedures, digitising border processes, improving transparency, and easing access to trade finance can have a powerful gender-equalising effect without altering tariff schedules or negotiating mandates. In India's MSME-dominated export base, such reforms could unlock significant participation gains. Global value chains should be approached strategically. Evidence from India's apparel and electronics sectors suggests that technology upgrades and better logistics reduce informality and physical intensity, making factory employment more accessible to women. Trade policy that encourages upgrading — rather than pure cost competition — can quietly but decisively improve job quality. Finally, international cooperation must move beyond symbolic recognition. Investing in gender-disaggregated trade data, supporting women exporters through targeted capacity-building, and evaluating trade-facilitation reforms by who benefits — not just aggregate efficiency — will be critical. Inclusive trade is not achieved by rhetoric alone; it requires intentional design and accountability.

#### Trade Policy Must Catch Up with India's Reality

The debate on whether trade affects women differently is settled. The real question is whether India is willing to design trade policy for the economy it has. A trade strategy that ignores gender will underperform on exports, employment, and productivity. A trade strategy that integrates gender will be more competitive, more resilient, and more legitimate. Inclusive trade is not a moral indulgence; it is an economic necessity — one that India can no longer afford to postpone.

## TS Eliot, Indian thought, and the philosophical horizons of the NEP 2020



GARIMA  
GUPTA



DUSHYANT  
KUMAR RAI

The National Education Policy (NEP) of 2020 may well be described as a decisive moment in India's intellectual and cultural life. It is not merely an administrative blueprint for educational reform; it is a manifesto for the civilisational renewal of India. At a time when the world is grappling with the marvels and perils of artificial intelligence, the uncertainties of climate change, and the erosion of human values, education can no longer be confined to the acquisition of technical skills. It becomes, rather, a question of the soul and of consciousness: what kind of human being do we wish our young to become?

In this context, the writings of TS Eliot acquire renewed relevance, for Eliot not only diagnosed the fragmented consciousness of modern civilisation but also sought its remedy in the philosophical depths of Indian thought. It also exemplifies how the NEP is not parochial, but rather an inclusive mindset that promotes Indic knowledge beyond spatio-temporal boundaries.

Eliot's intellectual journey stretched from the mechanical modernity of the West to the spiritual landscapes of India. He matured his childhood interest as he studied Sanskrit and Pali at Harvard, immersing himself in the Vedanta, the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, and the Buddhist canon. His engagement with these texts, unlike that of his contemporaries, was not an exercise in antiquarian curiosity or Orientalist fascination; he drew upon them as instruments to interpret and heal the ruptures of Western civilisation through holistic knowledge. The NEP, in its own way, seeks to address contemporary crises with a holistic vision wherein yoga, Ayurveda, the classical arts, and philosophy engage in dialogue with modern science and technology. The policy reminds us that the aim of education is not efficiency alone but self-realisation, just as Eliot transformed his poetry and criticism through the assimilation of Indian philosophy, the NEP envisions the revitalisation of India's knowledge traditions as a medium of dialogue with the challenges of the future.

Eliot's 1922 masterpiece *The Waste Land* embodied a universal code for restoring balance to human life. Its climactic invocation — "Datta (Charity), Dayadhvam (Compassion),

Damayata (Self-restraint)" — is not a decorative citation but a shloka from the Bhadaranyaka Upaniṣad, offered as an ethical prescription for a Europe scarred by the First World War. Here, Indian philosophy is not merely supplemental to Western modernity; it emerges as its guide. The urgency of this message grows sharper today. Artificial intelligence is reshaping work, thought, and communication at a staggering pace, pressing education towards narrowly technical training. Yet the real question remains: do we wish to cultivate "mechanical experts" capable of innovation but devoid of compassion and wisdom? Or do we aspire to form citizens who, while mastering technology, remain grounded in human dignity, ecological balance, and cultural dialogue? The NEP's answer is unambiguous: knowledge is meaningful only when bound to ethics, and education is complete only when it fashions individuals who are at once local and global. The climate crisis makes this imperative all the more pressing.

The NEP not only emphasises scientific research but also regards environmental consciousness, sustainability, and responsibility as integral to education. This echoes Eliot's Four Quarters, where the balance between nature and eternity discloses itself as a condition of human meaning. Just as Eliot wrote that "the significance of human life lies not only in the present moment, but in the capacity to go beyond it," so too education derives its meaning not from immediate utility but from the preservation of the future and the renewal of eternal values.

Eliot had warned that the true crisis of modernity was not material but spiritual. Machines and economies cannot provide direction to life. This truth is now revealed in the crises of climate and inequality. The NEP, therefore, insists that value education, the arts, yoga, and philosophy form essential components of learning. This is not merely an Indian prescription; it is a message from the Global South to the world: that development is not mere production and consumption, but balance and restraint.

In adopting Indian thought, Eliot did not abandon his Western heritage; he deepened it. He demonstrated that civilisations endure through dialogue. In his poetry, the Gopis' dialogues with the Dantes and the Upaniṣads converge with the Dantes and the Upaniṣads. Similarly, the NEP envisions Sanskrit texts conversing with artificial intelligence and environmental science. Such dialogue is neither narrowness nor imitation; it is creative redefinition.

The central insight of this dialogue is clear: knowledge severed from moral and cultural foundations becomes sterile, but nourished



by the wisdom of tradition, it becomes a power of renewal. Eliot transformed modern poetry through Indian philosophy; the NEP seeks to transform the future of Indian education through the same. At a time when the world does not seek fragmented specialists but integrated human beings, the shared message of Eliot and the NEP acquires new urgency. This has been successfully demonstrated by the "Design Your Degree" programme of the University of Jammu, which has envisioned education beyond the confining walls of separate disciplines. It also exemplifies the practicality of the implementation of the NEP: that, if adopted in its true essence, it can create responsible citizens who are not only a future-ready workforce but also understand the responsibility of belonging to a region and to the nation. Such learner-centric courses, like DVD of Jammu University, with revolutionary pedagogy that fosters the humility of knowing rather than the pride of knowledge, play out the true spirit of the NEP.

Eliot once wrote that "the little wisdom we may acquire is the wisdom of humility." In embracing Indian thought, he lived this humility. His works — The Waste Land, Four Quartets, The Elder Statesman — testify that the final fulfilment of life lies in the confluence of love, compassion, and eternal consciousness. This is the path the NEP 2020 seeks to make the foundation of Indian education. Eliot and the NEP remind us alike that civilisations endure not by wealth or power alone but by their capacity for wisdom, compassion, and restraint. These are the very values that resound from the Upaniṣads to the present journey of Indian education — reminding us that the path to the future lies at the confluence of past wisdom and present responsibility.

In adopting Indian thought, Eliot did not abandon his Western heritage; he deepened it. He demonstrated that civilisations endure through dialogue. In his poetry, the Gopis' dialogues with the Dantes and the Upaniṣads converge with the Dantes and the Upaniṣads. Similarly, the NEP envisions Sanskrit texts conversing with artificial intelligence and environmental science. Such dialogue is neither narrowness nor imitation; it is creative redefinition.

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## How Indian consumers changed spending in 2025



MANDEEP  
SINGH

The year 2025 marked a significant turning point in how Indian consumers approached spending on everyday services. Insights from the start-up ecosystem suggest that the long-standing focus on finding the cheapest option began to give way to a more considered evaluation of value — one that prioritised reliability, transparency, and consistency over short-term savings. This shift reflects a maturing mindset among consumers, who are increasingly seeking meaningful experiences rather than merely low prices.

For much of the past decade, service consumption in India was largely driven by price discovery. Discounts, competitive undercutting, and one-time offers were central to influencing consumer choices. Consumers often selected services based primarily on cost, even when the overall experience was inconsistent. However, 2025 revealed a shift in priorities. While price remained a relevant factor, it was no longer the dominant criterion. Consumers demonstrated a willingness to pay a premium for services that delivered predictable, seamless, and high-quality experiences — services that met expectations without causing unnecessary friction or hassle.

#### Transparent Pricing Builds Trust

One of the most notable developments was the increasing importance of transparent pricing. Consumers began to prefer services that communicated costs openly and clearly, without hidden charges or ambiguous terms. Transparency emerged as a foundation of trust, fostering smoother interactions and setting accurate expectations.

Another emerging trend was the growing appeal of bundled services. Consumers appreciated solutions that simplified planning and reduced effort, particularly for recurring needs such as home maintenance, wellness, and lifestyle subscriptions. Bundled offerings provided continuity and convenience, reinforcing the perception of value beyond immediate cost considerations. These packages encouraged long-term relationships, positioning service providers as reliable partners in everyday life rather than one-off solutions.

#### Consistency Strengthens Customer Relationships

Reliability became a critical differentiator. Service providers who consistently delivered on promises



es saw higher levels of consumer loyalty. Rather than switching providers frequently in search of cheaper options, consumers increasingly gravitated towards familiar, dependable providers. Decisions evolved from being purely transactional to being relationship-driven, with trust, positive past experiences, and service history guiding repeated engagement.

Digital adoption played a key role in this evolution. By the end of 2025, consumers were using online platforms more confidently to compare services, assess availability, and review track records.

Reviews were interpreted with greater nuance, with attention given to patterns of responsiveness, reliability, and overall service quality rather than isolated incidents.

Collectively, these changes point to a steadily maturing service economy in India. Consumers demonstrated higher awareness, stronger preferences, and more deliberate decision-making.

Price sensitivity coexisted with an appreciation for quality, trust, and dependability, fostering healthier expectations within the service ecosystem.

Businesses responded by investing in training, technology, and process improvements to meet rising standards, creating interactions that were more predictable and collaborative.

Over time, this maturity strengthened confidence on both sides, paving the way for long-term relationships, innovation, and sustainable growth across India's expanding service landscape.

By the close of 2025, value was understood not merely as cost-effectiveness, but as consistent delivery, transparent communication, and dependable outcomes. Consumers increasingly chose services aligned with their expectations, lifestyle, and long-term needs. This shift marks a positive trajectory for India's service economy — anchored in trust, lasting relationships, and sustainable growth — reflecting the country's evolution from price-conscious consumption to value-driven decision-making.

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## The pension 'tap'

TN pension scheme balanced, but will pressure finances

**T**he Tamil Nadu Assured Pension Scheme (TAPS), to be implemented in 2027, bears the trappings of an election promise, with State polls round the corner — but its design is not without merits. TAPS, in fact, largely follows the Unified Pension Scheme (UPS) model, offered to Central government employees from this fiscal year. Like the UPS, it promises a defined pension to State government employees and teachers.

From the employees' point of view this is far better than the current Consolidated Pension Scheme (CPS) in the State, where the employee and the government contribute 10 per cent of the salary, but the employee does not have any assured pension and is paid only the accumulated sum along with interest on retirement. From a public finance viewpoint, TAPS looks better than the old pension scheme that is being implemented by some non-BJP ruled States. Under the latter, the entire pension burden falls on the State government. In TAPS, 50 per cent of the last drawn basic pay and dearness allowance is promised as assured pension. The employee's contribution is maintained at 10 per cent under TAPS, but the State government's contribution is increased to 18.5 per cent. There is also a small lumpsum payment which will be borne entirely by the government. The pension will also be adjusted for inflation regularly and 60 per cent of the pension will be paid to the nominee on death of the employee. The decision to shift the pension corpus to Pension Fund Regulatory Development Authority from LIC is also a good move as the corpus can increase faster if managed judiciously, reducing the burden on the State government. About six lakh employees stand to gain from TAPS.

TAPS needs to be implemented carefully to ensure that the pension corpus does not fall short of requirement. Under UPS, the Central government's contribution of 18.5 per cent of the salary is split into two parts — 10 per cent of the salary is added to the employee's pension account and 8.5 per cent is moved into a common pool which is used to address any shortfall in meeting the pension obligation. The Tamil Nadu government has not specified how its contribution of 18.5 per cent of the salary under TAPS will be accounted for. The State should be diligent about its monthly transfers to the pension fund, as any ambiguity in this regard can cause a gap in funds needed for pension payouts.

TAPS is, however, likely to increase the State's pension payout by at least 20 per cent over the existing level of ₹42,000 crore. The higher outlay should be viewed in the backdrop of the fact that the State's committed expenditures towards interest payments, salaries and pension account for well over half its revenue receipts. Given the state of Tamil Nadu's finances and the large workforce, the timing of the rollout of TAPS appears inopportune; it could have been postponed to the future. In the interim, the CPS corpus could have been transferred to PFRDA to help it earn better returns for pensioners.

## OTHER VOICES.

## THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

EUROPE

**The 'international law' illusion in Venezuela**  
Has international law become a tyrant's best friend? Democrats and foreign leaders are claiming that President Trump's arrest of Venezuelan dictator Nicolás Maduro is illegal — at least as international law is interpreted by the reigning complex of professors, NGOs and multilateral bureaucracies. United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres is "deeply concerned that the rules of international law have not been respected." Joining them are the usual suspects, including safely-out-of-the-fray Europeans, China ("a clear violation") and shameless Russia ("an act of armed aggression"). Our favourite is Hamas's statement condemning the Maduro arrest as a "grave violation of international law" and "assault on the sovereignty of an independent state." (NEW YORK, JANUARY 5)

The  
Guardian

## Europe's weak response to 'America first' imperialism

The initial reaction of European leaders to Donald Trump's illegal military intervention in Venezuela was not only weak, it also had the briefest of shelf lives. Refusing on Sunday to condemn the attack as a breach of international law, European Union member states called hopefully for "a negotiated, democratic, inclusive and peaceful solution to the crisis, led by Venezuelans." The delusional nature of that response was laid bare as Mr Trump told reporters the same day: "We're in charge." So much for the restoration of democracy. The US president was also charged with threats of further military action, should the repressive regime left behind when Nicolás Maduro was seized fail to do Washington's bidding. (LONDON, JANUARY 5)

## How the stock market could sink Trump in 2026

**RISKS ABOUND.** Spike in long-term interest rates, deflation of the AI bubble, economic reversals abroad, and unforeseen geopolitical events could hurt the US economy and the already overpriced stock market



Desmond Lachman

**I**n a recent campaign-style speech, US President Donald Trump asserted that "the only thing that's really going up, big, it's called the stock market, and your 401(k)." He has a point: all major US stock indices realised double-digit percentage gains last year. And yet, the November midterm elections are still a long way off. Were there to be a stock-market correction in the meantime, Trump's economic point of pride could become a liability.

Unfortunately for Trump, a market correction (a 10-20 per cent decline) does seem highly probable this year. There is an unusually high degree of optimism priced into the market, making stocks susceptible to a large pullback in the event of an economic setback — which any number of economic or political "known unknowns" could cause in the run-up to the midterms.

Consider the current optimism. It would be an understatement to say that stocks are priced at lofty valuations; in fact, they are priced for economic perfection. As measured by the Cyclically Adjusted Price-Earnings Ratio, the S&P 500 is valued at more than twice its long-term average, and at close to its pre-2001 dot-com high. And as measured by the Buffett Indicator —

the ratio of the total US stock-market valuation to US GDP — the market is trading at an all-time record, some 50 per cent above its 2008 high.

Another measure of optimism is the current bullishness on the part of fund managers. According to Bank of America, these influential voices are more exuberant now than at any point in the past three years, and their current cash holdings have plummeted to their lowest level on record. Again, such sentiment — and the best that follows from it — would seem to set the market up for a major pullback should the economy falter in the coming months.

Why might that happen? One need only consider the country's unsustainable public finances, coupled with the threat Trump poses to the US Federal Reserve's independence, to envisage a return of the bond market vigilantes and a spike in long-term interest rates. Heightening this risk is the country's high dependence on foreigners to finance its \$2 trillion annual budget deficit. If foreigners come to think that the US government will try to inflate away its debt, they will demand higher interest payments on their US Treasury bond holdings, which would

**As US operation against Venezuela demonstrated, unexpected or under-appreciated geopolitical events can disrupt financial markets**

increase the cost of mortgages, auto loans, and many other common forms of borrowing.

## THE AI BUBBLE

Another domestic risk is the AI bubble, which could burst or deflate at any time. This risk is especially acute considering that as much as a half of US GDP growth is being driven by AI-related investment. Moreover, the end of the AI bubble would have a chilling effect on the stock prices of the so-called Magnificent Seven (Alphabet, Amazon, Apple, Meta, Microsoft, Nvidia, and Tesla), whose combined valuation is around 35 per cent of the S&P 500's total. Oracle, whose stock price already fell 30 per cent last quarter, could prove to be the canary in the coal mine.

The US stock market could also be shaken by economic reversals abroad. One such shock could come from China, which is still relying excessively on an investment- and export-centric model to drive its economy. With China's trade surplus now exceeding \$1 trillion, increased US and European protectionism has become more likely, and with it, a further breakdown in the international system.

Another shock could come from Japan, where Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi's pursuit of an irresponsible budget policy has raised fears of a "Liz Truss moment" that could send Japanese government bond yields sharply higher (as happened in the UK in the fall of 2022). Were that to occur, we could see a disruptive unwinding of the Japanese carry trade (borrowing at a

lower interest rate in one country to invest in assets elsewhere) and the repatriation of Japanese capital that has been supporting US financial markets.

Finally, as last weekend's US military operation against Venezuela demonstrated, unexpected or under-appreciated geopolitical events can disrupt financial markets. Even before Trump announced that the US plans to "invade" Venezuela until a "proper" transition can take place, China was conducting live military drills in the Taiwan Strait, and Russia was dragging its feet on a peace settlement with Ukraine. China might try to capitalise on this moment to regain control over Taiwan, and Russia may be emboldened to make even more ambitious demands for territorial concessions from Ukraine. Even the smallest possibility of a conflict over Taiwan should be deeply concerning, considering that it supplies more than half the world's semiconductors.

If those who live by the sword die by the sword, the same may be true of equity prices in the run-up to this year's midterm elections. By emphasising how well the stock market is doing now, Trump could be setting himself up for disappointment if any number of risks materialise.

The writer, a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, is a former deputy director of the International Monetary Fund's Policy Development and Review Department and a former chief emerging-market economic strategist at Salomon Brothers. Copyright: Project Syndicate, 2026. www.project-syndicate.org

## Tackling US tariff shock with a monetary toolkit

Rate cuts and currency flexibility adopted by India worked in tandem, limiting the competitiveness loss from tariffs

## Vidhu Shekhar

**A**s the rupee crossed 90 to the dollar this winter, headlines have focused on record lows and currency stress. But analysts miss a critical point. Given the difference in rupee behaviour last year versus this, and RBI's reduced defence, the movement likely reflects a deliberate, coordinated response to the US' tariff escalation in 2025.

While China met America's tariff barrage with counter-tariffs, regulatory retaliation, and open hostility, India did something quieter, strategic, and arguably smarter. It reached for the monetary toolkit instead of the diplomatic megaphone. Rate cuts. Managed depreciation. No chest-thumping. No trade war headlines. The rupee's slide is in effect a policy.

To understand 2025, we need to understand the box India was stuck in during 2024. Every domestic signal pointed to rate cuts. Inflation below 5 per cent. Softening core. Sluggish industrial credit. Real rates among the highest in the G20. The economy was not just asking for easier money, it was desperate for it. Yet the RBI could not move. Its hands were tied by Washington.

As the Federal Reserve tightened post-Covid and then held rates at around 5 per cent, global central banks were forced to follow. Any unilateral easing risked capital outflows and a steep currency fall. The Fed, in effect, had stripped monetary sovereignty from central banks worldwide.

Later 2024 proved just how trapped

the RBI was. Over November and December, the RBI spent over \$35 billion to hold the rupee near 83-84. This underscored how constrained India's monetary autonomy remained. Much of India's post-Covid tightening had been forced for some reasons.

