



OUR VIEW



Gig work: This model is fine but must pay more

An online debate sparked by a gig delivery strike yielded more heat than light. Gig platforms aren't a problem but could ease one if they increase wages and adhere to India's labour codes

There is no contradiction between paying gig workers a living wage and the claim that gig work provides job opportunities to many who would otherwise struggle to earn anything. Delivery workers for food delivery and quick-commerce platforms like Zomato, Swiggy, Zepto and Blinkit went on strike recently, demanding better wages and work conditions. This has triggered a bizarre debate online, as if asking for better wages amounts to socialism and charges of gig worker exploitation go against entrepreneurship. The obvious gainers from low-paid gig work are consumers who get doorstep deliveries both extra-cheap and ultra-fast. Entrepreneurs running platforms that give millions of people work who may be left jobless without this option deserve appreciation; the profits they earn are indeed a reward for risk-taking. However, this does not mean that concerns raised about the work conditions of gig workers, their earnings and lack of social security or occupational safety lack merit.

What platforms pay their delivery agents is a pass-through. In other words, their earnings do not come from squeezing riders. If all companies had to pay, say, 5% more than what they do now, consumers would simply have to shell out that much more. This would not dent platform margins on those deliveries. Such a payout hike would need all platforms to pay 5% extra, without any player trying to grab orders by offering order placers a cheaper deal. The Labour Codes recently notified by the Centre could make the gig debate redundant. If implemented uniformly in a clearly defined market—urban spaces, for example, where wages need to track higher living costs—these codes

can address the expectations of workers without harming the viability of businesses that employ their services. An old demand of gig workers that is not justified is their call to classify them as employees. Gig work is a new kind of job that leaves workers free not to toil when they so choose. This freedom is valuable even if wages are low. What regulation should do is ensure realistic delivery timelines, given the distances to be covered and traffic conditions, and insist that riders get insurance and social security benefits from the platform fees paid by customers. This won't threaten the model.

The term 'exploitation' is subject to much confusion. In a technical sense, if one defines exploitation as the worker not being able to appropriate the entirety of the value generated by his or her effort at the workplace, workers will always be 'exploited,' however well they might be compensated. Yet, for a country to prosper and generate jobs, a private enterprise must get a return on its capital and entrepreneurs should be rewarded for entrepreneurship, which involves ideas, initiative, management skill and big money put at stake. The question is whether workers are paid wages that are fair or not. Market rivalry for workers can drive up wages. But if this mechanism fails, as in a monopsony situation (one employer or a cartelized lot), then regulation must step in. In general, better-paid workers tend to produce more, which serves employers well. Acting in aggregate, higher wages could also raise consumption in aid of the economy. Subsistence earnings depress demand, investment and growth. India's delivery gig model is not broken, but still needs a fix. A mix of Labour Code adherence and collective rider assertion could reset our gig sector to the benefit of all.

MY VIEW | MODERN TIMES

Let us pause to reflect on all that's good about our world

MANU JOSEPH



is a journalist, novelist, and the creator of the Netflix series, 'Decoupled'

As this is my first column of the new year, I thought I would do something challenging—write what is good about the modern world. Here are a few things:

Billionaires versus death: Billionaires do not have the heart to leave the party of life. That is where they become extremely useful to us. They are pouring billions into medical research that they will have no choice but to share with all of us someday. Their greed could help us live longer.

The superrich have been directing private capital towards curing ageing, which they consider a disease, and also other diseases no one disputes are diseases. Even though Bill Gates spends most of his philanthropic billions on the diseases that rage among the poor, he also spends sizeable amounts on finding a cure for neurodegeneration, like Alzheimer's research. Recently, the American Food and Drug Administration cleared a blood test for early detection of Alzheimer's. This has excited Gates. He usually

knows more than what he shares in his periodical releases. If his public optimism is any indication, we might very soon be able to prevent diseases that harm the brain. Jeff Bezos, too, is funding research on ways to reverse cellular ageing, which would simultaneously solve cancer, cardiovascular disease and neurodegeneration. Mark Zuckerberg and his wife Priscilla Chan have pledged billions to the radical goal of curing all disease by the end of the century. They are among the superrich of America who believe that if they can survive the next few decades, somehow push their lives another half a century, the future of science will further prolong it for them, and further advances may further this. Some scientists claim that the future human might be able to live hundreds of years. Even if that is not true, there is no doubt that the billionaire hope of enjoying much longer lives could deliver extraordinary medical breakthroughs.

Among the big disappointments are Elon Musk's ventures, which tend to be a bit melodramatic as though they are inspired by juvenile science fiction. His neural link might help those afflicted by paralysis and blindness, but appears to be chiefly a gamble by one man to attain eternal life by downloading his brain to a machine. His billions

would be better spent on stuff that I am interested in, with my brain in my own vat.