The tariff shock in 2025 changed these incentives completely. Once Washington raised duties to 50 per cent on key Indian goods, the calculus flipped. A weaker rupee, instead of being a threat, became a cushion. Controlled depreciation could offset part of the tariff hit. And if markets were going to accept a weaker rupee anyway, rate cuts suddenly became viable again.

The tariffs, paradoxically, gave India its monetary policy back.

## LOWER BORROWING COSTS

Another strong advantage followed. Lower borrowing costs strengthen the competitive position of Indian firms, especially when rivals in China and Europe are financing at near-zero or negative real rates. Rate cuts and currency flexibility worked in tandem, limiting the competitiveness loss from tariffs.

India had a rare alignment: inflation at 700, oil prices benign, reserves near \$700 billion. A window for monetary freedom had opened. Rate cuts were overdue anyway. The tariff shock just made them strategically defensible. And the RBI's own communications confirm this was intentional. The June Bulletin explicitly flagged "trade policy uncertainties" in the same month the RBI delivered a 50-basis point cut, a rarity in India. The message: lower borrowing costs for Indian industry before export



POLICY FLEXIBILITY. Deployed at a right time

burden into relative prices, and did so without spooking financial markets.

The contract with China is instructive. Beijing went tit-for-tat. Counter-tariffs, regulatory pressure on US firms and open confrontation. The result was反而, putting pressure on the yuan in offshore markets, alongside capital outflows that foreign investors were already primed to accelerate. Washington also escalated further and it became a much larger conflict.

India sidestepped the entire cycle. By keeping its response within the domain of monetary policy, India avoided the trap. A rate cut is not a hostile act. A managed currency adjustment cannot be turned into a headline. India defended its competitiveness without handing Washington a villain to rally against. There is a structural reason too. India's capital account is more open than China's, making currency instability far costlier. China can wall off its financial system while India cannot. That constraint shaped the strategy and made discipline essential.

There is a broader point here that deserves attention. The tariff escalation was political. The response was monetary. India executed its defence through tools that were domestically justified but externally timed. A political shock, absorbed through technocratic means.

India absorbed the tariff shock without sacrificing growth or stability. The rupee at 90+, then, is not a symbol of weakness. It is a marker of policy flexibility deployed at precisely the right moment.

The writer is faculty of Finance at SPJIMR, Mumbai

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

## Delhi's air pollution

This refers to 'Cannot blame farmers anymore for Delhi's air' (January 6). The writer's idea of having a winter capital seems good. But this would have little impact on the number of vehicles on road — the crux of the problem. Many suggestions and ideas have poured in for addressing the capital's pollution problem, yet nothing seems to have been adopted. Measures such as extending the winter vacation for schools, colleges, universities, resuming online classes, work from home for those in the IT sector, and

suspending all construction activities should help reduce pollution considerably. Also, measures such as containing vehicle population, increasing the ratio of EVs, and leveraging the vehicle scrappage scheme must be given impetus.

RV Basakar  
Pune

## Brazen abduction

Apropos 'Indefensible action' (January 6), the Trump administration's brazen abduction of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro starkly exposes a 19th

century imperial mindset operating with 21st century surveillance and logistical tools. By seizing a sovereign leader and transporting him across continents, the US has shredded international law and already-eroded multilateral norms. Asserting jurisdiction over Maduro's alleged crimes effectively claims that American law enforcement reigns everywhere, freed from consultation, consent, or due process. The narrative about narcotics is camouflage; the real objective is Venezuelan oil, leverage, and power projection. If

international law can be discarded so casually, then no nation's leader, territory, or resources remain secure, and global rules risk collapsing into coercion instead of dealing as legally.

N Sadasivam Reddy  
Bengaluru

## Sports ecosystem

This is with reference to 'Tech-driven sports' (January 6). India should leverage tech-driven, audience-centric systems for sports transformation. India's sports ecosystem should undergo a technological revolution,

enhancing fan engagement and creating an inclusive environment for athletes across levels. Moreover, the continued collaboration between the government, the private sector and start-ups will be vital to nurture this evolving landscape. By using India's strong digital infrastructure and passion for sports, the country could well be on its way to becoming a global sporting powerhouse, driven by innovation, inclusivity and a shared vision for a dynamic future.

Muthulakshmi  
Virudhunagar, TN

## Some Budget proposals

A defence cess, IT relief for seniors on deposits

Manas R Das

**T**he article discusses certain themes for the 2026-27 FY Budget.

The IT relief and GST 2.0 have benefitted all, boosting the economy. So the Budget has the leeway to focus on fiscal consolidation.

Revenue expenditure being rather inelastic, the Budget may endeavour to reduce the government's capital expenditure and allow the private sector to substitute, especially in the non-strategic sectors.

It should present a pragmatic roadmap for disinvestment in the financial and non-financial Public Sector Undertakings (PSUs).

Given the escalating geo-political tensions, both globally and in the neighbourhood, the defence sector will be primary in the upcoming Budget.

A 'defence' cess may be levied on the rich/super-rich, based not on their income, but on the value of luxury assets they acquire.

The cess may also cover the promoters who reap hefty capital gains by exiting their promoted companies through OFS.

Given the turmoil in foreign trade, the Budget needs to provide a framework for flexible medium-term foreign trade strategy.

The near-monopoly in critical minerals by one country is holding several countries to ransom, India included.

Given these minerals' importance in the tech sector, the Budget should not only allocate significant sums to this sector for exploration, processing, R&D, etc.

### THE PROPOSALS

The entire interest income from Term Deposits (TDs) may be exempted from I-T for the seniors as they, being relatively risk-averse, put their savings in bank TDs. Simultaneously, they provide a steady and effortless source of deposits for banks.

Senior citizens get some extra rate of interest over and above that for the general public. The additional rate, which usually ranges from 25 to 65 bps in respect of TDs, has long remained static, and hence is raised to 50 to 100 bps.

Transfer of PAN from the 'place of work' to the 'place of settlement' after retirement can be made easier and faster.

Discrepancy between interest earned as stated by banks in the account holder's passbook and AIS/26AS statements must be



**BUDGET 2026-27.** Setting the agenda

avoided, as the relative entities are electronically interconnected.

GST on the premium for group insurance for retired employees be annulled and/or the I-T exemption limit for the premium be raised significantly.

The Public Provident Fund (PPF) acts as a 'safety net' after retirement. However, the annual limit of contribution to PPF, which has remained stagnant at ₹1.5 lakh for a fairly long time, be raised to at least ₹2.1 lakh.

Besides, the Budget may allow the following operational relaxations:

\* Withdrawal from the PPF account be allowed twice, instead of once, in a year, subject to an aggregate limit.

\* Transfer of withdrawals from the PPF account to savings bank account be allowed through Internet Banking, if both the accounts are in the same bank branch.

After the initial investment in the Senior Citizens Savings Scheme, the procedure for additional investments should be made simpler.

The much talked about second round of PSB consolidation may be postponed for now.

Instead, PSBs with offices abroad may be asked to restructure their overseas operations during 2026-27, particularly due to the long-prevailing geo-political tumult, tariff manoeuvres and likely transformations in India's trade relations with various countries.

Increasing the foreign investment limit for PSBs can wait until their second round of consolidation crystallizes. It would also be prudent to watch the response to the recent hit in the foreign investment limit in the insurance sector.

Balance sheet formats and their contents, last revised years ago, may be made contemporaneous.

The writer is a former Assistant General Manager (Economist), SBI. Views expressed are personal

# VB-G RAM G Bill: faulty architecture

**SCHEME REVAMP.** The new Act may not deliver what the government wants, which is asset creation



**T NANDAKUMAR**

**M**uch of the public discourse on the VB-G RAM G Bill has revolved around three headline changes: the removal of Mahatma Gandhi's name; the effective dilution of the "employment guarantee"; and the shift to a centrally sponsored scheme with a 60:40 Union-State funding pattern.

Economists, sociologists, and political leaders have raised concerns on these points. It is true that MGNREGA had its own problems and weaknesses. But does the new Act address those? And will this law deliver what it promises?

To answer these, let's turn to the preamble and key provisions — Sections 4, 5, 8, and 22 — alongside the text of the Act as a whole.

The Bill signals a decisive shift in emphasis: from guaranteeing employment to creating rural infrastructure across four thematic domains: water security through water-related works; core rural infrastructure; livelihood-related infrastructure; and mitigation of extreme weather events.

These are indeed employment-generating activities, but employment is now incidental rather than guaranteed. Schemes will be prepared by Gram Panchayats under the Vikas Granth Panchayat Plans and integrated with the PM Gati Shakti National Master Plan. This alignment narrows local discretion though it improves effective monitoring by the Centre: Panchayats cannot freely set priorities but must conform to national templates and restrict their choice. The underlying objective is clear — asset creation first, employment second.

Will it apply? Implementation will not be universal. Only those Gram Panchayats notified by the Union Government will be eligible. While criteria are yet to be announced, infrastructure deficit may dominate as the key filter. This design risks excluding



The focus of the new scheme is more on asset creation than job generation

large swathes of rural India from the benefits of employment support.

Moreover, Panchayats unable to propose schemes within the four prescribed domains may lose out altogether. Approvals, therefore, will be complex and exclusionary.

**THE EMPLOYMENT 'GUARANTEE'** Section 5(1) raises the guarantee from 100 to 125 days. Yet this promise is undermined by structural constraints: schemes may not exist where demand for work is highest; labour may be unavailable where schemes are sanctioned; and strict timelines under PM Gati Shakti will prioritise

completion over participation. In such cases, contractors — not local labour — would become the default option. Thus, the "guarantee" risks becoming unimplementable.

The most formidable obstacle is financial. What was once a 100 per cent centrally funded scheme is now a centrally sponsored scheme. States must contribute 40 per cent of the total. In 2025-26, MGNREGA's allocation stood at ₹86,000 crore (down from ₹115,000 crore in 2020-21). If a similar outlay for the Central share is maintained, States collectively must mobilise about ₹57,000 crore. Bihar, with its infrastructure deficit, may need about ₹4,000 crore from its own resources. Kerala, under normal circumstances, will struggle to find an additional ₹1,500 crore.

For fiscally constrained States, this requirement is beyond their capabilities since the Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management Act provisions will kick in.

The flow of funds unfolds in the following manner: each financial year, the Union Government announces a normative allocation. States are then expected to contribute their share through their own budgets, creating the

pool of resources available for the scheme. These funds are subsequently sub-allocated to districts and panchayats.

At the local level, panchayats design schemes within these allocations, aligning them with the four thematic pillars of the PM Gati Shakti National Master Plan. In theory, this ensures coherence. In practice, however, political and fiscal realities intervene. States, reluctant to appear non-contributory, often commit to budgetary shares they cannot realistically sustain. When the time comes for actual disbursement, delays and cuts are inevitable.

Anyone familiar with the gap between budget estimates and actual expenditure knows the pattern. State contributions falter, central allocations are withheld. Panchayats are left with half-finished projects, forced into a cycle of catch-up and completion. This is precisely where contractors step in, often at the expense of employment and accountability. Administratively, the result is nothing short of a nightmare. Some of these problems could have been avoided if many of the process conditions were part of rules than that of the Act. This could have given more leeway to the Government to address problems as and when they arise.

### THE LIKELY IMPACT

Employment will emerge only as a secondary by-product; sustained asset creation may remain elusive.

Infrastructure outcomes will be fragmented, with some unfinished and part-finished projects undermining both credibility and long-term utility.

Administrative strain will intensify, as local bodies juggle political expectations, fiscal uncertainty, and completion pressures.

Trust deficits between tiers of government will deepen, eroding the intended synergy of the Gati Shakti framework.

Clamour for relaxations in the Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management Act will increase.

We will know after a year!

The writer is former Secretary, Food & Agriculture. Views are personal

## STATISTALK.

Compiled by Dharaivel Gunasekaran | Graphic Visveswaran V

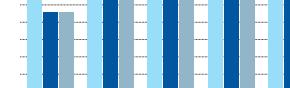
**Curve Watch: Tight liquidity, steeper long end, and wider state spreads**

Edelweiss Mutual Fund's CURVE report highlights key trends in the Indian bond market. For the fortnight ended December 31, 2025, short-term G-sec yields remained flat, supported by anchored near-term RBI policy expectations and improved liquidity visibility, while long-term yields edged up, reflecting persistent term premium, heavy fiscal supply, and global rate uncertainty. Banking system liquidity stayed tight, driven by advance tax outflows, sustained currency leakage, and year-end balance-sheet adjustments. State Development Loan (SDL) yields hardened amid modest supply pressure and cautious duration demand, despite supportive liquidity and steady domestic growth conditions. Corporate bond yields rose amid tight liquidity, heavy government borrowing, currency pressure, and global uncertainty.

### Long-end yields stay elevated amid term premium, fiscal supply and global rate uncertainty

Indian Government securities yields (%)

■ 1 year ago ■ 3 month ago ■ As of December 31, 2025



### Banking liquidity stays tight\*

pressured by advance tax outflows, currency leakage and year-end balance-sheet effects

in ₹ lakh crore

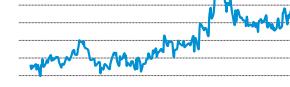
■ Net liquidity (Deficit (+)/Surplus (-))



### SDL spreads widened on supply pressure, reflecting cautious duration appetite

Spread in bps

■ 1 year ago ■ 3 month ago ■ As of December 31, 2025



### Long term corporate bond yields rise amid tighter liquidity, heavy government borrowing

in %

■ 2 Year AAA-PSU ■ 5 Year AAA-PSU ■ 10 Year AAA-PSU



Source: Edelweiss Mutual Fund \*Banking liquidity refers to the amount of surplus or deficit cash available in the banking system for lending and short-term funding

## On businessline.in

### Worrying trends in economic inequality in India

The divergence seems to be largely due to higher income groups benefiting disproportionately from policy changes, point out Trishna Sarkar and C Satcharan

<https://tinyurl.com/su3c6ck>

### From demand driven dole to fiscal discipline

G-RAM-G prioritises efficiency, assets, and fiscal control over MGNREGA's equity and social justice, says Govind Bhattacharjee

<https://tinyurl.com/tyzdu5c>

### Water budgeting: An innovative approach

Water budgeting should be worked out at the State, district, GP and village levels, involving all stakeholders including farmers and industry representatives, argues SK Sarkar

<https://tinyurl.com/2p8y7c4>

## thehindu businessline.

### TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

January 6, 2006

#### Divestment in NMDC, NLC on hold

The Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs (CCEA) to day deferred a decision on dis investments in National Mineral Development Corporation (NMDC) and the Neyveli Lignite Corporation Ltd, indicating that it had taken note of the opposition of the Leftist allies to such moves.

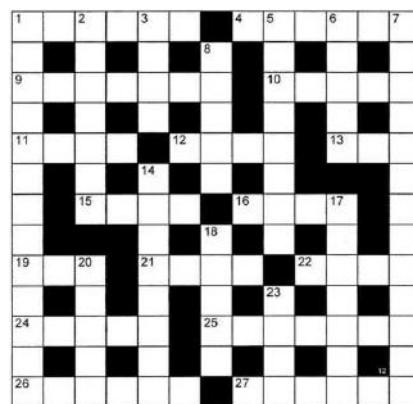
#### 29 cos participate in FM radio bidding

The Government has kicked off the second phase of FM radio privatisation with over 29 companies participating in the financial bidding process for 64 frequencies in 13 metros and key cities. Initial estimates suggest that the Government is likely to mop over Rs 500 crore as one time entry fee (CTEF) from successful bidders.

#### Foreign reserves fall by over \$6 b due to IMD redemption

The redemption of India Millennium Deposits (IMD) left its mark on the country's foreign exchange position for the final week of 2005, with reserves down by \$6.844 billion after the central bank sold foreign exchange to SBI for redeeming IMDs. In its Weekly Statistical Supplement, the Reserve Bank of India said that the total reserves for week ended December 30, 2005 touched \$137.206 billion against \$144.05 billion in the earlier week.

## ● BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2592



### EASY

#### ACROSS

- 01. Those who copy others (6)
- 04. The Big Top (6)
- 09. Wrinkled, folded (7)
- 10. Portion (5)
- 11. Wicked (4)
- 12. Look through narrowed eyes (4)
- 13. Baked dish (3)
- 14. Acidulous (4)
- 15. Inkspot (4)
- 16. Steal from (3)
- 21. Volume (4)
- 22. Island east of Java (4)
- 24. Supernumerary (5)
- 25. Anguish (7)
- 26. Pays out money (6)
- 27. Be consistent (6)

#### DOWN

- 01. Producers of fruit, vegetables (6,7)
- 02. Preserved corpses (7)
- 03. Frigid (4)
- 05. Puts in danger (8)
- 06. Sound of chick (5)
- 07. 14 Down. Family secret one wishes hidden (8,2,3,8)
- 08. Went on to say (5)
- 14. See 7 Down
- 17. Acrobat's swing (7)
- 18. Plunder, loot (5)
- 20. Take a dip (5)
- 23. Three players (4)

### NOT SO EASY

#### ACROSS

- 01. They copy Roman figures in writing (6)
- 04. Open place at street junction to find acrobats in (6)
- 09. Having creased the back-end, went ahead (7)
- 10. Literary composition, or a part of one (5)
- 11. It's very bad to be six in the Spanish version (4)
- 12. Have to look hard to find one's equal (4)
- 13. Old Indian coin was enough for a welcome luxury (3)
- 15. Thus united, rebel leaders may be turned (4)
- 16. Mop up the ink and get out to obliterate it (4)
- 19. Wrongfully deprive one, or return to bandleader (3)
- 21. Make a reservation as to the libretto (4)
- 22. Half the Socialists return to one island (4)
- 24. Wide on top? (5)
- 25. After gold, people in a race will inflict torture (7)
- 26. Passes some time if one uses money (6)
- 27. In this place, given firm lead, we can hang together (6)

#### DOWN

- 01. Covent, Hatton : only the first will take their produce! (6,7)
- 02. Familiar parents, having been worked on by embalmers (7)
- 03. A hundred aged, having head complaint (4)
- 05. Mischievous kids about to change line one puts at risk (8)
- 06. A sound from the nest has no expensive soundalike (5)
- 07. 14 Down. More than Mother Hubbard expected to find, she would have wished to hide (8,2,3,8)
- 08. Landed, dashed up and put something more on in part (5)
- 14. see 7 Down
- 17. Half-Sneeze after role reversal may be swing in 4 (7)
- 18. Find it at the back of car at end of day for plunder (5)
- 20. Graduate article to immerse oneself in (5)
- 23. Two lose heart about night one being duet plus one (4)

## SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2591

**CROSS** 1. Glaziers 7. Prose 8. Between 9. Dwindle 10. Opal 11. Rosebud 14. Mystery 17. Isle 18. Martial 21. Learner 22. Noose 23. Educated

**DOWN** 1. Gibson 2. Attracts 3. Item 4. Render 5. Wood 6. Head 7. Priests 11. Precise 13. Bassinet 14. Miming 15. Yelled 16. Feared 19. Room 20. Talc

## THE ASIAN AGE

7 JANUARY 2026

## India needs to live down threats from Trump, US

The world was witness to a most modern form of imperialism as American troops stealthily swarmed Nicolas Maduro's presidential compound in Caracas and made him a captive of its justice system on the soil of a charge of narco-terrorism.

The scenario, post the US action, plotted meticulously by Trump-led forces, is a throwback to the days of the East India Company when the sub-continent was forced to trade on colonial terms and lost all its riches, the only difference being that it is Venezuelan oil that the US, a latter-day conquistador, is asserting its rights over currently.

How appropriate that the 12th March 1903, the date that first spelt out US claims over the Western Hemisphere, Trump is now casting his eyes on Colombia whose President Gustavo Petro might have already been earmarked for the special Maduro treatment. Cuba and even Greenland, a semi-autonomous territory held by Nato member Denmark which is an ally of the US.

Far from bringing about any drastic regime change, the US, under CIA advice, has been content to let the Maduro regime loyalists, including his vice-president Delcy Rodriguez who is now President and heads of state, continue to do their best to keep the oil flowing in the Venezuelan petroleum trade. The Trump administration is acting like an imperial mafia whose goal is extortion rather than as a world power that was supposed to help protect and preserve the rules-based international order.

**The Trump administration is acting like an imperial mafia whose goal is extortion rather than as a world power supposed to help protect and preserve the rules-based international order**

Adding insult to injury at a time of extreme geopolitical swings, Trump fulminated some more on India's preference for Russian crude oil over US oil, which is in its own interests but remains his pet peeve for not letting talks on a free trade deal fructify though talks are ongoing. It is apparent that Trump is not inclined to act quickly on the India FTA and he might soon have far more on his hands in the year of the midterms in which even his MAGA base must feel somewhat insecure.

It is clear that Trump is letting things ride while he continues to crack the whip on one of the few nations, along with China and Brazil, that has been standing up to him, defining his diktat to sign on the dotted line for buying American corn and dairy products in return for an FTA. India is, however, on a bit of firm ground here as sectors more critical to American interests like IT services, generic pharma and electronics, especially iPhones, are exempt from the FTA framework, and that suits India too.

If his domestic compulsions dictate that Trump keeps India hanging though the tariff of 25 per cent plus an additional 25 per cent have been in place since 2018, there is little India can do save hope that diversified export destinations help the Indian exporter tide over and that the losses in US exports they are now bearing in not passing on to the consumer will not be excessive.

It is easy enough to mock the bonhomie of the "Namaste Trump" and "Howdy Mod" days, but is there anything that India can do or offer the US that would satisfy a whimsical and transactional President now that even his yearning for the Nobel Peace Prize may have dissipated after his Venezuela foray in which the global peacemaker transformed into a marauder acting through his department of war?

## TN pension: A bridge too far?

When the Tamil Nadu Assured Pension Scheme (TAPS) was unveiled by the AIADMK, it turned out to be a very welcome gift not only for the government employees of the state but for those from other states, too. For, in all likelihood, it would open a Pandora's Box with other state governments facing a demand for a similar, costly scheme.

Pension, though a British legacy, was one of the attractions of a "government job" besides the permanency it offered in an era of rising employment uncertainty. When the Union government struck down the highly benevolent Old Pension Scheme in 2004, the traditional "government job" lost its sheen. In Tamil Nadu, trade unions and the workers gave up on the privilege, at least for the moment, and had to struggle for a minimum wage.

With the DMK promising restoration of pension benefits in its manifesto for the 2024 Assembly elections and then winning the polls, it became paramount for it to honour that promise. After dragging its feet for four-and-a-half years, the government finally came up with the TAPS, perhaps with an eye on the Assembly election less than six months away. As a social security measure, the pension distinguishes itself since it ensures a definite income for government servants who have dedicated their lives for a public enterprise. So even though the Pension Scheme was not restored in toto, the DMK government did its best to bring back its old glory. The government has not, however, explained how it will make up for the huge financial hit it will deliver to the state exchequer — a one-time pay-out of ₹13,000 crores and an annual burden of ₹11,000 crores.

Aside from agreeing to fund the scheme fully, the DMK promised 50 per cent of the last drawn salary as pension, though naysayers rose to nippit on some aspects. The scheme offers a model, though costly, for other states and an immediate possible demand could arise from the neighbouring Kerala where the ruling front had promised a return to the old pension scheme.

## THE ASIAN AGE

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K. SURESHKUMAR

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John J. Kennedy

## Beyond the slap: What the rising violence against teachers reveals

This episode, however, should not be viewed in isolation. Utterly violent, against teachers' bodies across the country condemning the act. The Delhi University Teachers' Association rightly called it an attack not just on one professor, but on the dignity and safety of the entire teaching profession. In response to the growing violence, Delhi University initiated disciplinary action. A six-member inquiry committee was set up, and Ms Jha submitted from her DUSU post for two months for "gross indiscipline". She has been barred from campus and asked to submit a written apology and an undertaking of good conduct. Ms Jha has then apologised publicly, saying she acted impulsively. While the action shows the university's resolve to end the wrongdoings, many teachers feel the punishment is far too mild for a physical assault on a faculty member during an official meeting.

In Delhi alone, the police reportedly receive



## Polls won't lead to orderly power shift in Bangladesh



Shikha Mukherjee

**The BNP, if it wins, will have to negotiate with the self-appointed custodians of good government in Bangladesh. If it falls short of a majority, it will need to find partners.**

with NCP.

The furor within the NCP over the arrangement is a pointer that the quest for stability necessary to fulfil the pledges of the Four-Party Alliance was one of the 18 parties, later 20 parties, that fought against the Awami League in elections that were not particularly free or fair.

The 2026 election will be different from these elections, rigged or otherwise manipulated?

The difference will not be the degree of freedom that voters can exercise; it will be the choice that voters make.

Bangladeshis politics has been as polarised as it is now, and the BNP have been

partners before, the two

are not buddies any longer.

As the anointed heir of his

mother Begum Khaleda Zia, who passed away recently, Tarique Rahman has stepped into the leadership space.

Opinion polls in Bangladesh predict that the BNP will emerge as the largest party, with the Jamaat a strong second. Whether the BNP will have partners or not, and how many, is an open question.

While India has made it

clear that it will work with

whatever regime is voted

to power, it has also made it

clear that it wants a free,

fair and inclusive election

process.

What is particularly sig-

nificant is that the other

parties in the fray are not

as polarised as they were

since the promise is only

partial, as the administration

headed by Mr Yunus has

banned the Awami League

and declared it can

not participate in the

elections.

It does not require the

word of the BNP to be believed

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elections.

It does not require the

word of the BNP to be believed

as they have done so.

It does not require the

word of the BNP to be believed

tations of how governance and democracy function in Bangladesh.

In the 55 years since its

inception, Bangladesh has

not been turmoil-free.

The chances of the February

election outcome being tur-

moil-free are not certain.

The BNP, if it wins, will

have to negotiate with the

self-appointed custodians

of good government in

Bangladesh. If it falls short

of a majority, it will need

to find partners.

LETTERS  
COOL OFF TOWARDS USA

US President Donald Trump's remarks about imposing further tariffs on India are an indirect threat. It is India's prerogative to decide how much oil to buy from Russia. If the US does not remove its 25 pc punitive tariff, a trade deal will prove detrimental for India. The failure to reach a conclusion after six rounds of talks over nine months reflects the US's obstinate behaviour. While the Modi government has reduced the quantity of Russian oil purchased for its own reasons, and India has strategically entered a grey zone. Trump's self-centred nature is raising the risk of a deterioration in Indo-US diplomatic relations.

**Yugal Kishore Sharma**  
Faridabad, Haryana

## PENSION SUCCESS

**THE TAMIL NADU** Assured Pension Scheme (TAPS) is a major breakthrough for the state government employees, fulfilling a long-standing demand by guaranteeing a pension of 50% of their last drawn salary. The announcement comes as a major relief for the state employees and teachers of the state, who have been protesting since 2004, demanding the implementation of the old pension scheme. With this announcement, TN CM M.K. Stalin has won over a vital segment, whose support is critical for the DMK to retain power for a second term. Despite the financial burden caused by the pension, the state has reduced its tax and funding from the Union government, and the decrease in state tax revenue due to GST changes, Mr. Stalin continues to protect the interests of the state.

R. SIVAKUMAR  
Chennai

## AGRICULTURE HOPE

**CONGRATULATIONS** to India and Indian farmers for becoming No. 1 in the world in rice production with 150.18 million tonnes, surpassing China by 4.9 million tonnes in total. In spite of weather wreaking havoc many times, they managed this achievement. Encouraging to see that if India makes export禁令, it can earn more money and can enjoy a better lifestyle. The government, too, can earn more revenue via taxes and foreign exchange. The government should renew focus on agriculture, develop seed and fertiliser banks and counsel farmers.

**Sreelatha P.S.**  
Secunderabad

*Shikha Mukherjee is a senior journalist*

**around 20 calls a day related to school or college**

**altercations, many involving threats or violence**

**against teachers.** Recent incidents illustrate the

**enormity of the crisis:** in December 2024, a Class 11 student in Uttar Pradesh stabbed his teacher after the teacher asked him to submit a written apology. A engineering student in Vellore attacked his lecturer with a slipper for a similar reason; and in August 2025, a group of students in Uttar Pradesh brutally assaulted and humiliated a teacher, leaving him hospitalised. Comparable incidents in West Bengal, Karnataka and other states, often caught on video, suggest a nationwide pattern that cuts across regions and institutions, from primary to higher education. In India, weak legal protections for teachers, rising emotional volatility among students, socio-economic stress, digital addition and post-pandemic anxieties have eroded campus civility. In universities, this is worsened by hyper-politicisation, weak mentorship and a growing student-teacher disconnect. Space once meant for debate and discovery are increasingly becoming arenas of confrontation, where ideological superseded intellectual engagement.

Today, many educators admit that the real tragedy lies not merely in aggression or politics, but in the changing meaning of education itself.

Education was once conceived as a moral and civic enterprise that cultivated empathy, reflection as well as responsible citizenship. Today, it is increasingly treated as a transaction, a means to credentials, power or influence. Universities are

becoming training grounds for jobs rather than laboratories of thought. Students are encouraged to compete rather than converse, to perform rather than ponder. In other words, this commodification of education, driven by a neo-liberal

ideology, has transformed the teacher into a

symbol of power.

The teacher, once lauded for Prof. Sujit Kumar's face, was therefore not just physical. It symbolised the erosion of restraint, reason and respect within academic life.

The university, at its best, is a place where ideas clash without turning into conflict. When that basic civility breaks down, meaningful learning becomes impossible. The growing hostility can campuses reflects a national mood where polarised groups dialogue with each other as defiance. Sadly, in such a climate, the humanities and social sciences are often dismissed as irrelevant, even though society needs their critical and ethical insights more than ever.

So, what is the way forward? Universities must enforce clear and non-negotiable codes of conduct that protect teachers without fear of favour. Disciplinary action must be transparent and proportionate, not shaped by political affiliations

or institutional expediency. Safety mechanisms must ensure that educators can discharge their responsibilities without intimidation or humiliation.

Surely institutions alone cannot resolve what is fundamentally a cultural and ethical crisis.

Students, too, must take the seriousness of their role within the academic community. Of course, political awareness is not the enemy of education; it is essential to it.

However, activism divorced from responsibility and non-violence becomes destructive. The purpose of dissent is to challenge injustice and expand freedom, not to silence, threaten or physically assault those who disagree.

The Delhi University student should therefore serve as a moment of collective introspection. It forces us to ask what kind of citizens our universities are shaping. Are we nurturing individuals capable of listening, reasoning and caring, or merely producing impatient seekers of jobs and power? The answers to these questions will shape not only the future of our campuses, but the health of our democracy itself. If education is to retain its credibility, the role of the professoriate and teachers must be rebuilt through respect, dialogue and the courage to disagree without demeaning another. Only then can universities recover their true purpose as spaces where ideas flourish, justice is debated and real transformation becomes possible.

*The writer is retired professor and former dean of the School of Arts and Humanities at Christ University in Bengaluru*

## Punjab on edge

Spate of murders reveals gaps in law enforcement

THE new year has begun on a grim note for Punjab with a succession of daylight murders. Be it the killing of a former kabaddi player in Ludhiana district or the brazen shooting of a sarpanch at a marriage resort in Amritsar, it's apparent that criminals don't have any fear of the law. These incidents signify a deeper malaise — a well-entrenched network of gangs, easy access to weapons and a police force under visible strain. The political blame game — Opposition parties seeking CM Bhagwant Mann's resignation and the government accusing its predecessors of leaving a legacy of problems — won't make the state's residents feel less insecure. The police top brass insists that the crime rate in Punjab is well below the national average, but the importance of public perception can't be ignored. When murders happen in crowded places, statistics lose their reassuring power.

Punjab's crisis is compounded by national security concerns. The DGP's assertion that Pakistan's ISI is waging a proxy war — sending arms, ammunition and narcotics through drones — is worrisome for a border state that suffered a decade-long militancy. Yet external threats alone are not responsible for the dire situation. High youth unemployment, glorification of the gun culture and the lure of quick money have fuelled the rise of local or regional gangs. The resurgence of radicals is another aggravating factor. Add to all this a top-heavy police hierarchy, over-stretched field staff and frequent political interference — no wonder the state's cops are struggling to inspire confidence among the people despite some successes.

The state government must ensure that the rule of law prevails. A multi-pronged strategy is needed of the hour — sustained police reforms, better coordination with Central agencies, tighter gun control, big-time investment in jobs and skills, and a policy push to win over alienated youth. Punjab can't afford to let its hard-earned peace fall prey to the lethal nexus of gangsters, drug traffickers and terrorists.

## Record harvests

Align policies, infra with diversification goals

INDIA becoming the world's largest rice producer, overtaking China, is a milestone that underlines the country's formidable food security architecture. Along with this, reports of wheat acreage touching record highs reveal a deeper paradox: even as policymakers push for crop diversification, farmers continue to double down on the familiar wheat-paddy cycle. This is not a failure of farmer imagination but of policy signals. Rice and wheat remain the most remunerative and least risky crops because they enjoy assured procurement at minimum support prices (MSPs), backed by decades of institutional support. Irrigation networks, storage facilities and credit systems have been built around these staples. In contrast, alternative crops — pulses, oilseeds, millets or maize — often lack comparable price assurance, market depth and post-harvest infrastructure. Farmers, understandably, follow the incentives.

Yet the costs of this success are mounting. The rice-wheat system has become environmentally unsustainable in Punjab, Haryana and western Uttar Pradesh. Paddy cultivation has led to alarming groundwater depletion, soil degradation and rising input costs. Diversification is an ecological necessity. Government programmes promoting crop diversification acknowledge this reality, but their impact remains limited. Financial incentives for shifting crops are often short-term, while the risks farmers face are structural and long-term. Without guaranteed procurement, reliable markets and processing facilities, diversification remains an act of faith rather than a viable business decision.

The record rice output and expanding wheat acreage should therefore be read as a warning, not merely a triumph. The agricultural policy must move beyond celebrating volume and confront the skewed incentive framework that locks farmers into a narrow cropping pattern. Aligning policies and infrastructure with diversification goals is essential. Otherwise, India risks being trapped in its own foodgrain success — producing more, but progressing less.

## ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

## The Tribune.

LAHORE, THURSDAY, JANUARY 7, 1926

## Sir Abdur Rahim's challenge

WHILE we join the rest of the responsible section of the Press in India, both Indian and Anglo-Indian, in deplored the tone of Sir Abdur Rahim's presidential address at the last session of the Muslim League, it does seem to us that from one point of view it is just as well that the bitter pill is not sugar-coated. Sir Rahim cannot be disposed of even by Mahomed Ali, as he has so often disposed of the editor of the *Muslim Outlook*, as a madman. If such a man holds views which are so indistinguishable from those of the *Muslim Outlook* that in the opinion of that journal itself his address might have been drafted by a member of its staff, why should not the whole of political India, Hindu as well as Muslim, have true presented to it in all its bitterness without any attempt at sugar-coating? But if we are to have the bitter truth, let us have the whole of it. Did Sir Rahim speak only as an individual, or did he speak as the mouthpiece of his community and particularly that section of it which is represented by the Muslim League? That is what the non-Muslim Indian has a right to and must, indeed, know before he can take one single step forward either in his talk of communal unity or his attempt to bring it about. Two things are significant in this connection. One is that Sir Rahim's views must have been at least partially known to his co-religionists before they put him in the chair of what they claim to be their foremost representative gathering. The other is that at the meeting of the Muslim League itself, the views of Sir Rahim as well as the man in whom he chose to express them passed unchallenged.

## When rules are bent, the world splits

Many nations are judging the Maduro case less by who was removed than by how removal was undertaken



SYED AKBARUDDIN  
INDIA'S FORMER PERMANENT  
REPRESENTATIVE TO THE UN

ON January 3, as the United States seized a sitting President and began speaking of "running" a country, the world saw more than a dramatic operation. It sensed a message about how power now speaks.

Disregard for sovereignty is not new. Ukraine has shown how force can be claimed as entitlement. Gaza has shown how necessity becomes the justification for collapsing restraint. Venezuela now feels like a more direct assertion of power: a leader can be seized, and the aftermath managed through shifting rationales.

"Narcoterrorism" reframes military intervention as international policing. "Transnational crime" recasts the use of force as a cross-border arrest. Oil provides the strategic subtext, quietly shaping priorities beneath the surface. The "Trump corollary" to the Monroe Doctrine reintroduces spheres of influence as doctrine, sold as national security common sense. Terms like "illegitimacy" and "democracy" add a moral veneer. Democracy sells outward; illegitimacy licenses inward.

Even migration is folded in, turning foreign policy into campaign messaging about border control. Each rationale speaks to a different constituency: military, moral, economic, political. Together they converge on one claim: Washington chooses when rules apply, and to whom. What has changed is that the old narrative of a broadly consensual order is harder to sustain when the exception is asserted so openly.

What makes this moment disconcerting is the portability of



MADURO'S OUSTER: Regime change does not reliably yield democracy or peace. REUTERS

precedent. Once such actions are normalised, they stop being news and start becoming a tool. Precedent outlives the target. It travels further than intent, and it gives other powers a script they can borrow under different flags and in different theatres.

There is also a practical warning that many in the Global South remember with painful clarity. Regime change does not reliably yield democracy or peace. Libya remains the clearest exhibit. Remove the centre, fracture institutions, splinter the security sector, and the vacuum fills with militias, revenge and foreign patrons. Outsiders can topple a ruler. They rarely build legitimacy. That is why many capitals, even those with no affection for Nicolás Maduro, judge this episode less by who was removed than by how removal was undertaken.

The global response is coalescing into three camps, not along ideological lines, but according to the language each state chooses to describe the episode.

First, there are the norms-first states. They read the episode through international law and the UN Charter's core restraint on the use of force.

What makes this moment disconcerting is the portability of

precedent. Once such actions are normalised, they stop being news and start becoming a tool. Precedent outlives the target. It travels further than intent, and it gives other powers a script they can borrow under different flags and in different theatres.

They speak in the language of sovereignty, restraint and precedent. Brazil, Mexico, Colombia, Uruguay, South Africa, Malaysia and Singapore fall into this camp, along with the African Union representing its 55 members. Their argument is structural and anticipatory: if forceful capture becomes routine and restraint becomes optional, any power with a plausible pretext will claim the same licence. Precedent is contagious.

China and Russia, too, have

adopted a norms-first register, condemning the seizure and demanding Maduro's release. Their motives aside, their consistency will be tested.

The second group includes the hedged-norms states. These countries express unease without full confrontation.

They speak in the language of concern, dialogue, de-escalation, and protection of civilians. India sits here, alongside Indonesia, Turkey, Vietnam and the Philippines. Japan and South Korea also belong to this group, emphasising political

resolution rather than endorsing the method. Most of Europe fits here too. Its position is cautious: Maduro lacks legitimacy, but that does not license procedural collapse.

The fear is broader than Venezuela. If sovereignty becomes conditional, exceptions become templates and the logic will reappear elsewhere.

The third group signals what might be called exceptions-implied states. They treat the outcome as justification in itself, using the language of freedom, justice and anti-crime while bypassing the legality of the method.