The world is still a peaceful place: An affliction of Western anthropologists is that they appear to be constantly trying to find out what humans are "meant to do." Always, what we are meant to do, according to them, is very different from whatever it is that we are doing right now. For some reason, "picking berries" comes up often; we are all meant to be picking berries, they say, or be doing something just as tame. But somehow, modern life interfered with this safe and pleasant task.

I look at the matter a bit differently, even though I agree that humans tend towards peaceful activities. I feel that the present world of relative calm is not in spite of human nature. Instead, it overwhelmingly reflects what people want. For, what can be greater evidence of our intentions than what billions of people do with their lives, including the 100 billion or so who are dead. It appears that what most people want to do is live peace-

fully with a tight group of people. And if they are poor, escape the hard labour of agriculture and migrate to cities but retain their village inside them. This might seem naive in a world where war is raging as you read this. But war is big news precisely because most of the world tends towards peace. Also, it is the peaceful nature of a majority that gives some violent people, especially those who can tell a good story, a political advantage. It is as though they have a rare talent. But they are usually defeated by another set of brutal people who are promoted by a world that tends towards peace.

We live in an age where practicality has beaten ideals in many parts of the world. But that, too, is a good sign. Everyone can now see how ugly a world without ideals is, how unremarkable and unsafe. This might be the peak of practicality and it may be time for the world to swing back towards ideals.

How Trump may create a better world: We tend to think of illegal migration to America as an activity of the poor. There has to be

some truth in it, but if you consider the Indian stories, those who were put in jumpsuits and flown back to India in chains, many of them claimed to have paid tens of lakhs of rupees to agents to smuggle them into the US. That is not the sort of activity the poor can afford. At least one part of illegal migration to the US appeared to be a middle-class activity. US President Donald Trump has put an end to it by instilling fear. He has also made it difficult for the Indian upper class to legally emigrate or work there. All this has made very expensive one of the great Indian dreams, which is to escape India. As a consequence, a new generation of upper class and middle-class Indians might be more invested in improving India the way that previous generations were not. This cannot be just an Indian phenomenon. The economic and social elite of several Asian countries used to escape to the US and practice long-distance nationalism. Now they have an opportunity to be patriotic on the soil they claim to love.

Every advanced nation was built by its elite, while most developing nations have not enjoyed the fervour of true upper class nation-building, the type India witnessed right after independence. Now, that can happen. Or should happen.

THEIR VIEW

The US action in Venezuela sets a precedent the world will regret

It may embolden an eastern power like China to forcefully take over Taiwan on a similar argument



DEEPAKSU MOHAN

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On 3 January, the US carried out airstrikes on Caracas in the backdrop of heightened tensions in the Caribbean and its recent interdictions of vessels alleged to be carrying narcotics in Venezuelan waters. The White House framed this operation as a necessary move to dismantle narco-terrorist efforts and halt weapons being sold to anti-US forces. This large-scale operation included the 'capture' of Venezuela's leader Nicolás Maduro and there is enough to suggest that its aims were wider than claimed.

US President Donald Trump claimed Caracas has been emptying Venezuelan prisons and mental wards into the US, a narrative criticized as weak justification for the use of force. Maduro's capture indicates an attempt at regime change, consistent with a revamped US national security strategy that treats American primacy in the Western Hemisphere as non-negotiable. Venezuela's closeness with the Kremlin, which includes hosting Russian military facilities in violation of the Monroe Doctrine under its left-leaning government, thus appears to have been a key trigger for US action.

The White House has stated that it seeks to oversee a "safe, orderly and judicious" transition of power in Venezuela, signalling continued US involvement in its political future. That Venezuela's vast oil reserves may be in play as a factor is clear too. This may offer the

US strategic gains, but carries heavy geopolitical and economic risks.

The operation reveals a broader geo-economic strategy for the region that is unfolding against the backdrop of Maduro's sustained refusal to reopen large-scale oil dealings with US corporations. Venezuela's intrinsic value in the global energy market has led to stiff US sanctions in the past that impacted India's hydrocarbon partnerships there. The latest US actions jeopardize ONGC Videsh Ltd's \$200 million San Cristobal and Carabobo investments; dividends and crude-oil supply had been disrupted before, but now the future of these appears to hang in the air. US business involvement and extraction activity in Venezuela is negligible, while China has emerged as its principal importer of crude oil. Even as the US administration urged renewed engagement, American oil firms reportedly stayed away amid political volatility in Caracas. This may have made regime change to install a US-friendly government an appealing idea in US geo-strategic circles.

Legally speaking, the US strike on Caracas sits on uncertain ground. International law prohibits the use of force against another state's territory unless authorized by the UN Security Council, or in self-defence against armed attack. Drug trafficking does not meet that threshold under established standards of international jurisprudence.

Analysts warn that Washington has risked not just an erosion of the rule of law in world affairs, but may have also violated customary international law by compromising Venezuelan sovereignty, and if the airstrikes that accompanied the US capture of Maduro are found to have caused civilian harm, allegations of war crimes under international humanitarian law could be levelled.