Argentina and Ecuador illustrate

this posture, as does the incoming Chilean leadership. Italy has also leaned in this direction, framing the US action as legitimate and defensive, aligning more with exceptions' logic than with Europe's cautious consensus. The claim is that rules do not matter, only that the target does not qualify for protection under them. Once "narco" becomes the solvent that dissolves sovereignty in one case, it begins to travel. Labels are sticky. They do not stay contained.

India's position warrants a more thoughtful reading than it usually receives in Western commentary. Hedging is not evasiveness; it is risk management by a state shaped by experience, where moral theatre rarely stabilises real crises. India has no interest in defending Maduro, but it has every reason to resist a precedent that weakens sovereignty as a general norm. Its calibrated language reflects a balancing act: registering concern without gratuitously alienating Washington, avoiding entanglement in someone else's script as practice, not posture.

For India, there is also an opportunity. It can help define the boundary between legitimate concern and procedural collapse. It can defend sovereignty with outdefending strongmen, and uphold accountability without endorsing impunity. That means working with norms-first states to raise the diplomatic cost of shortcuts, and with hedged-norms states to keep restraint credible without turning every crisis into spectacle.

The UN Charter's promise is not moral perfection. It provides predictability that power will be fenced in by procedure. Precedents travel fast than armies. Today's exception becomes tomorrow's tool. The real damage will not be measured in Caracas, but in the permission slip we let power write. Once bent, rules are borrowed everywhere.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Power gradually extirpates from the mind every humane and gentle virtue. —Edmund Burke

## Twists and turns of the first flight

SHIV PRASAD SHARMA

THE first-ever flight can be turbulent for some passengers. I realised it during my tenure in Andhra Pradesh. I was posted as Secretary, Regional Transport Authority. The Election Commission of India announced the schedule of the Lok Sabha elections. A few days later, I was deputed as an election observer in Khammam constituency (now in Telangana).

I wasn't elated by this assignment. Since it was almost mandatory, I told my PA to book air tickets. He said, "Sir, I have never travelled by air. You can fulfil my long-cherished desire by allowing me to travel with you." I pondered for a while, and as a goodwill gesture finally consented to his request. The PA's tickets were also booked. He was quite excited till we boarded the plane.

Trouble started when a crew member started explaining the emergency precautions to passengers. This made him uneasy and he sensed that the journey was full of unforeseen risks. He closed his eyes and piously prayed as the plane took off.

He promptly took out a copy of *Hanuman Chalisa* from his handbag and started reciting verses. He continued to do it throughout the journey. He was so preoccupied with prayers that he refused to take the delicious food offered by the soft-spoken crew. Suddenly, the weather turned hostile and the crew again announced the routine precautionary measures. This frightened him more. The chanting grew louder. Luckily, the weather calmed down after some time.

He didn't realise when the captain announced the landing instructions. The chanting of verses came to an end only after the aircraft stopped on the runway. We disembarked and reached the circuit house, where the administration had made arrangements for our stay. I completed the hectic election assignment in the next couple of days.

As the job was over, it was time to book air tickets for the return journey. My PA opted to go by train. While departing, he offered me the copy of *Hanuman Chalisa* and said: "Sir, since I was travelling with you on the plane, I prayed for your safety too. But I will not be with you now, so you need this holy book more than me. Please keep it."

Touched by his gesture, I couldn't say 'no' to him.

Thereafter, he happily left for the railway station, making a vow never to travel by air again!

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

## High threshold for seeking bail

Refer to 'The Court chose caution over courage'; when a person is taken into custody, he/she must be released on bail unless compelling circumstances to the contrary are shown. The tide against this principle turned after the enactment of laws that have created such a high threshold for seeking bail that it sometimes becomes virtually impossible to surmount. The Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA) and Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) are such examples. A delay of more than five years amounts to a structural failure. Courts exist to prevent such failures from destroying individual freedom. Legal doctrine should not become a shield behind which indefinite incarceration is normalised.

SS PAUL, NADIA (WB)

## Laws cannot eclipse Article 21

Refer to 'Jail, not bail'; the Supreme Court's denial of bail to Umar Khalid and Sharjeel Imam, despite over five years of incarceration without trial, contradicts its own jurisprudence. From *State of Rajasthan vs Balchand* (1977) to *Sanjay Chandra vs CBI* (2012), the Court affirmed that bail is the rule and pre-trial detention cannot become punishment. Even in an earlier UAPA case, *Union of India vs KA Naqeeb* (2021), the court held that statutory rigours cannot eclipse Article 21 when detention turns indefinite. Treating delay not as a "trump card" risks normalising jail without adjudication.

CHANCHAL S MANN, UNA

## Speedy trial fundamental right

Bail jurisprudence has undergone a shift. Delay is no more to be treated as a trump card by the prima facie accused in activities which fall under UAPA. However, reasons behind the delay of trial proceedings remains a mystery. Unexplained long incarcerations create delays on the justice delivery system. Right to speedy trial is a fundamental right. Criminal justice actors must initiate steps required for the earliest completion of the due process of law. Public perception must not be allowed to meander into trust-eroding grey areas.

ABHYAN SHARMA, PATHANKOT

## Price for instant gratification

Refer to 'The human cost of 10-minute deliveries'; the article compels us to pause and question the ethics behind hyper-speed convenience. What appears as efficiency on mobile screens often translates into relentless pressure on delivery workers, forcing them to negotiate traffic, fatigue and constant risk in return for incentives measured in minutes. The promise of instant gratification quietly transfers danger to those least protected within the system. As consumers and citizens, we must reflect on the moral trade-offs we make. Convenience cannot be divorced from responsibility. If 10 minutes cost a life, the price is far too high. Progress must be guided by safeguards, insurance regulations and compassion because growth that ignores humanity moves us backwards.

ASHOK SINGH GULERIA, KANGRA

## Failing law and order in Punjab

The deteriorating law and order situation in Punjab has become a matter of grave public concern. Incidents of violence, particularly targeted attacks on sportspersons, singers and other public figures has dented the image of Punjab, historically known as a land where people lived with openness, confidence and a strong sense of community. However, the current climate of fear has compounded many to reconsider public visibility and professional success, as fear itself appears to invite risk. If this situation continues unchecked, Punjab risks losing not only its sense of safety but also its urban capital.

GURPREET KAUR, PATTIALA

## CCTV initiative goes kaput

In January last year, the Bhagwant Mann government ordered the installation of CCTV cameras in all Registrar and Joint Registrar offices across Punjab to ensure transparency, enhance accountability and curb irregularities in revenue offices. Despite this, there appears to be very little or no visible improvement in the functioning of the cameras. The government must place before the public complete, accurate and detailed data on the outcome of the initiative to conclude whether public money has gone down the drain or has been well-spent.

RK ARORA, MOHALI

## OPED

## Congress needs a new lease of life

AJAY K MEHRA  
SENIOR FELLOW, CENTRE FOR  
MULTILEVEL FEDERALISM

**O**N December 28, 1883, 72 delegates from all over British India met at the Golokdas Tejpal Sanskrit College and Boarding House in Bombay (now Mumbai). Their discussions led to the creation of the Indian National Congress, that went on to spearhead India's freedom movement.

One hundred and forty years later, the Congress Working Committee (CWC) met in New Delhi on December 27, 2025, to celebrate the party's long existence. Emerging the grand old party continues to be the key theme — it has been sitting on the Opposition benches since 2014 after having been in power at the Centre for a total of around 55 years. There are only three states where the Congress is in power on its own (Telangana, Karnataka and Himachal Pradesh), while it is a junior

member of the ruling coalition in Jharkhand as well as J&K.

It was in 1984 that the Congress last rode to power with an absolute majority. Then came Narasimha Rao's minority government (1991-96); later, the party ruled for a decade, leading the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) with Manmohan Singh as the Prime Minister.

Despite accusations that Sonia Gandhi engaged in "back-seat driving" and the loss in the 2014 Lok Sabha polls due to the BJP's well-planned campaign, the party has not lost its prominence in Indian politics. The 2024 parliamentary elections showed its ability to bounce back.

The Congress displayed its incapacity for party-building during Rajiv Gandhi's reign and then during the UPA years. Rahul Gandhi wasted a decade as a "non-performing" MP during 2004-14. In September 2013, he tore a copy of an ordinance — in full public view — that his own party's government was bringing in to save convicted legislators.

The focus on keeping the leadership in the hands of the Nehru-Gandhi family has restrained the party from developing local leaders and cadres. Making Mallikarjun



CONGRESS AT 140: The party's hopes for electoral gains have dimmed. SANDEEP JOSHI

Kharge (83) the party president was a smart move, but age is not on his side. There should be younger leaders around him. Equally, it is important to empower young leaders and workers to give grassroots zest to the party. At the recent CWC meeting, it was announced that 2026 would witness the 'Sangathan Srijan Karyakram' (organisational revamp programme). However, no comprehensive resolution on the country's social, political and economic situation nor a strategy to tackle the key

Bihar Assembly elections starkly exposed gaps in the party's institutional edifice and strategic foresight.

problems came out of the deliberations.

Indeed, the party needs an exhaustive rebuilding programme. The fact that the Congress is poor at attracting funds compared to the BJP does not help matters. According to the Election Commission of India's (ECI) data, the BJP has emerged as the richest party with a Rs 7,113-crore fund balance, while the Congress has just Rs 857 crore.

The hopes that the party raised with its performance in the 2024 elections have

dimmed. The Congress began its rebuilding efforts with Rahul Gandhi's Bharat Jodo Yatra from Kanniyakumari to Kashmir and Bharat Jodo Nay Yatra from Manipur to Mumbai. These journeys (September 2022-January 2023 and January-March 2024, respectively), covering over 10,000 km on foot and by bus, gave Rahul and the party some visibility; BJP leaders stopped calling him Pappa (duffer). But, as I pointed out in my articles in the *Mainstream Weekly* a couple of years ago, the yatras did not make an enduring impact on the party's fortunes. The 2024 General Election saw the Congress gaining slightly and the BJP losing its absolute majority in the Lok Sabha. But apart from getting the office of LoP the party's gains were limited.

The 2024 Bihar Assembly elections starkly exposed gaps in the party's institutional

and strategic foresight. The party's strategy of attacking the ECI and naming officers has had a negative impact as the BJP has repeatedly accused the Congress of maligning the institution. The 'vote chori' allegations, though backed by loads of documents, have not had the kind of resonance that Rahul and the party were expecting.

Foregrounding the redesigning and renaming of MGNREGA — the rural employment guarantee scheme that was rolled out by the Congress-led UPA — as the VB G-RAM G Act by the Narendra Modi government is also not turning into a big platform for political mobilisation.

The BJP's strategy of creating a large population of 'labharhis' (beneficiaries), who sustain on free foodgrains, and offering cash to women eventually proved to be a vote-catcher, as witnessed in the Bihar elections.

Obviously, the Congress needs to redesign its programmes and agenda for strengthening the party structure in order to reach out to every Indian. It can start from the states where it is in power. Beyond that, it will have to react promptly to issues emerging in various states.

## When Trump parachuted into the Kennedy Center

JYOTNSA G SINGH  
PROFESSOR EMERITA,  
MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

**O**N December 18, 2025, the Kennedy Center — a revered and iconic cultural institution in Washington, DC — was renamed 'The Donald J. Trump and the John F. Kennedy Memorial Center For The Performing Arts' by its Board of Trustees, followed by the installation of a new exterior signage and changes in digital branding.

Earlier, in February, soon after assuming office, President Trump had replaced the existing board with handpicked members, who elected him Chair. The new board changed the bylaws to exclude ex-officio members appointed by Congress from a vote or quorum, clearing the way for Trump's full control.

While the White House has celebrated the new name, many voices — official and unofficial — have questioned the legality of the decision. Since Congress had passed a federal law in 1964, specifically designating the arts institution as a memorial to President Kennedy, legal activist groups have challenged this decision in court, stating that only Congress has the authority to rename the Center.

Kennedy family members have also expressed outrage, viewing Trump's plans for the renamed Center as antithetical to the former President's humanistic cultural vision, as his niece stated recently: "[President Kennedy] was a man who was interested in the arts, in culture, interested in education."

Furthermore, a spate of programme cancellations has followed the Kennedy Center's renaming, indicating the artists' opposition to MAGA ideals. For instance, an all-star Jazz group, which cancelled its New Year's Eve performances, stated that "Jazz was born from struggle, from a relentless insistence on freedom: freedom of thought, of expression and of the full human voice."

And a New York dance company that pulled out said it was "financially devastating, but morally exhilarating." More cancellations are happening, including Hamilton, the famed musical, while the board threatens to sue the producers.

Other US institutions, often promoting intellectual and creative freedom, have also been targeted by the Trump administration. For instance, the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) and the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) have been mostly defunded.

The exhibits at various Smithsonian museums are also being revaluated by the Trump administration under the pretext that they depict "American and Western values as inherently harmful and oppressive."



THE CHAIR: US President places the medal on himself as he is awarded the FIFA Peace Prize at the Center. REUTERS

Historians see this as a move to sanitise American history to a single narrative and to erase the voices of formerly disenfranchised peoples. Several major universities have also been pressured to submit to broad government surveillance or lose federal funding. Harvard University resisted this threat while remaining committed to "open inquiry and freedom of speech," followed by several others, such as UPenn and UC Berkeley.

Overall, despite cuts in both sciences and humanities, as well as some compromises, a basic commitment to intellectual and creative freedom is largely holding in US academia. In addition, some media organisations, legal professionals, religious leaders and

ordinary citizens are also pushing back on Trump's agenda. Given these unrelenting struggles against authoritarian policies, what lessons can we learn, as we mark the new year, 2026?

In our divisive times, populist regimes worldwide seek to usurp and revamp cultural institutions for their national agendas, typically based on religious, ethnic, racial and cultural purity. Thus, citizens are called to self-identify with a purified, homogenous nation, via myths of "national greatness" while excluding groups or individuals, marked as outsiders or "others".

Many citizens embrace these narrow national identities, often losing the ability to encompass historical com-

plexity, or to envision alternative and plural worlds. Trump's new programming vision for the Kennedy Center seems to follow this script: he calls for a "Golden Age in Arts and Culture", implying that the spirit of "Make America Great Again" is not far from a xenophobic white Christian nationalism.

Trump's pushback against liberalism echoes populist trends worldwide. In India too, the call to "make India great again" — namely to Hinduise it by recuperating an imagined ancient splendour, antithetical to modernity — permeates public discourse. For instance, explicit on the RSS website is the idea of a pure Hindu nation: "The Hindu culture is the life-blood of Hindustan. If Hindustan is to be protected, we should first nourish the Hindu culture."

Once citizens are offered an organic image of Hinduism as a "life-blood" that nourishes the body of the nation (Hindustan), then they can more strongly self-identify with the Hindu nation and feel excluded if they are Muslim, Christian, etc. Given its widespread legitimacy, this ideology now increasingly informs educational planning and policies at different levels.

This move is a clear departure from the Nehruvian approach to education, in which no single ideology intruded on curricular arrangements for several decades after Independence. One response to this exclusionary vision in India has been to defend and protect the rights of minorities. Another different, though

equally powerful, riposte to a monolithic Hindutva is to expose its reductive and simplistic rerepresentation of Hinduism itself.

This rigorous intervention has in recent years been offered by several eminent Indian historians, perhaps most visibly by Romila Thapar, though often in conversations with other professional colleagues.

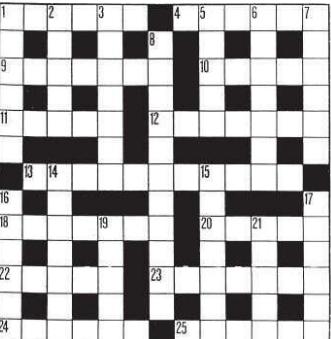
What we can draw from these contemporary discussions — in print, in media and in live lectures — are complex historical facts and related questions that undermine Hindutva as a hegemonic ideology of nationalism.

Thus, facts emanating from these conversations about Indian history raise provocative questions: How can a society as diverse as India be reduced to a single, uniform and static heritage? What will happen to Hinduism's inherent pluralism, its coexistence with diverse sects, mythologies, animal elements and its overall relative syncretism?

We must also stop to think of the extraordinary influence of Hindu cultures across South-East Asia. Instead of accepting Indian nationalism as qualified by a single religious identity, we must recognise that Hinduism itself encompasses varied cultures. In this vision, we can realise the true dynamism of India's ancient civilisation.

For all aspirational Indians today, especially the younger generation, let us re-engage with history as a discipline — return to our past with curious yet critical minds. How will history judge our divisive times?

## QUICK CROSSWORD



## ACROSS

- 1 Impressed (6)
- 4 Easily influenced (6)
- 9 In the distant past (4,3)
- 10 Professorship (5)
- 11 Exonerate (5)
- 12 Stupid person (7)
- 13 Hard-headed (4-2-5)
- 18 Discarded (4-3)
- 20 Bode (5)
- 22 Conjuring tricks (5)
- 23 Loud and hoarse (7)
- 24 Inherent character (6)
- 25 Conventionally proper (6)

## Yesterday's Solution

**Across:** 1 In front, 5 Amiss, 8 Serve one right, 9 Evoke, 10 Lawless, 11 Modest, 12 Filthy, 15 Kinship, 17 Press, 19 On a grand scale, 20 Tally, 21 Yielded.

**Down:** 1 Issue, 2 For good and all, 3 Oneness, 4 Tingle, 5 Arrow, 6 In great demand, 7 Satisfy, 11 Make out, 13 Impasse, 14 Openly, 16 Harry, 18 Speed.

## DOWN

- 1 Chosen for excellence (6)
- 2 Wander freely (5)
- 3 Acute vexation (7)
- 5 Peculiar to particular place (5)
- 6 Resistant to persuasion (7)
- 7 Long vehement denunciation (6)
- 8 Little, if any, consolation (4,7)
- 14 As soon as seen (2,5)
- 15 More often than not (2,1,4)
- 16 Keen disinterest (6)
- 17 Irritably curt (6)
- 19 Come into existence (5)
- 21 Despondency (5)

## SU DO KU



## YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

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

## CALENDAR

JANUARY 7, 2026, WEDNESDAY

■ Shaka Samvat	1947
■ Posh Shak	17
■ Posh Parvishi	24
■ Hijri	1447
■ Krishna Paksha Tithi 5, up to 6:24 am	
■ Ayushman Yoga up to 6:34 pm	
■ Magha Nakshatra up to 11:57 am	
■ Moon in Leo sign	
■ Gandamola up to 11:57 am	

## FORECAST

SUNSET	WEDNESDAY	17:38 HRS
THURSDAY	07:20 HRS	
CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	13	06
New Delhi	16	07
Amritsar	13	05
Bathinda	16	05
Jalandhar	13	05
Ludhiana	14	06
Bhiwani	16	04
Hisar	16	06
Sirsa	15	05
Dharamsala	15	03
Manali	12	0
Shimla	13	03
Srinagar	10	-03
Jammu	15	08
Kargil	0	-10
Leh	0	-11
Dehradun	19	05
Mussoorie	13	03

TEMPERATURE IN °C

## OUR VIEW



## India's fertilizer policy needs a fruitful rehaul

*Our subsidy framework is a formula for fiscal waste, inefficiency, ecological damage and health hazards. Let's adopt direct cash transfers to farmers and market determined usage*

India's fertilizer imports are expected to go up from 10 million tonnes this year to 12 million in the next. This has led to heavy lobbying for incentives to raise domestic production for import substitution. On the face of it, this demand has merit. But look closer, and the picture changes drastically. India needs to reform its policy for fertilizers. The subsidy bill on these farming inputs was above ₹1.9 trillion in 2024-25, and while this fiscal year's budget allotted under ₹1.6 trillion, the actual expense could go higher. This figure does not reflect the subsidy on natural gas used as an input by our fertilizer industry, which pays only about half the regular price (of up to ₹13 per million British thermal units). Yet, this huge subsidy has increasingly been going waste. Nutrient Use Efficiency, which measures how much of the applied fertilizer—not of the total sold at subsidized rates, a portion of which gets diverted for resale at higher prices—is actually absorbed and used by crops has dropped to below 35% for nitrogen-rich urea (N), 20% for phosphorous (P) and a range of 50-80% for potassium (K). "Nationwide, the fertiliser-to-grain response ratio (a measure of the additional unit of grain to be had by applying an additional unit of fertilizer) has fallen from about 1:10 in the 1970s to barely 1:2.7 by 2015 in irrigated areas," according to agricultural economist Ashok Gulati. Simply increasing the quantity of subsidized fertilizer, thus, is to squander scarce fiscal resources.