Framing warfare as global policing is not unusual of the US, but unilateral military power running roughshod over international principles could have larger implications. It could normalize coercive intervention by a hegemonic

force in a way that reshapes global expectations and lowers the cost of external aggression by stronger nations on smaller countries.

Such a global order could embolden China, for example, to encircle Taiwan, on the bet that framing its territorial ambition as a routine enforcement of its rights will yield condemnation without any real deterrence. Beijing's showed its approach with its 'Justice Mission 2025' military drills conducted at the fag end of 2025. These war games were the largest since 2022 by geographical scope. Several exercise zones extended into areas within 12 nautical miles of Taiwan's coast, marking a significant escalation. The timing and framing of these drills were deliberate.

Justice Mission 2025 followed within days of Washington's approval of a record \$11.1 billion arms package for Taiwan and was accompanied by Beijing's sanctions on 30 US defence firms and executives. It was a coordinated military-economic response to what Chinese authorities characterized as foreign interference in China's internal affairs. China's ministry of foreign affairs described the drills as a "punitive and deterrent action" against Taiwan's forces of independence and their external supporters. Beijing thus sought to brand its escalation of a territorial tension as a matter of its own sovereignty.

As Venezuela's sovereignty is violated with apparent impunity to safeguard Washington's perceived strategic vulnerabilities arising from Russia's presence in the region, the future looks bleak for any multilateral peace arrangement to be institutionalized. Worse, it could encourage aggression in the Eastern hemisphere. After all, Beijing views Taiwan's reunification as a historical inevitability rather than policy choice. A global environment of unchecked unilateralism and selective law enforcement could give us a more dangerous world than before.

Saksham Raj and Aditi Lazarus contributed to this article.

JUST A THOUGHT

Now we have a gig economy where many people are holding down several jobs at once. The whole concept of a 40-hour week makes people under 30 laugh.

KATRINA ONSTAD

10 YEARS AGO





MY VIEW | ECONOMIC GRAVITY

Let us deploy customs reform as a strategic tool for trade success

As world trade fragments, India's response should include five specific measures that could raise our global competitiveness

**PRACHI MISHRA & VIJAY SINGH CHAUHAN**

are, respectively, head and senior fellow, Ashoka University Isaac Centre for Public Policy

The multilateral trade order is unravelling. The US has imposed country- and product-specific tariffs unilaterally, leveraging them to extract deals from several countries. China has retaliated with export controls on critical minerals. These moves undermine the basic principles of cooperative global commerce, leaving countries like India to prioritize securing their national interests. Against this backdrop, the Union finance minister's announcement of a comprehensive customs overhaul comes at a critical moment. These reforms will offer India an opportunity not merely to shield itself from trade conflicts, but capture a larger share of global exports and integrate more deeply into global supply chains. Success, however, will require a fundamental restructuring of how goods flow across India's borders.

The reforms must recognize and build upon India's expanding web of trade agreements with Japan, Korea, ASEAN, Australia, the UAE, European Free Trade Association and the UK, even as negotiations with the EU are underway. But signing agreements is only the first crucial step. The real challenge lies in making these partnerships work for Indian exporters through streamlined customs procedures and reduced friction at the border.

At the heart of meaningful reform lies a dual focus on tariffs and the often-overlooked non-tariff barriers that quietly strangle trade. Our exporters struggle to comply with complex regulations in destination markets, while import processes at home remain cumbersome. The path forward requires simplifying India's tariff structure into three tiers: the lowest rates for raw materials, moderate rates for intermediate goods and higher rates for finished products. This rationalization should reduce our applied weighted average tariff rates from current levels of more than 5% to those comparable with competing economies: 1-2% for Vietnam, China and Indonesia. The inverted duty structure that penalizes domestic manufacturers when import duties on finished goods are lower than those on inputs must be eliminated, such as through the availability of streamlined Import of Goods at Concessional Rate of Duty Rules.

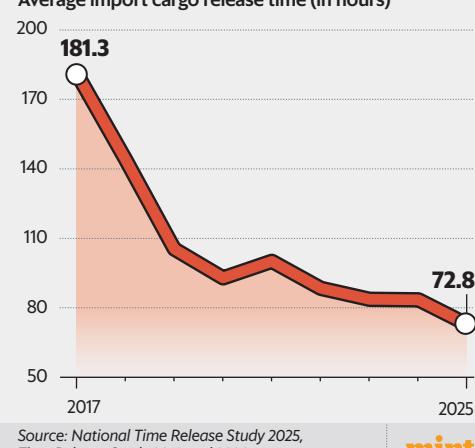
Capital goods present a particular case for tariff reform. Various export promotion schemes already permit duty-free imports of machinery. The Manufacturing and Other Operations in Bonded Warehouse (MOOWR) scheme extends this benefit even to domestic production. This practice essentially reveals a policy of openness toward duty-free capital goods' imports, subject to checks and balances under the scheme. Direct tariff reduction on capital goods for select sectors, from the current levels of 7.5% for most goods to 0% would be more straightforward and better serve the goal of encouraging investment while



Regulatory reforms make a difference

India has reduced how long it takes for import cargo to be released but cargo release times still remain below globally competitive levels.

Average import cargo release time (in hours)



protecting domestic manufacturers through careful sectoral targeting.

Beyond tariffs, India's reforms must tackle the practical barriers that inflate costs and create uncertainty for traders. India has made impressive strides in reducing cargo release times and improving logistics. Yet, there is significant room for improvement. Five specific interventions could transform the trading environment:

The first challenge traders face is knowing what regulations apply. Goods routinely arrive at ports only to be detained because importers lack clear information about compliance requirements, particularly those arising from domestic regulations including quality control orders (QCOs). This defeats the purpose of processing shipments before arrival, a cornerstone of modern trade facilitation. The solution already exists in the Customs Act's Section 11(3); introduced in 2018, it authorizes the creation of a single repository for all regulatory requirements regardless of which ministry issues them. This provision must be implemented.

Even with simplified tariffs and centralized information, traders will encounter ambiguities, particularly around rules-of-origin under India's growing list of free trade agreements. Expanding the scope of Customs Advance Rulings under Section 28-H(2) of the Customs Act would allow busi-

nesses to seek binding clarification on how domestic regulations will apply to them at the border. This will require establishing mechanisms for coordination between the customs advance rulings authority and the relevant ministries to provide traders certainty.

Modern global supply chains increasingly involve transactions between related corporate entities. The current system of advance scrutiny by the Special Valuation Branch to determine proper duty values for such transactions often sees cases drag on for years without resolution, creating planning nightmares for businesses. This advance review process should be replaced with post-clearance audits that verify compliance after goods have moved, incorporating statutory time limits to prevent indefinite uncertainty.

Trade facilitation should also embrace a more sophisticated, entity-based approach centred on the globally recognized Authorized Economic Operator programme, which certifies reliable traders who meet stringent criteria. These certified operators deserve greater trust from customs officials in the field. The benefits should expand to include mutual recognition under free trade agreements, self-licensing for export permits (including sensitive technologies) and exemption from routine examinations at ports. Trust, once earned through rigorous vetting, should translate to tangible advantages.

Finally, while facilitating legitimate trade, customs must maintain robust compliance mechanisms. The current risk management system needs refinement to reduce both false positives that delay compliant shipments and false negatives that miss genuine violations. This requires a more nuanced categorization of non-compliance based on its nature, likely intent and economic impact. Different categories of violations should trigger different responses, from education and mediation to enforcement action, with clear processes for dispute resolution. Transparency in how these determinations are made will increase efficiency and build confidence in the system's fairness.

As global trade fragments into competing blocs and bilateral deals, India's customs system must evolve into a strategic policy instrument. The proposed reforms represent an opportunity to position India as an agile competitor ready to seize opportunities in a reordered global economy. These changes must be implemented with the urgency and ambition that this moment demands.

Shubhangi Sahai contributed to the article. These are the authors' personal views.

ADITYA SINHA



writes on macroeconomic and geopolitical issues.

India has 54 million pending cases, 47 million in district courts, 6.3 million in high courts and nearly 90,000 in the Supreme Court, with just 25,000 judges to handle them. This translates to barely 21 judges per million people, far below the Law Commission's recommended 50 and well short of the US (107) and UK (51). Vacancies hover around 30% in many high courts and case disposal rates remain sluggish, averaging 1,350 cases per judge annually, versus over 2,000 in OECD jurisdictions. Each adjournment adds several months to case duration: over 18 million cases are more than three years old and 5 million exceed a decade. Judicial inefficiency has thus become both a governance and economic problem, conservatively estimated by Niti Aayog to shave 1.5% off GDP annually through delayed contract enforcement, locked capital and investor uncertainty.

Behind this inefficiency lies an even deeper structural distortion: the state itself. The Union government, public sector

undertakings (PSUs), state governments, state PSUs and local bodies together account for nearly half of all litigation nationwide. At the Union level, according to Legal Information Management and Briefing System (LIMBS), the finance ministry alone is party to nearly 200,000 pending cases, 98,544 before tribunals, 83,552 in high courts and 12,589 in the Supreme Court, representing roughly 13% of the top court's burden. Tax and revenue disputes dominate, but the government's litigation footprint extends across civil contracts, land acquisition and service matters. Although monetary thresholds for appeals were raised in 2022 (to ₹1 crore for high courts and ₹2 crore for the Supreme Court), pendency reduction has been marginal, reflecting a culture of litigation as bureaucratic insurance rather than legal necessity.

This culture stems from several institutionalized incentives that make 'default litigation' the path of least resistance. Audit and vigilance frameworks indirectly treat unappealed losses as negligence; accounting codes of the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) require every audit objection to be 'settled' or 'explained,' and an appeal offers safe harbour from being questioned, while a liberal appellate framework allows

virtually automatic filing. Despite calls for a binding national litigation policy, successive governments have balked. Instead, we now have a 'Directive for Efficient and Effective Management of Litigation' (April 2025), which introduces nodal officers, legal cells and MIS dashboards, but lacks statutory teeth, performance-linked disincentives or real-time data integrity. LIMBS itself remains under-updated and fails to track reasons for appeal.