Farm value addition per unit of crop-sown land in India is just 38% of that in China. While the People's Republic uses double the quantity of fertilizer that we use, it gets significantly more output from that because of a better balanced ratio of N, P and K fertilizers, apart from

superior farm technology. The ideal NPK combination is 4:2:1. Our current mix is 10.9: 4.4: 4. Since urea is heavily subsidized, farmers use more of it—often without complementary proportions of P and K. Excess urea has three effects. Some of it is lost to the atmosphere as nitrous oxide, a climate warmer. Some leeches into ground water as nitrate, interfering with the nutrition of those who drink it and posing other health hazards. It also raises green vegetation without a proportionate rise in grain yield. Our subsidy regime does not just incentivize an adverse fertilizer ratio, it also inhibits the adoption of complex fertilizers with optimally mixed crop nutrients.

India must overhaul its subsidy regime. It is time to abandon sending subsidy payments to fertilizer companies, which should be freed to make innovative products such as nano and complex fertilizers for sale at market prices. The subsidy sum could instead be sent directly to farmers as cash support in proportion to the area they cultivate. Let farmers be identified as cultivators—and not necessarily owners—of each tract of subsidy-eligible farmland. Once this is properly determined, financial transfers would be easy and just. Farmers would accept market prices for fertilizers if they are guided on the best mix for their soil type and learn to appreciate the space created for them to optimize farming. This would drive efficiency and reveal actual shortages (if any). We must also push for the gasification of coal, which is abundant in India, instead of using pricey LNG imports as fertilizer feedstock. Gasifying coal for gas-based electricity generation would also serve our climate goals, as it could bridge gaps in renewable power supply. In all, we need sweeping reforms in this sector.

## THEIR VIEW

## What the Union budget must do to get private capex going again

*Long-term tax and regulatory certainty would grant private businesses the confidence to take risks*



AMARENDRANANDY

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commit capital to long-lived assets while corporations, evaluating 10- to 15-year industrial projects, draw more conservative conclusions about risk and return. This divergence points less to a shortage of savings than confidence.

The statistics ministry's latest survey shows that fresh private capex intentions for 2025-26 have moderated to ₹4.89 trillion from ₹6.56 trillion in 2024-25. This comes despite a cumulative 66% rise in announced investment plans over the previous three years, suggesting that the pipeline is thinning beyond a narrow set of sectors. RBI's August bulletin projects a 21.5% rise in private corporate capex in 2025-26, but much of this increase is expected in power, renewables and transport, sectors closely tied to public investment and regulatory assurances.

The painstaking repair of bank and corporate balance sheets over the past decade was expected to trigger a stronger capex response. Instead, for many firms, it has translated to risk containment. Global uncertainty has played a role, but domestic policy risk has been equally important. Firms struggle to form stable expectations on taxes, trade policy and regulation over the life of long-gestation projects.

The proliferation of Quality Control Orders (QCOs) illustrates the problem. Since 2019, their number has increased from 88 to 765, with nearly half covering intermediate goods critical to domestic supply chains. While better standards is a legitimate goal (and some QCOs have been eased), the speed and breadth of implementation, particularly across metals, machinery and electronics, imposed certification delays and compliance costs that are burdensome for small enterprises. Combined with frequent tariff changes, shifting sectoral norms and *ad-hoc* tax interventions, regulatory moves have made investment outcomes harder to forecast.

Notably, the household sector now contributes over 40% of GFCF, driven largely by investments in real estate and unorganized ventures. The contrast is striking. Households appear willing to

base manufacturing and services.

This makes the upcoming budget all the more consequential. With the new Income Tax Act of 2025 set to take effect from April, the budget must embed tax predictability as a structural public good. Steps such as a rationalized and unified capital gains tax regime, inflation-indexed personal income tax thresholds for higher earners and a credible medium-term commitment on corporate surcharge rates would lower uncertainty over post-tax returns and cut policy risk premiums, which are essential for long-term capital formation.

Another structural constraint requires attention. Small firms face a persistent credit gap of ₹20-25 trillion and liquidity stress due to delayed payments, including from government entities. Their reluctance to invest is driven less by demand and more by cash-flow risk. To revive private capex beyond a narrow corporate group, the budget must treat payment discipline as an essential reform. Enforcing the 45-day payment rule for government and public sector procurements, supported by mandatory disclosure and automatic penalties, would be a more significant reform than credit subsidies. Credit-guarantee schemes should also shift focus from working capital to term investments, enabling small firms to undertake capex at lower cost.

There is also a tightening fiscal reality. If central debt must be reduced to 50% of GDP by 2030-31, government capex cannot sustain its current pace. The sustainability of India's investment ratio will, therefore, depend on whether private capital fills the space that public investment can no longer occupy.

India does not lack investment opportunities; it lacks the assurance that projects will move from conception to execution without friction, delay and policy drift. Until that confidence is restored, private capital formation will remain misaligned with India's long-term growth ambitions.

*These are the author's personal views.*

## 10 YEARS AGO



## JUST A THOUGHT

Years of government inaction on air pollution has got people thinking that the state cannot even protect basic public goods like clean air.

BARRY GARDINER

## MY VIEW | ECO SQUARE

## Much can be done to relieve urban India of its toxic air

LEENA SRIVASTAVA



is an independent expert on climate change and clean energy.

Air pollution in the National Capital Region (NCR) continues to dominate headlines this winter, highlighting the absence of any long-term strategy to deal with a deadly subject that is affecting millions of lives in and around India's capital. Of growing concern is the fact that most other urban areas in India beyond the NCR are also generating increasing levels of air pollution, with the number of 'good' air quality days trending towards zero. Sadly, while all arms of government at various levels fail at even creating the illusion of solutions, attempts to distract the general populace by whipping up sentiments of nationalism (rejection of World Health Organization standards on air quality), religion (allowing the use of 'green' crackers on festivals) and culture (recall the massive traffic jams during the festive season and the use of crackers through the year on every 'Joyous' occasion) muddy the air.

Further distraction is provided by the advocacy of poorly thought out, end-of-pipe solutions such as cloud-seeding or water-

spraying, which only help shirk responsibility for hard regulations. Not only do these fail to provide an effective solution but they can even aggravate environmental and health impacts. There has been no meaningful debate on the use of water sprayers in this water-scarce region, nor on the quality of water being used and the associated equity and health impacts. Similarly, the adverse effects of cloud-seeding are well documented and severe enough to warrant a very serious evaluation of its deployment.

Our lack of aspiration on providing good quality air is visible in our air quality index (AQI), which serves to numb the populace on the severity of health impacts. The argument used by the government for its lax pollution standards, which it rarely enforces anyway, relates to India's specific geography and climatic conditions. Our national average standard for PM2.5 (fine particles) is eight times the WHO standard and four times for PM10. What we overlook in these arguments is that WHO standards are not concerned with geographical or socio-economic differences; rather, they are based on the best available evidence on what exposure to different forms of pollutants, given varying human intensity and duration, does to human health. If India wants to argue that its popu-

lation is more resilient to air pollution than the rest of the human species, then we need hard proof of that—after all, we have rejected as inadequate WHO standards set on the basis of scientifically valid evidence.

Additionally, so-called background pollution levels can sometimes be a red herring.

For instance, scientists have been sounding an alarm on the relentless invasion of our National Capital Region by the Thar desert in Rajasthan as a result of poor land and water management practices for decades. And when we destroy hills of the Aravalli range, this background pollution is likely to intensify further.

Do lax and opaque air quality standards reduce performance pressure on the government by creating a false sense of well-being? In mid-December, the environment minister had boasted that "good to moderate" air quality days (AQI200+ PM2.5 under 90 micrograms per cubic metre) increased from 110 in 2016 to 200 in 2025.

India's definition of 'moderate,' however, overlaps with what the WHO defines as unhealthy. Also, this implies that by its own definition, for 163 days, NCR residents are exposed to unhealthy to hazardous air. For comparison, the WHO guideline for short-term exposure to above-standard PM2.5 is set at 15 micrograms per cubic metre for a maximum of 3-4 days.

Government officials often point to farm fires in Punjab and Haryana as a significant part of the problem. No doubt, these contribute to the deterioration of air quality. But December has experienced the poorest air quality in the last 7-8 years, with the stubble-burning season well behind us. Consequently, the debate has shifted once again to the complexity of our air pollution crisis. The Union minister for transport and highways has acknowledged that 40% of this pollution comes from vehicles.

Apparently, we have little understanding of the causes of air pollution and their contribution to air quality. While scientific modelling of the impact of various intervention

measures will take time, we must recognize that GRAP restrictions are reactive and can not absolve decision-makers of the responsibility of taking more effective action.

A few steps that can be initiated immediately include the following: *One*, re-introduce mandates on electro-static precipitators for thermal power plants while we define a pathway to phase out coal; *two*, shift the focus of public expenditure from the expansion of highways, particularly those that are destroying our fragile ecosystems; *three*, make a comprehensive effort to smoothen the flow of traffic—regulate the number of vehicles on the roads throughout the year, deal with traffic disruptions strictly, even if caused by cultural or religious processions, and hasten the country's shift to electric vehicles; *four*, expand the green cover in urban areas and re-evaluate the development of India's cities; and *five*, engage with the industrial, commercial and service sectors in urban India to hold them accountable for environmental externalities. While not comprehensive, these measures illustrate the space available to the government for an immediate-to-short-term systemic impact, that could have a long-term impact, even as more sustainable solutions to this crisis are planned.



## THEIR VIEW

# Let us promote universalism in a world riven by ultra-nationalism

A truly borderless world is a distant dream but we could surely work on strengthening useful supranational organizations



KAUSHIK BASU

is a professor of economics at Cornell University and a former chief economic advisor to the Government of India.



**A**t the cusp of a new year, the global outlook appears increasingly grim. Escalating conflicts and resurgent authoritarianism are undermining domestic and international institutions alike, while rising wealth inequality is deepening economic insecurity and eroding social cohesion.

Perhaps the most dispiriting development is the growing hatred of the 'other'. In country after country, political leaders increasingly dehumanize migrants and refugees, casting people fleeing poverty, persecution, and conflict as a mortal threat. Such rhetoric brings to mind W. H. Auden's *Refugee Blues*. Written on the eve of World War II, a period when refugees were similarly blamed for economic insecurity and social decline, the poem depicts a speaker at a public meeting who warns, "If we let them in, they will steal our daily bread."

The rise of xenophobic populism across large swathes of the world is also occurring in a vacuum. It is at least partly driven by a profound structural shift that is often overlooked by social scientists who assume the inevitability of the nation-state.

It is easy to forget that the nation-state is a relatively recent idea that emerged when travel was slow and limited. At the time, it made sense to imagine the world as a collection of communities, each responsible for the welfare of its own members. Governing these units effectively required the cultivation of a shared identity and nationalism emerged to fill that role.

But globalization has put this arrangement under growing strain, as the freer movement of goods, money, information and people—together with the digital revolution—enables firms, workers and consumers to connect across borders. Paradoxically, it is precisely that fragility that is fueling the current wave of hyper-nationalism, which represents a rear-guard effort to revive a model the world has outgrown.

We have seen this before. Claims of racial superiority were once considered normal, but now provoke widespread revulsion. While it remains common for people to declare their countries the greatest on earth, assertions of national primacy will, in time, come to sound just as crude and indefensible.

The contours of this shift were already visible decades ago. In his 1992 book *The Twilight of Sovereignty*, former Citigroup chairman Walter Wriston predicted that national governments would gradually lose relevance. Once collective fate, he observed, increasingly rests with those who "interconnect the planet with telecommunications and computers" and the bankers who move capital across a "new global electronic infrastructure."

Just as the rejection of slavery and racial supremacism was essential to building a more just

world, so too may shedding the current hubris of nationalism. This view is central to the work of the late philosopher John Rawls, who argued that a fair society must be designed from behind a "veil of ignorance," setting aside accidents of birth like ethnicity, gender and nationality that would otherwise shape moral judgments.

The moral case for universalism is not the sole preserve of academic philosophers. Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore, who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913, repeatedly imagined a world free of borders. In a 1917 essay, he argued that while the nation-state remained a practical necessity, we must ultimately aspire to a day when our primary identity would be simply human.

India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, recognizing the force of that vision, wrote that "nationalism is a narrowing creed" and credited Tagore with pushing his compatriots to reject its intellectual constraints.

But even if we accept the moral case for universalism and recognize how deeply interconnected the global economy has become, the question remains: Is a borderless world feasible? After all, nationalism has often provided people a powerful incentive to strive and excel, thereby helping to

drive growth and innovation.

Here, the Greek Stoic philosopher Chrysippus of Soli offers a useful perspective. Writing in the third century BCE, Chrysippus lived a life of legendary simplicity and often turned to competitive sports as a metaphor for a moral life. As American philosopher Tad Brennan puts it, he advocated a "no shoving" ethic, according to which competitors should strive to win, but only within the rules of the game. Under such conditions, competition can coexist with friendship, cooperation and shared purpose.

To be sure, a truly borderless world remains a distant dream. For now, what we can do is strengthen existing supranational organizations, including the United Nations, Bretton Woods institutions and the International Criminal Court. At a time when nationalism is again weakening the foundations of international cooperation, their resilience is of critical importance.

As a new year gets underway, we must nurture aspirations for a world in which no one is treated as the 'other' and refugees and migrants are not dehumanized as the ones stealing our bread. Universalism is a dream, but it is not an impossible one.

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## MY VIEW | EX MACHINA

# Tech solutions exist to mitigate KYC data leakage risks

RAHUL MATTHAN



is a partner at Trilegal and the author of 'The Third Way: India's Revolutionary Approach to Data Governance'. His X handle is @matthan.

**T**oday, more than half of all data breach incidents target personally identifiable information—tax identities, passport numbers, biometric data and the like. In most instances, this information was collected and stored to comply with know-your-customer (KYC) obligations. Could the regulations we put in place to prevent financial crime be the leading reason why identity theft has risen so dramatically? And has KYC insisted led regulated entities to create some of the most valuable and breach-prone datasets in India's economy?

This does not have to be the case. Even though Section II A of the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA), 2002, permits identity verification using either Aadhaar authentication or offline verification, regulated entities continue to require their customers to submit copies of their personal information. As a result, most companies find themselves in control of vast databases of identity information—scanned copies of Aadhaar cards, PAN cards, passports and the

like. And, since money laundering is a "continuous offence," this information ends up being retained indefinitely.

This practice conflicts with the minimalist philosophy that animates our data protection law. Under the Digital Personal Data Protection Act (DPDPA) of 2023, data processing must be limited to what is necessary for the specific purpose and personal data must be erased after that purpose has been served. Although the law permits verification, institutional practice has evolved to mandate permanent archiving. While the DPDPA does allow for exemptions to comply with existing laws, our current maximalist interpretation of KYC obligations is certainly not the most proportionate way to achieve these objectives.

First, we need to ask ourselves whether we truly need all the information we currently require. Why, for instance, does the Central KYC (CKYC) template require the submission of a married woman's maiden name, father's name, spouse's name and her mother's name? While none of this strengthens identity verification, it expands the collateral damage of a breach.

Our current approach to KYC has exponentially expanded our vulnerability to identity theft. Every additional document

retained and unnecessary data-field collected expands the blast radius of a single compromise. Should we not be exploring alternative ways to achieve our PMLA objectives—ones that do not require regulated entities to maintain massive databases of identity documents?

It was once assumed that privacy and law enforcement lay at opposite ends of a zero-sum trade-off. That statement is no longer true. Zero-Knowledge Proofs (ZKPs) allow us to verify a statement without accessing the underlying data. Using ZKPs, you can prove that you are above 18 without disclosing your actual age, or that you are an Indian resident without having to reveal your actual address. This provides us with a technical solution to the verification problem that does not require organizations to retain custody of identity documents to prove that verification was completed. What is being replaced here is document retention, not regulatory accountability. If we can amend the law to confirm that the use of ZKPs

solutions for identity verification is sufficient to meet the user verification obligations under applicable laws, we can reduce the collection of identity documents to the point where there will be nothing to breach and even less to steal.

But identity verification is only one part of the story. Most laws also require regulated entities to ensure that, if any verified customer violates the law, details of that customer needed to aid the investigation will be made available on request to law enforcement. As a result, any identity verification system that cannot ultimately respond to a lawful summons will not be a viable regulatory solution.

This means that even though ZKPs addresses the verification requirements in a privacy-preserving manner, we will also need a "break glass" mechanism to give legitimate authorities a way to recover the identity of the person under investigation, while ensuring that it still remains permanently invisible to the regulated entity.

One possible solution would be to implement "auditable privacy"—a technological solution that keeps identity information encrypted and unusable by default, but capable of being revealed if authorized through lawful due process. Consider this proposed solution: whenever users undergo KYC, their personal data is encrypted using a public key controlled by a designated authority. At enrollment, the regulated entity collects and stores this encrypted package while simultaneously verifying that the encrypted data satisfies KYC requirements through a user-generated ZKP. This ensures that the regulated entity holds a personal information package that remains encrypted until an investigation is triggered. In such a case, in response to a court order, the designated authority can decrypt the payload to recover the complete identity package. The entire chain—encryption, storage, decryption—can be made cryptographically auditable, thus reducing the risk of misuse.

This approach ticks multiple boxes. For regulated entities, it reduces the risk of data breaches. For users, it guarantees privacy. For regulators, it ensures that when the veil of privacy needs to be pierced, it can, via due process, reveal identity details in a verifiable and legally admissible way.

## MINT CURATOR

## Why we can't innovate our way out of the world's climate crisis

*Tackling it is more about being mindful of it than people realize*



GAUTAM MUKUNDA

is a Bloomberg Opinion columnist who writes about corporate management and innovation.



Bill Gates has spoken of innovation as crucial to fighting the crisis.

BLOOMBERG

**O**ptimism, especially about our ability to solve big problems, is in brutally short supply these days. The gloom might be at its worst in the climate change arena, where the Trump administration is in the midst of an all-out assault on green energy and the world is poised to miss the Paris Agreement target of limiting warming to no more than 1.5°Celsius.

Given that backdrop, I was struck by Bill Gates's recent announcement of a major—and decidedly optimistic—shift in his thinking about climate change. "We've made great progress" on addressing global warming, he writes, and he's confident the changing climate "will not lead to humanity's demise." But it's time to shift our attention from cutting near-term emissions to investing in ways to "improve life in a warming world." Doing so, according to Gates, will require us to "focus on innovation."

Ensuring that global warming doesn't exterminate humanity strikes me as a terribly low bar. I'd like our children to say that our generation left them a world better than the one we inherited, not just "I'm glad we're not all dead." Unfortunately, that goal is becoming harder and harder to reach, and technological innovation alone won't be enough to get us there.