Here is a five-point agenda for inclusion in a national litigation policy. *First*, India must move away from its open-ended appeal culture and adopt a 'leave-to-litigate' system that acts as a regulatory filter. Departments should not be permitted to file more than one automatic appeal. Any second or higher appeal must obtain prior clearance from an empowered group of secretaries (EGoS) chaired by the attorney general that should apply a three-factor test of (a) public interest, or whether the case impacts governance or citizens beyond the

immediate dispute; (b) legal novelty, or whether it raises a new or unsettled question of law; and (c) its probability of success, or whether an appeal has reasonable merit.

All clearances, refusals and reasons for decisions should be published quarterly to promote transparency and accountability,

making higher litigation a privilege of merit rather than routine practice.

Second, litigation must be treated as an information system. A new national legal information grid should integrate existing platforms such as LIMBS, the National Judicial Datagrid, e-courts, digital platforms, etc., to enable real-time tracking of every case involving a government entity. Reasons for appeal, stages of proceedings, adjournments, costs

incurred and success rates should be visible. AI-based analytics could identify departments that repeatedly lose on the same issue, generate predictive 'win-loss' probabilities and flag cases ripe for settlement.

Third, to reduce unnecessary appeals driven by audit or vigilance fear, we need a

clear pre-EGoS litigation decision protocol. Only after a ministry's legal advisor advises litigation should it be sent to the EGoS. Officers who support decisions in writing, with the legal merit, financial implications, public interest and success likelihood of a case duly noted, should receive safe-harbour protection if it is vetted by the legal advisor.

Fourth, every ministry and PSU must have an annual litigation budget cap. Legal spending should be treated as a burden. If a department exceeds its cap or loses a case where an appeal was discouraged, expenses should be charged to its own account head. Conversely, ministries that achieve measurable reductions in pendency or successful settlements could get incentives.

Fifth, transparency deters wasteful litigation. The law ministry should set up a public litigation dashboard, a citizen-friendly version of LIMBS, covering every ministry and department. It should publish quarterly data on pending cases, average case duration and adjournment frequency, apart from the success rate and costs. It should be easy for the public to access and understand.

The state should stop being the country's most compulsive litigant. Justice will be more efficient once the government learns to rest its case.

THEIR VIEW

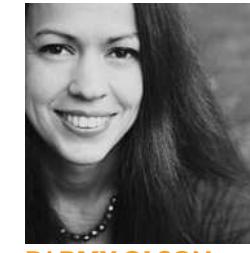
Litigation overload: It's time for the state to rest its case

Here are some measures that could stop the government from being a compulsive litigator

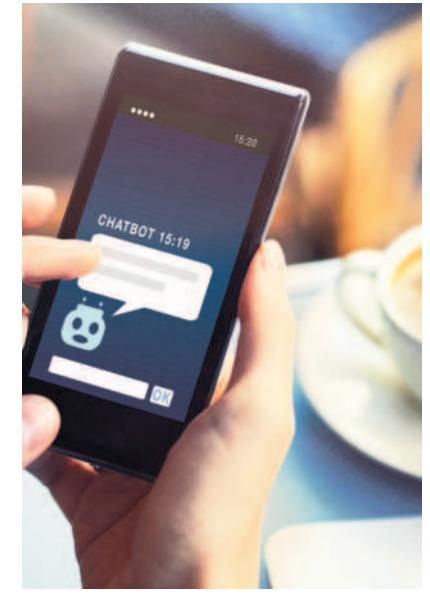
MINT CURATOR

People in relationships with AI chatbots may need some help

They should refine their chatbot settings and engage humans more

**PARMY OLSON**

is a Bloomberg Opinion columnist covering technology.



Many chatbot users have begun to think of these AI tools as friends

ISTOCKPHOTO

like consultancy jargon but contains a tangible step: changing how ChatGPT talks to you. She recommends entering the settings of a chatbot and altering the system prompt to reshape future interactions.

For all our fears of AI, the most popular new tools are more customizable than social media ever was. You can't tell TikTok to show you fewer videos of political rallies or obnoxious pranks, but you can go into the 'Custom Instructions' feature of ChatGPT to tell it exactly how you want it to respond. Succinct, professional language that cuts out the bootlicking is a good start. Make your intentions for AI clearer and you're less likely to be lured into feedback loops of validation that lead you to think your mediocre ideas are fantastic, or worse.

The

second part doesn't involve AI at all but rather making a greater effort to connect with real-life humans, building your "social muscles" as if going to a gym.

One of Miller's clients had a long commute, which he would spend talking to ChatGPT on voice mode. When she suggested making a list of people in his life that he could call instead, he didn't think anyone would want to hear from him.

"If they called you, how would you feel?" she asked.

"I would feel good," he admitted.

Even the innocuous reasons people turn to chatbots can weaken those muscles, in particular asking AI for advice, one of the top use cases for ChatGPT.

The act of seeking advice isn't just an information exchange but a relationship builder too, requiring vulnerability on the part of the initiator.

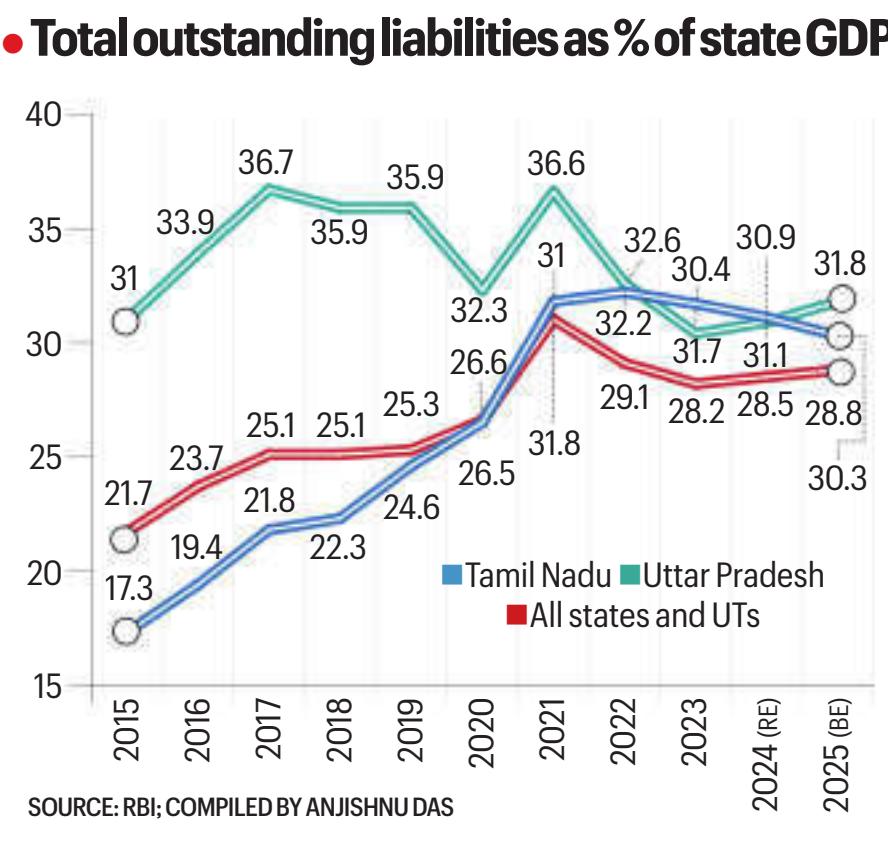
Doing that with technology means that over time, people resist the basic social exchanges that are needed to make deeper connections. "You can't just pop into a sensitive conversation with a partner or family member if you don't practice being vulnerable [with them] in more low-stakes ways," Miller says.

As chatbots become a helpful confidant for millions, people should take advantage of their ability to take greater control. It makes sense to configure ChatGPT to be direct and seek advice from real people rather than an AI model that will validate ideas. The future would look far more bland otherwise.

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• POLITICAL ECONOMY

TN vs UP debt: The politics and fiscal arithmetic behind debate



Arun Janardhanan
Chennai, January 4

ON DECEMBER 28, Praveen Chakravarty, the head of the Congress' data analytics wing, described Tamil Nadu's debt position as "alarming", citing its absolute outstanding liabilities, rising interest burden and debt-to-GSDP ratio. His post on X sparked a debate across political circles — not just over the fiscal arithmetic, but also because of who was saying this, and when.

The remarks by Chakravarty, who also heads the All India Professionals' Congress, come at a time when the Congress is beginning its poll negotiations with the DMK, and as it quietly assesses its long-term relevance in the state.

Understanding the numbers

In his post on X, Chakravarty said Tamil Nadu has the highest outstanding debt of all states. He also posted that while Uttar Pradesh had more than double the debt of Tamil Nadu in 2010, TN now had higher debt than UP. "TN's interest burden (%) is 3rd highest after PB & HR... TN's debt/gdp is still much higher than pre-covid levels," he posted.

Experts disagree with Chakravarty's view about the Tamil Nadu economy, which is one of the fastest growing in the country. The state has a strong manufacturing base, a diversified services sector, and a high level of urbanisation — factors that allow an economy to carry and service debt.

One expert, Madras Institute of Development Studies Director M Suresh Babu, told *The Indian Express* that Tamil Nadu's debt needs to be viewed alongside its growth trajectory. "Absolute figures can be misleading. What matters is not the size of the economy or debt in isolation, but how those numbers relate to underlying capacity," he said.