Innovation is an enormously powerful tool—often the best one we have. But it works best on problems where a single breakthrough can have a massive impact. Consider, for example, how effective it's been in areas like public health, where one new drug or vaccine has sometimes been enough to eliminate a disease. These solutions are developed and even manufactured by relatively small numbers of highly skilled people. Technology handles that kind of problem superbly. Climate change, with its multiple causes, diverse impacts and global reach, is very different. Handling its effects can't be outsourced to a small group of experts.

To better understand what innovation can and can't do to help us through the climate crisis, I reached out to Spencer Glendon. I've known Glendon for more than a decade, since he gave a talk about his research at Harvard Business School while I was a professor there.

He's the former director of investment research at Wellington Management and is now the founder of Probable Futures, a non-profit that strives to make climate science accessible and understandable to everyone.

Our central task in dealing with climate change, Glendon says, is "to manage the

small group of experts."

How can leaders succeed in this new reality? "Good leaders will ask 'What climate conditions are we assuming now and in the future?' whenever they make a decision," says Glendon. "The good news is that we have a good forecast of how local climate conditions will change. Decision-makers of all kinds don't need to be climate experts, but they need basic climate literacy."

The most modest shift is among the most difficult—and surely the most important—leadership challenges of our time.

As we think about our New Year's resolutions, my suggestion for leaders and for everyone who wants to be one is just that: Make 2026 the year you become climate literate.

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## Fast-tracking infrastructure

Further reductions in delays are needed

The Pro-Active Governance and Timely Implementation (PRAGATI) platform has helped in accelerating the implementation of stalled infrastructure by digitally integrating project monitoring, inter-ministerial and Centre-state coordination, and resolution of a variety of issues pertaining to land and environment. The progress was reviewed in a meeting chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi last week. Since 2015, PRAGATI has helped over 3,300 delayed projects, worth ₹85 trillion. This matters because delays in public infrastructure continue to impose high economic costs. The data from the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation for November last year showed cost overruns in centrally funded projects had widened by 22.2 per cent, pushing the revised costs to nearly ₹29.55 trillion and absolute overruns to ₹5.37 trillion across 823 ongoing projects. Such slippages are not just accounting problems. They lock up public capital, postpone economic returns, and weaken the growth impact, which infrastructure spending is meant to deliver. The reasons for these delays are well known and largely structural: much of this stems from land acquisition, which alone accounts for around 35 per cent of project delays, followed by environmental clearances at about 20 per cent. Right-of-way issues, shifting utilities, and inter-ministerial disputes add to the problem. At their core, these are coordination failures between the Centre and states, among ministries, and among regulators and executing agencies.

PRAGATI has shown that some of these failures can be overcome through sustained oversight. Its strength lies in combining real-time data, drone imagery, and video-conferencing to promote oversight, coordination, and problem-solving. Importantly, the platform has not functioned as a standalone review mechanism. It has worked in close coordination with other digital governance platforms such as PM Gati Shakti, which improves upon planning and inter-agency coordination; the Proactive and Responsive Facilitation by Interactive and Virtuous Environmental Single-window Hub (PARIVESH), which streamlines environmental clearances; and the Project Monitoring Group (PMG), which ensures followups after decisions are taken. Together, these platforms with direct oversight from the Prime Minister's Office have helped loosen bottlenecks and move project management from being fragmented, paper-based processes to becoming a more integrated and time-bound system.

However, the persistence of large cost overruns suggests that oversight alone is not enough. The next step is to institutionalise its mechanisms beyond reviews so that faster decision-making becomes routine. This requires deeper state ownership, stronger digital capacity at the district and departmental levels, and stricter sequencing of approvals, especially ensuring prior environmental clearances through PARIVESH. Also, there is a growing push to broaden its mandate from tracking scheme outputs to assessing real outcomes. Scaling up social services nationwide demands infrastructure that is not only put in place but also maintained. This requires local implementing agencies to have sufficient funding, support, and capacity. The government has significantly increased capital expenditure in recent years. If the economy is to grow from higher capital expenditure, it is critical that projects on the ground are completed in time. Delays mean the government has to borrow more, which increases overall costs in several ways.

## Align skills to reality

Adult Skills Survey will inform policy

The government's plan to conduct a nationwide Adult Skills Survey in 2026 marks a critical attempt to align India's skilling policy with actual workforce capabilities rather than assumed demand. The three-month survey is scheduled to be conducted after the first quarter of 2026, using the comprehensive modular survey framework, and it aims to map skill levels across basic, intermediate, and advanced categories. It should help address identified skill gaps in the workforce. The core objective is clear: To pivot from supply-driven skilling targets towards demand-aligned workforce capability assessment.

This exercise is timely, given that nearly three-fourths of India's workforce has only basic schooling, and graduate employability is just around 55 per cent, underscoring a glaring mismatch between workforce readiness and economic aspirations. By 2030, India's working-age population is expected to reach nearly 69 per cent of the total population, conferring a potential demographic dividend. The latest India Skills Report, produced by Educational Testing Service in collaboration with industry and academic partners, shows some progress: National employability has risen to 56.35 per cent for this year from 46.2 per cent in 2022. Digital fluency, artificial-intelligence (AI) integration, and hybrid work models have driven part of this improvement, with women's job-readiness surpassing men's for the first time. India also accounts for 16 per cent of global AI talent, projected to cross over one million professionals by 2027. India has emerged as a global leader in AI skill penetration, with AI increasingly viewed as a core requirement for most digital roles.

Yet these increments do not obscure the deeper disconnect between what skilling programmes promise and what the economy demands. No comprehensive assessment of adult skills has been conducted recently, leaving policymakers to work with partial evidence at best. Robust skill development is not only central to labour productivity and employability but essential in the context of evolving labour markets, automation, climate action, and digitisation.

Domestic oversight bodies have also flagged systemic weaknesses. A recent audit by the Comptroller and Auditor General identified execution inefficiencies, poor placement outcomes, and weak monitoring across flagship skilling schemes such as the Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana, questioning whether certifications translate into meaningful employment outcomes. Against this backdrop, the Adult Skills Survey, if conducted with methodological rigour, could establish a baseline for workforce quality rather than merely tallying training certificates or enrolments. With granular data, policymakers can target regional imbalances, align curricula with industry demand, and incentivise firms to invest in skills. Regular iterations would further allow tracking whether reforms in education, vocational training, and labour markets are actually moving the needle. Ultimately, India's next chapter of economic growth will be defined by the level of the skilled workforce.



## Cloudy skies over US and EU trade deals

In both cases, India must prepare for worst-case scenarios

At periodic intervals, Indian officials raise the possibility of a trade deal with the United States (US), and also a free trade agreement (FTA) with the European Union (EU). A briefing by the external affairs ministry a few days ago said that both deals were being actively pursued with the aim of concluding a fair, balanced and mutually beneficial agreement.

After the recent, speedy conclusion of trade deals with Oman and New Zealand, there may be a tendency to assume that both the US and EU deals could happen reasonably soon, especially the latter. After all, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and European Council President António Costa will be in New Delhi as guests of honour for Republic Day. What could be better than getting the deal initialised when they are here?

A few days ago, India's ambassador to the US, Vinay Kwatra, met Sergio Gor, the US ambassador to India, to push for an early trade deal. Chief Economic Advisor V Anantha Nageswaran said the deal was nearly done, but was perplexed by delays. Still, he volunteered that he would be surprised if it did not get done by the end of the financial year (i.e. by March 2026).

There is, actually, less reason for optimism on the US deal today thanks to one man: Donald J Trump. The US President has been changing the goalsposts for India repeatedly. It started with a demand that India reduce its trade deficits by buying more from the US; then it became about acknowledging his alleged role in brokered a ceasefire with Pakistan last May; then it became about Russian oil; and two days ago he said it was all about India making him happy.

India would like a good trade deal with the United States of America, but what we are being

forced to negotiate is a dubious deal with one vain man in the White House. That trade deal would not be worth the paper it is written on if Mr Trump's political fortunes start reversing as America comes to its constitutional senses, or even if he gets up in a different mood one fine day in the coming months.

Maybe these deals will happen soon, maybe they will get delayed. But India's policymakers, and especially the markets, should do well to assume that their conclusion may take time. It is time to prepare for worst-case scenarios, and not build national trade policies on a wing and a prayer. Doing a trade deal with Mr Trump, who currently rules by personal fiat and decree in defiance of constitutional norms, may not stand judicial scrutiny in his own country.

Both the US and the EU are going through massive internal political and economic convulsions, with different ideological lobbies seeking to tear each other apart.

In the US, the breakdown of the elite consensus after the election of Mr Trump, and his wayward behaviour for much of 2025, makes political consensus difficult. His own Maga (Make America Great Again) base is split between the realists, and the hard-boiled Right-wing ideologies who don't want any concessions to be made to India despite Big Tech's push on India's behalf, especially on H-1B visas and services. Despite being confirmed as US ambassador in October, Sergio Gor is yet to set up shop in India. Probably his biggest battles are in the US itself.

The Trump administration is battling the political fallout from the release of the Epstein files, where some details of Mr Trump's alleged close relationship with sex-trafficker Jeffrey Epstein were disclosed. Epstein was awaiting trial on charges of

rape and other counts.

India would do well to plan for worst-case scenarios. The crystal ball for big-ticket trade deals looks cloudy at the start of 2026.

The author is a senior journalist

sex-trafficking of women and young girls when he apparently committed suicide in jail in 2019. The Epstein files do not only deal with Trump, but an entire category of politicians and businessmen who constitute the elite. The US Deep State needs the distraction of trade and other external conflicts to deflect public scrutiny from focusing too much on Epstein. Hence Mr Trump's focus on Greenland and his bashing of Venezuela, where the US behaved like a highway brigand, kidnapping a sitting President and his wife and shipping them to America for a taste of "American justice".

In Europe, which is busy shooting itself in the foot over Ukraine — it recently chose to permanently freeze Russian sovereign assets, thus dealing a blow to international confidence in its financial system — the Union is sharply divided between those who want to support Ukraine to the hilt, and those who do not want the war to continue endlessly, draining resources needed for growth and jobs. As Europe gets a taste of Mr Trump's ridicule and his threats regarding Greenland (which would be the first time a North Atlantic Treaty Organization leader had threatened another Nato member's territory), Europe is sounding increasingly unaligned about Ukraine. While Mr Trump is trying to get a deal with Vladimir Putin and penalising India for his failure there, Europe is promising itself that it will defend Ukraine to the bitter end, and ultimately may decide that someone else is to blame for its follies, just as Mr Trump decided India must pay higher tariffs because he could not get Mr Putin to end the war.

The future of both Nato and the EU is now in some doubt. In December, the EU was set to sign its biggest trade deal with the Latin American Mercosur bloc, but the deal was postponed by a month after Giorgia Meloni of Italy threw a spanner in the works at the last minute. The deal, if signed, would create one of the largest trade blocs in the world, tying the EU to Mercosur, which includes Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, and Paraguay.

A deal that was negotiated in fits and starts over two years is still stuck in limbo, held hostage by internal rifts within the EU. Farmers in France, Poland and Italy are said to be the main roadblocks to the deal, though Ms Meloni is said to have assured Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva that she would sign up the minute she can get her farmers to agree. She could be separately trying to get more EU support for her farmers in order to remove her veto. But EU finances are strained in a climate of weak growth. In a union where voting weights are based on population sizes, a qualified blocking minority can still decisions if four countries representing at least 35 per cent of the union's population decide to do so.

This is the US and EU context in which India is trying to get a trade deal, and one cannot assume that the EU collectively is more eager to get the deal done than America. Both are grappling with internal quarrels and opposition. They are fighting political battles within, and as the political Right gets stronger in the EU, even the current limited political consensus will start looking weak.

India would do well to plan for worst-case scenarios. The crystal ball for big-ticket trade deals looks cloudy at the start of 2026.

The author is a senior journalist

## How quick must quick commerce be?

New Year resolutions are mostly as short-lived as the impact of any chief executive's New Year address to employees. Whatever the longevity of such inspirational activities, some of them do strike a note for their timeliness. One such New Year resolution came from a journalist colleague who has been tracking developments in the quick-commerce space with interest, especially when a section of gig workers (mostly delivery partners) went on strike to protest their inadequate compensation and demanding an end to the 10-minute delivery model while asking for social security.

He announced on the first day of the year, after an editorial meeting, that he would not order through quick commerce anymore. The unique resolution drew some attention before others attending the meeting got into a debate on the merits and demerits of the gig workers' strike.

The debate on quick-commerce and the labour practices in this segment of retail reached new levels ever since gig workers' unions knocked on the doors of ministers and bureaucrats recently, calling out some of the top companies in this space for "unfair practices". But why has this strike triggered so much reaction even though deliveries ordered through online platforms were not as badly disrupted as anticipated on peak-demand days such as New Year's Eve? Perhaps, the numbers explain why anything to do with gig work is now core to our lives.

Consider the latest New Year's Eve estimates for Eternal (Zomato). Together, Zomato and Blinkit (its quick-commerce unit) delivered more than 7.5 million orders to more than 6.5 million customers on

December 31 — all in a single day. These orders were delivered by more than 45,000 delivery partners. Coming to the overall gig universe, including food delivery, quick commerce, and app-based cab and bike drivers, the numbers would be in the vicinity of 20 million workers — far more than what the top 10 employers in the country cumulatively have on their rolls. The number could reach 90 million by 2030, according to some estimates. As for growth, quick commerce is described by companies and industry associations to be on an explosive trajectory. Valued at up to \$7 billion as of 2024, the annual compound annual growth rate of quick commerce is projected at 40 to 70 per cent over the next three to four years.

While the numbers are staggering, it helps to look beyond them. Although the frontrunners and advocacy groups have been busy pointing at the job creation potential in the gig universe, the gaps in the system need to be plugged so that it can drive several services effectively and add to the country's gross domestic product (GDP). In a recent podcast with YouTuber Raj Shamani, Eternal founder and CEO Deepinder Goyal admitted that Zomato terminates nearly 5,000 gig workers a month due to fraud cases, while around 150,000 to 200,000 workers leave the platform voluntarily as they may see their jobs as "transient".

The transient nature of the gig business, where such a large-scale churn takes place on a regular basis, is probably indicative of a systemic weakness that critics of the gig platforms as well as political parties have highlighted. That could imply anything from poor wages to unsatisfactory working conditions to the

lack of social security. It is another matter that the 4.5-hour podcast, in which Mr Goyal held forth on his own platforms, Zomato and Blinkit, as well as on rival Swiggy, was recorded some weeks ago and streamed soon after the gig workers' strike.

As the gig debate goes on, even after the moment of the strike has passed, it may be the right time to think about how to do the online gig and app-based business better. It is in nobody's interest to kill an ecosystem that can employ millions. On quick-commerce, looking at the global models may offer perspective.

A few things stand out across key markets such as the United States, China, the United Kingdom, and Japan. For instance, the regulatory framework in online businesses ensures a certain level of product and service quality in many markets. Also, quick commerce is not synonymous with 10-minute delivery; typically, there's a break of two to three minutes, even stretching to a couple of hours. Then, there's a price, a hefty one in many markets, for superfast delivery. In China, where quick commerce is called instant retail, incentive and freebies rule, triggering sustainability issues.

Ensuring the social security of gig workers, covering the cost of setting up dark stores close to residential areas, and running a profitable business have made quick commerce a tough balancing act for many companies around the world. In India, we can relax the quick-commerce window to start with. A hard stop at 10 minutes puts lives at risk even if the distance from the dark store to an apartment is just a few 100 metres. Adequate compensation and social security for workers — which companies claim are already there — should be an integral part of the app ecosystem, with regulatory oversight. Only then can New Year resolutions strike a different note.

Readers inclined to dismiss such possibilities as naïve, delusional or hokey may be persuaded by the author's glowing credentials. He has served on the American Psychological Association's Task Force on Global Climate Change.

Dr Doherty repeatedly invites readers to lean on and replenish inner resources. He offers a wide range of practices, including breathwork, mindfulness, journaling, contemplating the cycles and rhythms of nature, outdoor activities, making art, building a network of eco-friends, opening up to sacred teachings, setting boundaries around the consumption of climate news, and learning how to have productive conversations with those who disagree with one's environmental that are harmful.

At the heart of the book is the revolutionary idea that readers can cultivate a "growth mindset" and develop "coping skills" to live with purpose and meaning, not just stay afloat as cataclysmic changes take place around them. Dr Doherty makes space for joy, humour, creativity and connection to coexist with fear, grief and anger.

The most unusual practice mentioned here is called the "eco-confessional". It is a ritual wherein people share personal stories of ecological irresponsibility in order to release them-

selves from the burden of self-blame they carry. It is attractive because it promises to free people from the self-righteousness that is often part and parcel of activism and destroys relationships.

Dr Doherty urges readers to embrace what he calls "a manifesto for flourishing". One is asked to take a deep breath, and read with conviction: "Nature is not just a place outside of me, I am nature. I have a unique environmental identity, and set of experiences and values that give me a place to stand on the planet." This framing is an act of courage because it dares to question the very basis of what leads human beings to treat trees, animals, mountains and rivers as resources. At first glance, it might seem only poetic and philosophical but it is also profoundly political.

The reviewer is a writer, journalist, and literary critic. Instagram/X: @chintanwriting

## A manifesto for flourishing in climate change



versation while reading Thomas Doherty's book *Surviving Climate Anxiety: Coping, Healing and Thriving on a Changing Planet*. It is geared towards helping readers reclaim their creativity and creativity amidst environmental disasters.

The author is a clinical psychologist, who researches the psychological impacts of climate change and integrates them into his practice. He also trains mental health professionals addressing eco-anxiety. This professional grounding shines throughout the book, which delivers information with emotional intelligence and restraint, making it not only a source of reassurance but empowerment. There is no fixed or cured or the crisis.

Dr Doherty is clear about the stakes. He describes "out-of-control climate breakdown" as "the greatest public health threat humans face in the twenty-first century, or certainly a force multiplier for other threats". He

gives readers accessible language to discuss the mental health consequences of fires, storms, floods and heatwaves. This includes their immediate effects as well as "indirect ripple effects" and "the emotional toll of anxiety, loss, and depression".

One of the book's strengths is its broad appeal. It demands no prior expertise in psychology or climate activism. Dr Doherty insists that feeling anxious about the planet is not a pathological response but a "normal and healthy emotion that manifests in your mind and body". It is to be explored and understood, not fixed or cured. The individual's never reduced to a diagnosis.

The author's recommendation to build a rich emotional vocabulary encompassing languages other than English is particularly relevant for a multilingual context like India. He points out that Germans use the word *Weltzermere* to capture what it feels like to carry the world's weight on one's shoulders whereas the Portuguese use

verses from the burden of self-blame they carry. It is attractive because it promises to free people from the self-righteousness that is often part and parcel of activism and destroys relationships.

Dr Doherty urges readers to embrace what he calls "a manifesto for flourishing". One is asked to take a deep breath, and read with conviction: "Nature is not just a place outside of me, I am nature. I have a unique environmental identity, and set of experiences and values that give me a place to stand on the planet." This framing is an act of courage because it dares to question the very basis of what leads human beings to treat trees, animals, mountains and rivers as resources. At first glance, it might seem only poetic and philosophical but it is also profoundly political.

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CPI ACTIVISTS  
STAND WITH  
VENEZUELA

CPI(M) activists in Jammu and Kashmir on Tuesday held a peaceful protest against the US military operation in Venezuela that led to the capture of President Nicolas Maduro. Activists held up anti-US banners, shouting slogans and carrying placards denouncing the Trump administration. Party's Kulgam MLA MY Tarigami questioned the Centre's statement which called Maduro's capture a matter of "deep concern", and urged it to condemn the aggression instead.



## Metamorphosis of longest serving Karnataka CM

After days of haggling with his deputy over the 'chair' that threw up some nervous moments for him, Congress veteran Siddaramaiah is now on the cusp of a record - Karnataka's longest serving Chief Minister.