Babu, also a former adviser to the PM's Economic Advisory Council, pointed out that in fiscal analysis, "what matters is the denominator — whether we are looking at per capita income or debt as a share of GDP. When that context is removed, one number gets highlighted and projected as alarming".

"Globally, many advanced economies carry high levels of debt. What determines sustainability is not the number itself, but whether that debt is productive — whether it supports growth and generates the capacity to repay," he said.

Babu also noted that Tamil Nadu has, in recent years, recorded one of the fastest growth rates among Indian states. "The economy is expanding, and the capacity to service debt is embedded in that growth," he said.

The economist also underlined structural constraints facing states. "Fiscal space for states is shrinking across India. At the same time, transfers from the Centre are not rising proportionately, even for better-performing states. Within those limits, Tamil Nadu has largely stayed within Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management norms."

The politics behind the numbers

Yet, the controversy was never purely economic. It unfolded against the backdrop of internal tensions within the Congress, especially over its longstanding alliance with the DMK. Half-a-dozen senior Congress leaders who spoke to *The Indian Express* admit that a section has grown restless with its subordinate role. The party governed Tamil Nadu from Independence till 1967. Ever since, the rule has oscillated between the Dravidian parties.

The 2026 Assembly election has intensified this anxiety. "Certain leaders who are worried about their own irrelevance in DMK are using this to disrupt the alliance with DMK," said a senior leader. In recent weeks, Chakravarty's comments — and his recent meeting with actor-politician Vijay — were read as more than personal opinions. To many in the party, they appeared to signal a willingness to explore alternative political alignments.

While Chakravarty insisted the interaction was informal, senior leaders within the Tamil Nadu Congress were unsettled. "It creates confusion," one leader said.

The growing unease prompted an intervention from one of the party's most seasoned figures. Former finance minister P Chidambaram publicly reaffirmed the Congress's commitment to the DMK-led alliance, making it clear that strategic decisions would not be shaped by individual statements. About Chakravarty's tweet, Chidambaram said government data from December shows Tamil Nadu registering the highest nominal growth in the country.

The state Congress unit appears torn between loyalty to a powerful ally and fear of irrelevance. According to senior Congress sources, a faction within the party believes it no longer benefits from remaining tethered to the DMK and has begun pressing Rahul Gandhi to explore an alternative alignment, even with actor-turned-politician Vijay. This group, which includes Chakravarty, Manickam Tagore and Tamil Nadu Congress Legislature Party leader S Rajesh Kumar, is learnt to be behind almost all major confrontational demands raised with DMK.

A senior state Congress leader alleged that this group also enjoys the backing of senior central leader K C Venugopal, who is himself emerging as one of the three leading Chief Ministerial contenders within Congress party in Kerala as the state heads toward elections. The group hopes that an alliance with Vijay would also help them win in Kerala, a state where the actor has a huge fanbase.

"K C Venugopal shares the feeling that a Vijay-led formation could deliver greater political leverage. They argue that an alliance with TVK could potentially offer Congress up to 50 seats (in Tamil Nadu), even if the party's actual winning chances remain uncertain," this leader said.

A senior DMK leader said the developments have unsettled the party, even as the Congress leadership moves cautiously.

• VENEZUELA CRISIS

America's return to interventionism

Since last year, Trump has asserted force across the globe. The Venezuela operation, with an eye on oil, is his most alarming yet



ANIL SASI

"IF YOU break it, you own it." The words of former US Secretary of State Colin Powell, one of the architects of the Iraq War, would come to mind after the audacious capture of Venezuela's President Nicolás Maduro by America's elite Delta Forces on Saturday.

Trump, a major critic of the US invasion of Iraq and someone who promised to be a peacemaker when he took office a year ago, has upended that commitment.

At a briefing on Sunday, the President justified the operation as being in line with an over 200-year-old foreign policy agenda, the Monroe Doctrine, which declared the western hemisphere to be under US influence.

This agenda, which Trump has now rebranded as the "Don-roe Doctrine", had for years been relegated to the foreign policy sidelines. Trump's move, which he first signalled in the new US security strategy last month, marks a worrying reassertion of the doctrine. But it also talishes with his actions over the past year, when the US demonstrated increasing willingness to use military force around the globe.

Just in the last week, Trump ordered airstrikes on Syria and Nigeria. He threatened an intervention in Iran, after widespread demonstrations in Tehran. In 2025, Trump targeted nuclear facilities in Iran, attacked drug-trafficking boats in the Caribbean, the Houthis in Yemen, militants in Somalia and Islamic groups in Iraq.

But why Venezuela?

Not a tough question to answer. Venezuela is home to the largest proven crude reserves on Earth, even though the actual oil output is minuscule. The South American country is estimated to be sitting on over 300 billion barrels worth of crude — about a fifth of the world's global reserves, according to the US Energy Information Administration — but produces only about 1 million barrels of oil per day, about 0.8% of global crude production (see chart in accompanying story). The American company Chevron is the only foreign oil major that has an exposure to Venezuelan crude.