For a man rooted in 'Janata Parivar' for over two decades and known for strident anti-Congress stances in the past, it has been a remarkable turnaround for the 77-year-old as he equals on Tuesday, fellow Mysorean Devaraj Urs' record of number of days in office.

In his second term as Chief Minister, Siddaramaiah equalled Urs' record with 2,792 days in office, and will be the proud holder of the record from 7 January.

Urs, considered as icon of social justice and land reforms in the State, was a two term CM (1972-1977, 1978-1980).

Siddaramaiah, who is also the only CM after Urs to complete his term in office for 1,329 days in his first term from 13 May, 2013 to 15 May, 2018.

In his second term since 20 May, 2023, he has completed 965 days, but not before supporters of Deve Gowda, his deputy in JD(S), Siddaramaiah tried to throw a spanner by seeking their leader's elevation in lines with a rumoured 2023 power-sharing formula.

From early 1980s to 2005, Siddaramaiah, who comes from a poor family, his father was a tea-chand and Chinnappa, his mother a weaver. But his ouster from Congress' D. Shivarao, who tried to bring him down by seeking their leader's elevation in lines with a rumoured 2023 power-sharing formula.

Siddaramaiah went on to become the CM as the Congress pick in 2013. Those qualities, besides his bluntness, once again catapulted the nine-time MLA to another stint in the top office in 2023.

Siddaramaiah, who has made it his mission to bring him back to complete his tenure as Chief Minister, one last time, is hoping to sign off on a 'high'. He has however given mixed signals about continuing in electoral politics.



Initially a staunch anti-Congressman, Siddaramaiah joined the rival party after being ousted from Janata Dal (Secular).

Announcing 2023 polls to be his last, Siddaramaiah went back to his home constituency of Varuna and once again won. Although this may be his last poll, Siddaramaiah to continue in politics.

Siddaramaiah has the credit of successfully edging out Congress heavyweights to become the lone Shivalingam in 2023 and M Mallikarjun Kharge (now All India前进) a decade ago.

After the fractured verdict in 2004, Congress and JD(S) formed a coalition government, Siddaramaiah, who comes from a poor family, his father was a tea-chand and Chinnappa, his mother a weaver. But his ouster from Congress' D. Shivarao, who tried to bring him down by seeking their leader's elevation in lines with a rumoured 2023 power-sharing formula.

Following this, in 2005, Siddaramaiah, a Kuruba - the third largest caste in Karnataka - chose to position himself as a backbone classes, by spearheading AHD (Kannada acronym for marginal backward classes) and Dalits' demands coincidentally at a time when the former PM Deve Gowda's son, HD Kumaraswamy was seen as a rising star of the party.

Siddaramaiah was sacked from JD(S), where he had earlier served as its state unit chief, with critics insisting that he was removed to promote Gowda.

Siddaramaiah, an advocate, at the time talked about "political sanyas" and even toyed with the idea of giving back to his law practice. He failed in floating a regional outfit, saying he can't muster money power. Both the BJP and the Congress wood him then, but Gowda scuttled his prospect.

But Siddaramaiah did not agree with the BJP ideology and joined the Congress with his followers in 2008.

A mass leader, Siddaramaiah has presented 16 State budgets.

A product of 'Janata Parivar', he was influenced by socialist ideals advocated by Dr Ram Manohar Lohia, dedicated his life to his profession to pursue political career - first as a taluk board member.

Making his debut in the Assembly in 1983, elected from

Chamundeshwari constituency in Mysuru on a Lok Sabha ticket, he later joined the ruling erstwhile Janata Party.

He lost 1989 and 1999 Assembly elections, and 1991 Lok Sabha polls from Koppal.

With Congress losing that election, he became the Leader of Opposition and strongly took on the BJP government on corruption, scams and illegal mining.

However, despite being popular because of populist 'Bhagya' schemes, Congress faced defeat in 2004. Siddaramaiah himself lost the 2013 polls in Chamundeshwari in Mysuru to JD(S)' GT Deve Gowda by 36,042 votes.

He, however, won from Badami in Bagalkot district.

After the 2018 polls, Siddaramaiah became the chief of the Congress-JD(S) government's coalition committee, and following the collapse of the coalition government and BJP coming to power, he became the LoP.

Announcing 2023 polls to be his last, Siddaramaiah took back his home constituency of Varuna and once again won. He had then said this may be his last poll, but will continue to remain in politics thereafter.

unable to pay for his rent.

In the western Indian city of Mumbai, the country's business hub, 31-year-old Santosh Pawar is a gig worker employed by Blinkit, a firm focused on delivery services. He is also found to move through the Indian metropolis to meet the company's ten-minute delivery deadlines.

Workers say these ten-minute delivery poses personal safety risks.

Last month, I slipped on a waterlogged road and fractured my wrist. The platform offered nothing. There was neither compensation nor medical support... just a message asking when I would be back online and to award D. W. He continued working despite the pain.

"If I do not deliver, we don't eat," said Pawar.

"Our future looks shaky and uncertain. There is no steady work, just endless hustle and family worries," said Priya Shinde, a gig worker in the beauty services sector in New Delhi. "Every canceled order chips away at our dreams. There is no safety net for tomorrow."

So far, India's gig economy is growing by absorbing surplus labor from agriculture and other informal sectors.

The NITI Aayog, a premier Indian government think tank, released a policy brief in

2022 hailing the gig and platform economy as a vital job engine fuelled by the rise of digital platforms, widespread use of smartphones and an increasing demand for flexible jobs, among other reasons.

It projects the gig workforce in the world's most populous nation to jump from 7.7 mil-

lion in 2020-21 to about 23.5 million in 2029-30.

### MOUNTING ANGER AND FRUSTRATION

As the number of gig workers rises, anger and frustration are also mounting over work conditions.

Platforms, for instance, have

the power to arbitrarily suspend accounts without explanation, cutting off workers' income. When gig employees fall sick and get injured on the job, there is often no insurance or paid leave.

This leaves workers bearing all the risks that platforms firmly in control.

## US' decades-long pursuit of Venezuelan oil wealth

After US special forces swooped into Caracas to seize Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro and topple his government, US President Donald Trump said the United States will now "run" Venezuela, including its abundant oil reserves.

US companies were poised to invest billions to upgrade Venezuela's crumbling oil infrastructure, he said. Venezuela has the world's largest oil reserves - outpacing Saudi Arabia with 303 billion barrels, or about 20 per cent of global reserves.

If this does eventuate - and that's a very big "if" - it would mark the end of an adversarial relationship that began nearly 30 years ago.

Yes, the Trump administration's military action in Venezuela was in many ways unprecedented. But it was not surprising given Venezuela's vast oil wealth and the historic relations between the US and Venezuela under former presidents Hugo Chavez and Maduro.

### A LONG HISTORY OF US INVESTMENT

Venezuela is a republic of around 30 million people in the northern corner of South America, about twice the size of California. During much of the early 20th century, it was considered the wealthiest country in South America due to its oil reserves.

Foreign companies, including from the US, invested heavily in Venezuela oil and played a heavy hand in its politics. Venezuelan leaders began asserting more control over their main resource.

Chavez became a giant of the oil industry. He was popular for his use of oil revenue to subsidise government programmes for food, health and education.

Notably, Chavez provided Cuba with billions worth of oil and expertise from Cuban doctors. He also set a precedent of standing up to the US and to the IMF at global forums.

This negatively impacted US firms like ExxonMobil and has fuelled Trump's claims that Venezuela

"stole" oil from the US.

### WHY VENEZUELA IS POOR DESPITE OIL?

Economic prosperity, however, did not follow for most Venezuelans. The mismanagement of the oil industry led to a debt crisis and International Monetary Fund (IMF) intervention in 1988. Caracas erupted in protests in February 1989, and the military to crush the uprising. Official figures suggest 300 people were killed but the real figure could be 10 times higher.

In response, aftermath, Venezuelan society became further split between the wealthy, who wanted to work with the US, and the working class who sought autonomy. This division has defined Venezuelan politics.

### CHAVEZ'S RISE TO POWER

Hugo Chavez began his career as a military officer. In the early 1980s, he formed the socialist Revolutionary Bolivarian Movement-200 within the army.

Then, after the 1989 riots, Chavez began planning the overthrow of Venezuela's government. In February 1992, he staged a failed coup against the pro-US president, Carlos Pérez. Another coup attempt failed that same year. Chavez was jailed for two years, but emerged as the leading presidential candidate in 1998.

Chavez became a giant of the oil industry. He was popular for his use of oil revenue to subsidise government programmes for food, health and education.

Notably, Chavez provided Cuba with billions worth of oil and expertise from Cuban doctors. He also set a precedent of standing up to the US and to the IMF at global forums.

THE US IS ACCUSED OF INCITING A COUP

Unsurprisingly, the United States was not a fan of

Chavez. After protests in April 2002, Chavez was briefly ousted in a coup by dissident military officers, who installed new president, businessman Pedro Carmona. Chavez was arrested and the Bush administration recognised Carmona as president.

Chavez swept back into power just two days later and the Bush administration faced scrutiny for its possible role in the aborted coup.

The US denied any involvement. In 2004, newly classified documents showed the CIA was aware of the plot.

### US PRESSURE GROWS ON MADURO

Maduro, a crude unionist, was elected to the National Assembly in 2000 and joined Chavez's inner circle. He rose to the office of vice president in 2012 and, following Chavez's death the following year, won his first election by a razor-thin margin.

But Maduro did not have the same level of support among the working class or the military. Venezuela's economic conditions worsened, and inflation skyrocketed.

Three successive US administrations continued to put pressure on Maduro. Venezuela was hit with sanctions in both the Obama and the first Trump presidencies.

Isolated from much of the world, the US' Maduro's government became dependent on selling oil to China as its sole economic outlet.

Maduro also claims to have thwarted several coup and assassination attempts aimed at him, involving the US and domestic opposition. US officials have denied any involvement.

One thing is for certain: As long as it has financial stakes in the oil-rich country, US' involvement in Venezuelan politics will go on.



## LETTERS

write to us at growingindia.co.in@gmail.com

## Millions of India's gig workers demand fair treatment and benefits

**M**illions of informal workers in India are dependent on app platforms, with their livelihoods on the line as they negotiate the country's gig economy.

Raju Kumar works as a delivery worker for Zomato, a leading Indian online food ordering platform, in India's capital New Delhi.

The 27-year-old says he puts in close to 10 hours every day, navigating the city's traffic to deliver orders to customers' doorsteps. He is forced to race through congested streets in a battle to complete the delivery on time, and is doing his best to avoid getting any complaints from customers.

Kumar earns about Rs 700 to 900 a day from the gig work.

"But there is no job security here," he told DW.

"All it requires is one customer complaint or a random ID block, and I am out without notice or savings," Kumar added, referring to a practice by delivery platforms like Zomato and Uber where they cut off a worker's account.

This could be motivated by a drop in customers' ratings or by employees violating company policy, but it could also be due to a simple glitch.

Kumar, who has been working for Zomato for a week last month due to an algorithmic issue, hurting his income to the point of leaving him



unable to pay for his rent.

In the western Indian city of Mumbai, the country's business hub, 31-year-old Santosh Pawar is a gig worker employed by Blinkit, a firm focused on delivery services. He is also found to move through the Indian metropolis to meet the company's ten-minute delivery deadlines.

Workers say these ten-minute delivery poses personal safety risks.

Last month, I slipped on a waterlogged road and fractured my wrist. The platform offered nothing. There was neither compensation nor medical support... just a message asking when I would be back online and to award D. W. He continued working despite the pain.

"If I do not deliver, we don't eat," said Pawar.

"Our future looks shaky and uncertain. There is no steady work, just endless hustle and family worries," said Priya Shinde, a gig worker in the beauty services sector in New Delhi. "Every canceled order chips away at our dreams. There is no safety net for tomorrow."

So far, India's gig economy is growing by absorbing surplus labor from agriculture and other informal sectors.

The NITI Aayog, a premier Indian government think tank, released a policy brief in

2022 hailing the gig and platform economy as a vital job engine fuelled by the rise of digital platforms, widespread use of smartphones and an increasing demand for flexible jobs, among other reasons.

It projects the gig workforce in the world's most populous nation to jump from 7.7 mil-

lion in 2020-21 to about 23.5 million in 2029-30.

As the number of gig workers rises, anger and frustration are also mounting over work conditions.

Platforms, for instance, have

the power to arbitrarily suspend accounts without explanation, cutting off workers' income. When gig employees fall sick and get injured on the job, there is often no insurance or paid leave.

This leaves workers bearing all the risks that platforms firmly in control.

Against this backdrop, some labour groups organized a strike on New Year's Eve, one of the busiest times of the year.

They demanded a minimum monthly income for every gig worker, ranging between 24,000 and 40,000 rupees, transparent payment systems,

and an end to arbitrary account suspensions.

"Our mission is to challenge the perception of gig workers as merely temporary labor. Instead, we aim to bring them into the formal labour market where their work is recognized with dignity, and they are provided with equal opportunities in a safe and secure working environment," Sanjay Gaba, president of the All-India Gig and Platform Workers Union, told DW.

### WARNING OF MORE STRIKES

The Indian government recently came up with new labour laws that mandate a minimum monthly wage as well as extend social security benefits to the unorganized sector and gig workers.

Prashant Swaradev, president of the Indian Federation of App-Based Transport Workers (IFAT), also urged the government to do more.

"We want platforms contributing to a welfare fund that provides health insurance, accident coverage, pensions and other protections that workers currently lack," he told DW.

"We just saw a trailer on New Year's Eve. The fight begins now and we will press

on in the coming weeks and months," Swaradev said, warning of more strikes to come.

# The Statesman

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## Power and Legitimacy

The capture of Venezuelan leader Nicolás Maduro by the United States has forced the international community to confront an uncomfortable reality: the widening gap between power and its justification.

Mr Maduro's removal did not occur in a political vacuum. His claim to democratic legitimacy was already gravely weakened by the disputed 2023 election, while allegations linking senior figures in the Venezuelan state to transnational drug trafficking are longstanding and widely acknowledged. Even critics of Washington's actions rarely argue that these charges emerged without basis. The question raised by recent events, therefore, is not whether Mr Maduro was a credible democratic leader, but whether the method used to remove him can be reconciled with the principles that ostensibly govern international conduct.

That method matters. The US did not rely on diplomatic isolation, economic pressure, or recognition of an alternative authority. It conducted a direct military operation on foreign soil, seized a sitting head of state, and declared its intention to administer the country until a "safe and proper" transition could be arranged. In doing so, it moved decisively from influence to control.

Regime-change operations, overt and covert, are not unprecedented. Powerful states have repeatedly acted beyond the strict confines of international law, particularly when strategic interests were at stake. What distinguishes the Venezuelan episode is not novelty, but its candour. The intervention was openly claimed, publicly celebrated, and explicitly tied to strategic and economic objectives, including the management of oil infrastructure and reimbursement of costs.

This operation sharpens the dilemma rather than resolving it. If legitimacy is conferred through criminal indictments and enforced by superior force, international law risks becoming conditional - applied when convenient and suspended when it is not. The argument that Mr Maduro forfeited sovereignty through misconduct may persuade some, but it establishes a principle that cannot be selectively contained. Many governments would reject the idea that their internal failures justify external seizure, however flawed their leadership.

For Venezuela, the path ahead remains uncertain. Removing an entrenched ruler does not automatically restore institutions weakened by years of misrule and economic collapse. An interim authority perceived as externally managed risks lacking domestic credibility, however compromised the previous regime have been. Stability imposed from outside can prove brittle if not followed by a genuinely inclusive political reconstruction led by Venezuelans themselves.

For US President Donald Trump, the operation signals a governing philosophy that privileges decisiveness over restraint. Whether such an approach produces durable order or accelerates global volatility remains an open question.

Ultimately, the Venezuelan episode is less about the fate of one leader than about the trajectory of the international system itself. Mr Maduro's fall may be defensible on moral or practical grounds. But the manner of his removal ensures that the debate will not end with his arrest. It instead forces a reckoning with how far the world is willing to drift from rules toward results - and what that drift will cost when power shifts and today's justifications are tested against tomorrow's realities.

## When Water Kills

The deaths linked to contaminated tap water in Indore are not merely a tragic municipal failure; they expose a deeper contradiction at the heart of India's urban governance. A city celebrated repeatedly for cleanliness has revealed, in the most brutal way possible, how fragile that reputation can be when infrastructure, accountability and public health oversight do not keep pace with accolades. At the centre of this tragedy is a familiar but deadly leap: sewage entering drinking water lines due to neglected or poorly maintained pipelines. What makes the incident particularly disturbing is not just the number of lives lost - the toll still conflicting between official statements and local accounts - but the fact that residents had reportedly complained of foul-smelling, contaminated water weeks before the outbreak escalated. The warning signs were there. They were simply ignored.

Urban India often treats water supply as a logistical issue rather than a public health problem. When water smells bad, people adapt. They boil it, filter it, dilute milk, or assume the risk is manageable. That adaptive behaviour, born out of necessity and habit, becomes lethal when contamination reaches a tipping point. In this case, even precautions such as boiling proved tragically insufficient. The outbreak also exposes the limits of India's obsession with rankings and optics. Clean streets, waste segregation drives and glossy municipal dashboards create the impression of well-run cities, but underground realities - ageing pipelines, unchecked leakages and poor sewage segregation - remain invisible until disaster strikes. Cleanliness, when measured narrowly, can mask deeper vulnerabilities rather than eliminate them.

Equally troubling is the uncertainty surrounding the death toll. When official numbers lag behind local reporting, public trust erodes. Families grieving sudden deaths are left with unanswered questions, while authorities appear defensive instead of transparent. In public health crises, credibility matters as much as corrective action. Minimising numbers may limit political fallout, but it magnifies long-term distrust.

The administrative response - suspensions, dismissals, emergency water tankers - follows a familiar script. Yet these are reactive measures. The harder questions remain unresolved: why routine water quality monitoring failed, why complaints were not escalated, and why preventive maintenance was allowed to lapse in a densely populated area.

This tragedy should force a rethinking of how Indian cities define "success." Urban governance cannot be reduced to annual rankings or awards. It must be measured by resilience - the ability to prevent invisible failures before they claim lives. Water safety audits, independent monitoring, transparent reporting, and rapid grievance redressal are not optional add-ons; they are core civic duties. Ultimately, the Indore deaths are a reminder that infrastructure neglect kills quietly and indiscriminately. The victims were not casualties of a natural disaster but of institutional complacency. If this episode ends with symbolic penalties and no systemic reform, it will not remain an isolated tragedy - it will be a warning ignored, waiting to repeat itself elsewhere.

# End of Restraint

*Under the United States Constitution, the authority to initiate war rests with Congress. This requirement is not symbolic; it is fundamental. It exists precisely to prevent unilateral military action by a single individual. No such authorization was sought or granted in this case. International law is even more unequivocal. The United Nations Charter prohibits the use of force against another state's territorial integrity or political independence except in cases of genuine self-defense or with Security Council approval. What unfolded was neither legal nor defensible under the rules that the global community has spent decades - often imperfectly - trying to uphold.*

In the early hours of 3 January, the United States crossed a moral, legal and historical threshold that should alarm the world. American forces bombed targets in Venezuela, including areas in and around its capital, and seized the country's sitting president and his wife, transporting them to New York to face trial. This extraordinary act was announced not through Congress, nor through any international body, but through a presidential declaration.

This was not law enforcement. It was not diplomacy by other means. It was an act of war. The administration would like the world to accept this as routine - another "operation," another "strike," another exercise in enforcement. Such language is deliberately anesthetizing. Foreign territory was bombed. A sovereign government was violated. A head of state was forcibly removed. If this does not constitute invasion, the word has lost its meaning.

One need not harbour illusions about the Venezuelan regime to grasp the enormity of what has occurred. The country's president has ruled suppressively, undermined democratic processes, and presided over economic collapse that has driven millions from their homes. These facts are well documented. They are also beside the point. International order does not survive by granting powerful nations the discretion to overthrow weaker ones they deem immoral, inconvenient, or expendable.

At stake here is not the character of a single leader, but the survival of restraint itself.

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authority to initiate war rests with Congress.

This requirement is not symbolic; it is fundamental. It exists precisely to prevent unilateral military action by a single individual. No such authorization was sought or granted in this case. There was no public debate, no vote, no collective reckoning before bombs fell on a foreign capital. A decision of irreversible consequence was made by executive fiat.

International law is even more unequivocal. The United Nations Charter prohibits the use of force against another state's territorial integrity or political independence except in cases of genuine self-defense or with Security Council approval. What unfolded was neither legal nor defensible under the rules that the global community has spent decades - often imperfectly - trying to uphold.

The administration's stated justification rests on the language of "narco-terrorism." History is replete with examples of governments invoking crime to legitimize conquest. The transformation of war into policing is a familiar rhetorical maneuver: arrests instead of invasions, instead of aggression. Yet Venezuela is not a central source of the drugs ravaging American communities, nor does its government pose an immediate military threat to the United States. The explanation strains credibility.

A more candid reading points elsewhere. Venezuela possesses some of the largest proven oil reserves in the world and occupies a strategic position in a region long subjected to American political pressure. In recent months, Washington had increased its military footprint in the Caribbean, speaking openly of reasserting dominance in the hemisphere. This assault did not emerge in isolation; it was the culmination of a policy trajectory that had already abandoned restraint.

A recent editorial in the New York Times warned that even the removal of brutal or illegitimate regimes by force has repeatedly produced disastrous outcomes. Iraq, Libya,

and Afghanistan stand as grim reminders that dismantling a government is far easier than building a stable political order. These are not ideological arguments; they are historical facts. Time and again, intervention has bred chaos rather than cure.

Latin America, in particular, carries a long and painful memory of such actions. From Chile to Guatemala, from Nicaragua to Cuba, the region has endured repeated episodes in which Washington claimed to act in the name of order or freedom, only to leave behind instability, resentment, and trauma. Each intervention was justified as exceptional. Each was later acknowledged - often quietly

- as a mistake. Venezuela now risks becoming the latest chapter in this bleak record.

Supporters of the invasion insist that this time will be different - that removing the president will unlock democracy, stability, and renewal. Such confidence is deeply misplaced. Power vacuums do not produce justice, they invite violence. The generals, armed groups, and political networks that sustained the regime will not disappear because one man has been captured. Nor are they likely to submit willingly to outcomes shaped by foreign force.

The dangers extend beyond Venezuela's borders. Further instability could accelerate migration across the hemisphere, strain neighboring states, disrupt energy markets, and inflame armed groups already operating in the region. A country already exhausted by crisis may now face further suffering - not as an unfortunate by-product, but as a predictable consequence.

There is also the matter of conduct. Reports that US forces struck Venezuelan targets without offering surrender or due process raise grave concerns under international humanitarian law. The Geneva Conventions do not distinguish between wars fought for noble or ignoble reasons; they apply precisely when violence occurs. The erosion of these

norms is not collateral damage - it is the damage.

Perhaps the most dangerous consequence of this action lies in the precedent it sets. By asserting the right to bomb a country, abduct its leader, and subject him to domestic prosecution, the United States has weakened the very norms it once championed. Other powers will not treat this as an aberration; they will treat it as permission. If such actions are acceptable when carried out by Washington, they will soon be replicated elsewhere by governments with far less regard for restraint.

The irony is stark. President Trump once presented himself as an opponent of endless wars and reckless interventions. He criticized past administrations for overreach and promised restraint. That posture has now been abandoned. What has unfolded in Venezuela is not the end of imperial habits; it is their revival, stripped of pretense.

Democracies do not collapse only through coups or revolutions. They erode when laws become optional, when institutions are bypassed, and when power substitutes itself for legitimacy. Congress was sidelined. International bodies were ignored. Allies were informed after the fact. This is not leadership; it is unilateralism masquerading as resolve.

Opposing this action does not require sympathy for Venezuela's government. It requires fidelity to a principle far more important: that no nation, however powerful, has the right to rewrite global rules through violence. Sovereignty is not a favor bestowed by great powers; it is the foundation of international order.

If the United States wishes to address Venezuela's failings, it must do so through diplomacy, multilateral pressure, humanitarian engagement, and lawful international mechanisms - not bombs and handouts. Anything less signals a return to an age when might dictated right and legality followed force.

History will judge this moment harshly. The only remaining question is whether citizens, institutions, and allies will demand accountability now - or wait, as so often before, until the damage is irreversible.

Jakarta Post

## Regional autonomy does not have to redistribute corruption

As we bid farewell to 2025, we note that the year concluded with a series of sting operations by the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK), targeting at least six regional heads. Yet, the news no longer shocks the public.

There is no moral outrage as in the past, no eruption of anger. Citizens have grown accustomed to seeing mayors, regents and governors paraded before cameras, escorted into detention vehicles in orange vests. Regional power comes

and goes, yet one pattern remains: local authority continues to be fertile ground for rent-seeking.

Twenty-five years after decentralization was introduced in the form of direct regional head elections, the expectation was that local autonomy would enhance efficiency, bring public services closer to citizens and strengthen democratic governance.

Ironically, Home Minister Tito Karnavian

A Member Of The ANN ASIA NEWS NETWORK

responded to the wave of anticorruption raids by emphasizing the need to improve the training system for regional heads.

This statement appears normative and overly simplistic.

It frames corruption as an individual failure, as if the problem could be solved through ethics training and administrative oversight. In reality, the issue is structural, not merely personal. While training may serve as moral guidance, it fails to address the root causes: an oligarchic political recruitment

mechanism, high campaign costs and party patronage.

Meanwhile, the central government has gradually reclaimed some local powers. Scholars like Fitriani, Hofmann and Kaise refer to this phenomenon as "centralization", in which the central state retakes fiscal control due to a loss of trust in local authorities.

Tito's response is ironic in this context: while oversight is strengthened, the upstream recruitment process remains untouched.

## Letters To The Editor | editor@thestatesman.com

### Issues for SC

Sir, The Supreme Court's recent order to put in abeyance its own November 20 verdict accepting a new uniform definition of the Aravallis id "most necessary and welcome." There are three other environmental issues that the apex court must take up suo motu, as it did in the case of the Aravallis.

The court should reject the proposal to redraw the boundaries of Sariska Tiger Reserve, a move that would enable the opening of around 57 closed mines. On August 5 this year, citizens and environmental organisations moved a petition in the court raising numerous concerns about how the National Board for Wildlife (NBWL) had approved the Rajasthan government's proposal to increase the Critical Tiger Habitat of the Sariska Tiger Reserve from 881 sq km to 924 sq km, and reduce the buffer zone area from 245 sq km to 203 sq km.

This, they said, could pave the way to restart the operations of around 50 marble and dolomite mines that were stopped by an order by the Supreme Court in 2024. The top court heard the matter on August 6 and came down heavily on both the National Tiger Conservation Authority and the

Standing Committee of the NBWL, flagging the haste with which approval was given. The second issue that the court must look into is to review its verdict to permit retrospective environmental approvals. On November 18 this year, the Supreme Court had "opened the door for a review of its own earlier verdict" of May 16 that barred retrospective environmental approvals.

The third issue that the court must look into is to strengthen the powers of the National Green Tribunal. The National Green Tribunal (NGT) was set up in October 2010 by an Act of Parliament after detailed consultations with the Supreme Court and its full support and backing. Its powers have been thoroughly diluted over the past decade. The Supreme Court's intervention

is now essential to ensure that the NGT is allowed to function as per law without fear or favour.

Yours, etc., Bhagwan Thadani, Mumbai, 1 January.

### Missed deadlines

Sir, In the grand narrative of India's infrastructure development, a persistent and frustrating subplot unfolds: the chronic culture of missed deadlines. This pattern of postponement is not merely bureaucratic lethargy; it is a systemic failure that directly impacts the daily lives and economic prospects of millions. A closer look at projects in Punjab, particularly around the bustling Tricity region and its transport corridors, paints a stark picture of promises unmet and public trust eroded.

The saga of the Ludhiana Railway Station redevelopment is a classic tale. Announced as a world-class terminal under the Adarsh Station Scheme, the project has been a rollercoaster of revised completion deadlines. It inches in uncertainty, with passenger amenities caught in a limbo of unfinished platforms, congestion, and dust. Each missed deadline extends the ordeal for the thousands who use the station daily.

Similarly, the Chandigarh Railway Station modernization has been a lesson in incremental delays with deadlines for key upgrades like new waiting halls, foot over-bridges, and improved circulation spaces slipping silently.

The anguish multiplies on the roads. The crucial Banuri-Kurali stretch of the Chandigarh-Ludhiana National Highway, a notorious bottleneck, has seen its completion date pushed repeatedly. Adding to the list is the proposed Zirakpur-Kalka Bypass, a vital artery meant to decongest the chaotic entry to the hills. Even the initial step of tendering has seen deadlines come and go.

In the wake of all these delays, it is the common citizen who suffers. Missed deadlines are not just calendar events; they translate into real-world consequences - longer travel times, lost business hours, increased fuel costs, and compromised safety.

India's ambition to become a developed nation hinges on its infrastructure backbone. Until accountability is enforced, and project management is overhauled with transparency and rigor, India will remain, in the public perception, a land of missed deadlines, where progress is always just around a corner that never seems to arrive.

Yours, etc., Sumeet Seth, Chandigarh, 1 January.



# Opinion

The greatest day in your life and mine is when we take total responsibility for our attitudes. That's the day we truly grow up.

John C. Maxwell

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## EDITORIAL

### Address farmers' concerns

**A**t a time when the farming community is grappling with multiple problems that make agriculture a challenging endeavour, the draft Seeds Bill proposed by the Union Agriculture Ministry has raised fresh concerns. The Centre must address these apprehensions before moving ahead with the legislation aimed at overhauling the regulations governing the seeds sector and replacing the Seeds Act, 1966, and the Seed Control Order, 1983. The proposed legislation gives the government powers to regulate seed prices in specific cases and imposes penalties on those selling fake or substandard seeds. While the government maintains that the proposed law will help improve the supply of quality seeds, curb counterfeits and offer greater protection to farmers, there are growing fears that it will increase the control of private and multinational companies over the seed market. The registration requirements could restrict farmers' traditional practice of saving and exchanging seeds. The compensation provisions are difficult to enforce and still favour private companies. There is also concern that the proposed regulation may indirectly increase seed prices, making farmers more dependent on commercial suppliers rather than their own seed systems. The seed market, over the years, has become increasingly complex, leading to financial losses caused by substandard products. The proposed legislation has introduced several regulatory changes: All seed varieties will require registration; they must undergo Value for Cultivation and Use (VCU) testing across multiple locations; seed dealers and distributors must obtain a state-issued registration certificate to sell, import or export seeds; every seed container must carry a QR code generated through the central government's Seed Traceability Portal to enable end-to-end tracking. A proposed Central Accreditation System would allow companies accredited at the national level to receive automatic recognition across all States — a measure critics say overwhelmingly benefits big corporations. A resounding feedback from the farming community is that the proposed law is better suited to seed companies and agribusinesses than to ordinary cultivators, particularly those relying on traditional, chemical-free farming. The VCU trials, critics say, favour uniform hybrid seeds typically produced by larger companies. Indigenous, diverse and climate-resilient varieties may struggle to meet the standardised criteria and could gradually disappear from formal markets. Similarly, QR codes, online submissions and continuous tracking pose challenges for small rural seed keepers with limited internet access or digital literacy. There are also fears over genetically modified or patented seeds entering India. No wonder the farmer organisations are up in arms. By enabling corporate dominance and predatory pricing of seeds, the proposed law will squeeze small and marginal farmers, increasing their cost of cultivation and making them even more vulnerable. Farmers' bodies contend that the new law introduces a highly centralised and corporatised regulatory framework that risks weakening farmer-centred protections and diluting India's legal architecture for biodiversity conservation and farmers' rights.

## Budget 2026–27: Fiscal math points to higher borrowings even as deficit glide path stays intact

**A**s Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman prepares to present the union Budget for 2026–27 on February 1, early fiscal indicators suggest that while the government is likely to stay committed to its medium-term fiscal consolidation roadmap, higher market borrowings may be unavoidable amid front-loaded spending pressures and a renewed push on capital expenditure.

The Centre's fiscal deficit stood at 62.3 per cent of the full-year budget estimate during April–November 2025–26, significantly higher than the 52.5 per cent recorded in the same period last year. More strikingly, the primary deficit — which excludes interest payments — has already reached 78.9 per cent of the annual target, nearly double the 41.8 per cent utilisation seen a year earlier. Economists interpret this as a signal of heavier early-year spending, particularly on infrastructure and welfare-linked outlays.

Despite the sharper pace of deficit accumulation in the current year, the government is expected to announce a fiscal deficit target of around 4.3 per cent of GDP for FY 2026–27, in line with its stated glide path towards 3 per cent by 2030–31. Officials and analysts argue that this calibrated approach balances the need for fiscal credibility with the demands of growth support.

"The glide path allows the government to consolidate without choking off investment at a time when global growth remains uneven," said a senior



economist at a public-sector bank, adding that India's macro fundamentals provide room for a gradual rather than aggressive correction.

Budget expectations remain broadly positive, underpinned by strong GDP growth, robust industrial output as reflected in recent IIP data, sustained structural reforms and improvements in the ease of doing business. The government's explicit focus on job creation, particularly through manufacturing, infrastructure and green transition projects, is also expected to shape expenditure priorities.

Higher nominal GDP growth is likely to help contain the deficit ratio even if absolute borrowing rises, offering the finance minister some flexibility on the fiscal arithmetic.

However, a continued emphasis on capital expenditure, which has been the backbone of the government's growth strategy, is expected to translate into higher gross market borrowings in FY 2026–27.

While official borrowing numbers will be known only on Budget day, analysts estimate that gross market borrowings could rise modestly from the current year, reflecting higher

capex allocations, rollover of existing debt and limited scope for large non-debt capital receipts. Net market borrowings, too, are expected to remain elevated, even as the government seeks to smooth maturities and extend the duration of its debt.

Bond market participants are watching closely for signals on the borrowing calendar and the Centre's reliance on short- versus long-tenure securities. A higher-than-expected borrowing programme could exert upward pressure on yields, though this may be partially offset by strong demand from domestic institutions and the Reserve Bank of India's liquidity

management.

The key challenge for the Budget will be to reconcile fiscal discipline with growth imperatives. With revenue buoyancy expected from stable tax collections and improved compliance, the government may aim to protect capital even if it means tolerating slightly higher borrowing in the near term.

As one former finance ministry official put it, "The test of Budget 2026–27 will not be the headline deficit number alone, but whether the quality of spending continues to improve while keeping the consolidation story credible."

## Nicolas Maduro's visits from Sai Baba 'darshan' to fiery JNU address

**A**s Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro faces trial in the United States following his dramatic capture in Operation Absolute Resolve on January 3, a lesser-known chapter of his connections emerges from India's

The Jawaharlal Nehru Institute (JNU), known for its vibrant political discourse, played host to both leaders. In 2005, Chávez addressed thousands despite rainy weather, promoting socialist ideals and stronger bilateral

relations.

A decade later, in November 2015, Maduro delivered a fiery speech attacking US imperialism while praising shared values between Venezuela and India, met with chants of revolutionary slogans.

These visits underscored a period of close affinity, further

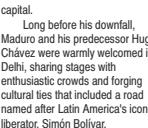
symbolized by Simón Bolívar Marg in Chanakyapuri — named in 2005 during Chávez's trip — located near diplomatic enclaves and ironically close to the American Embassy.

Maduro's personal links extended beyond politics: in 2005, as Foreign Minister, he and his wife Cilia Flores made a spiritual pilgrimage to Puttaparthi to meet Sathya Sai Baba, whom he later called his guru.

Today, as Maduro sits in US custody on serious charges, these echoes of camaraderie between Delhi and Caracas highlight the shifting tides of international relations.

Earlier, Nicolás Maduro visited India in 2005 and 2012 as Foreign Minister. He first came to India with his wife Cilia Flores. It is said that the main purpose of that visit was spiritual. They went directly from the capital to Puttaparthi in Andhra Pradesh to meet Sathya Sai Baba.

Photos of him with Sathya Sai Baba can be seen by searching on Google.



capital.

Long before his downfall, Maduro and his predecessor Hugo Chávez were warmly welcomed in Delhi, sharing stages with enthusiastic crowds and forging cultural ties that included a road named after Latin America's iconic liberator, Simón Bolívar.

## Jamaat alleges unfair election conditions in Bangladesh

**B**angladesh Jamaat-e-Islami on Monday said that the conditions for a free, fair, and impartial election have "not yet been established in the country," and accused the government of showing bias toward a particular political party, Dhaka Tribune reported. The remarks were made during a meeting of the party's Central Executive

reports from various areas indicate government officials are allegedly working in favour of a specific political party. It also noted that political leaders and activists continue to face attacks and killings in broad daylight across several regions. The council highlighted that fascism had been removed after a 16-year struggle and warned that the new Bangladesh — won through the sacrifices of about 1,500 martyrs and over 30,000 people injured or permanently disabled — must not fall prey to any conspiracy or political plot.

Jamaat-e-Islami called on the Election Commission, election officials, and law enforcement authorities to act with full neutrality. The party also urged the government to maintain law and order to ensure a genuinely free, fair, and impartial election, Dhaka Tribune reported. Meanwhile, Bangladesh on Monday noted with concern the recent developments

in Venezuela, as the situation in the South American country continues to draw international attention. These remarks come amid dramatic developments in Venezuela following a US military operation that resulted in the capture of deposed dictator Nicolás Maduro on Saturday. In a press release, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Bangladesh stated, "Bangladesh notes with concern the recent developments in Venezuela."

Council at its Moghbazar headquarters in Dhaka held on Monday, which was chaired by party Ameer Dr Shafiqur Rahaman. Other senior leaders, including the Nayeb-e-meer and the secretary general, attended the session, according to Dhaka Tribune.

The council reviewed the political environment ahead of the upcoming referendum and the 13th National Parliamentary Election. The party claimed that

Understandably, Beijing is content with such a limited response for there is little force behind their words of condemnation. The USA belatedly issued a statement too, saying, "China's military activities and rhetoric toward Taiwan and others in the region increase tensions unnecessarily. We urge Beijing to exercise restraint, cease its military pressure against Taiwan, and instead engage in meaningful dialog. The United States supports peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait and opposes unilateral changes to the status quo, including by force or coercion." On the other hand, China claimed "several dozen" countries had expressed support for its actions, mentioning Russia, Cuba, Serbia, Venezuela, Thailand and Pakistan by name.

Li Jian said, "They noted in particular, Taiwan is an inalienable part of China's territory, the Taiwan

## China flexes its military muscles around Taiwan



over Taiwan, it won't be because of

"fear of Taiwan declaring

"independence" or "by accident"

"or by miscalculation".

It will start because China (Xi

Jinping) wants a war." As Admiral

Samuel Paparo, commander of the US Indo-Pacific Command, testified last year, "These are not just exercises — they are dress rehearsals for forced unification." Alarmingly, the world is

standing by as China acts like this.

A few concerned nations issued

statements following the exercise — including Australia, the European Union, France, Germany, Japan, New Zealand and the UK.

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2025 exercise delineated seven

training and blocks ringing Taiwan,

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