Trump clearly has oil on his agenda. He said on Saturday that the US would take control of Venezuela's reserves and field American companies to invest "billions of dollars" to "refurbish" the country's oil industry.

"Venezuela has the largest oil reserves in the world. Any politician, journalist or commentator who leaves this crucial fact out of the equation of why Trump illegally invaded Venezuela is willingly distorting the truth. Just call it what it is. Straight up theft," Yousef Kobo, founder of Antwerp-based training and advocacy body ASATT-EU, said in a post. Analysts also pointed to Trump's action as a means of diverting attention from the Epstein Files.

The Monroe Doctrine

Named after former President James Monroe in 1823, this doctrine is one of the most consequential American foreign policy agendas of the last century. It laid out the American opposition to new or expanding European involvement in the Americas after centuries of colonial rule. Progressively, the US extended this tenet to consider South and Central America a strategic backyard that should be under the sphere of American influence. This went on to become a significant element of American foreign policy.

The next few weeks will set the stage for how events unfold in Venezuela.



US President Donald Trump during a press conference at his Mar-a-Lago resort in Florida. AP

ign policy intervention in the region for decades. It was criticised for being used as an alibi to justify meddling in Latin America. Between 1898 and 1994, the US government intervened successfully to change governments in Latin America at least 41 times, ostensibly to protect its interests and counter Communism.

Recent administrations had moved away from this policy. Trump has now conclusively reversed this, building on his earlier attempts to support the current right-leaning Argentinian administration and oppose the left-wing government in Brazil.

MAGA pushback

Trump rode to power on his promise of focusing on America and ending 'forever wars', coining the slogan "Make America Great Again". But he has likely opened the door to protracted US involvement in Venezuela. He claimed a team that includes US Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Secretary of Defence Pete Hegseth would work with Venezuelans to take control of the beleaguered nation. "We are going to run the country until such time as we can do a safe, proper and judicious transition," Trump said at the conference. He did not clarify what "running the country" meant.

This could be a source of frustration for some of Trump's supporters, just like his reluctance to release the Epstein Files.

How will this end?

It's not yet clear if the US will become an occupying force or install a pliant leader in Caracas. At one point in Saturday's conference, Trump seemed to suggest Venezuela's Vice President and current interim President, Delcy Rodriguez, had agreed to help the US run the country. But Rodriguez gave a live address to the nation shortly after to denounce the US attack. The big question is whether the government that's left in Venezuela — which is everybody except Maduro — would be able to maintain its grip on power.

While the US doesn't have troops on the ground, it will be tough to organise a political transition or takeover unless that is the case. Especially if it's Venezuelan oil and other resources that Trump is after.

Then there are questions over the role of the opposition. In the Presidential elections in July last year, Maduro clung on to power for a third straight term. Observers, however, said that Edmundo Gonzalez had won the election by a wide margin.

Earlier, in June 2023, the Venezuelan government had barred the then leading candidate, María Corina Machado, from participating. Machado, who went on to win the Nobel Prize, is currently in exile, and had backed Gonzalez in the 2024 elections. It is unclear what role Machado could have going forward, especially after Trump dismissed her chances of leading the country during the press conference.

The next few weeks will set the stage for how events unfold in Venezuela.

Trump's plans to revive Venezuela oil sector will take years, cost billions



SUKALP SHARMA

OIL IS no stranger to conflict. Unsurprisingly, it has emerged as the key factor in America's capture of Venezuela's President Nicolás Maduro on Saturday.

Soon after, US President Donald Trump said Washington would take control of Caracas's oil sector and that American majors would pump in billions of dollars to revive the struggling Venezuelan oil industry and fix its broken oil infrastructure.

What he didn't say is that it will take several years of work to fix that infrastructure and boost output. And American oil companies have made no comment yet on such a long-term commitment.

Venezuela has the world's largest oil reserves, but accounts for less than 1% of global production. This is one of the reasons why experts and industry insiders don't expect a major change in prices in the near term. The market is also well-supplied and global demand is relatively subdued.

If the US does succeed in effectively controlling Venezuela's oil industry, more of its oil is likely to flow globally, potentially having a bearish impact on oil prices. But this is something to see over the long run.

The potential, and the challenge

Venezuela's oil reserves are estimated at over 300 billion barrels or a fifth of the world's proven oil reserves. But it produces only around 1 million barrels per day of crude. Global output is over 100 million bpd. Saudi Arabia is second to Venezuela in terms of proven oil reserves but is the world's largest oil exporter.

The insignificant oil production by Venezuela, despite massive potential, is a result of a combination of factors — US sanctions that constrained exports, a severe economic crisis and a lack of investment in infrastructure.

Trump now wants American oil majors to get into the game. If Trump's intentions do materialise, Venezuela could emerge as a significantly larger oil supplier. The sector could open up for foreign investments. And more supply means lower prices.

But it will take years of work for any of these things to come to pass. Companies will need to pump in billions of dollars into the ageing and ill-maintained Venezuelan oil and gas infrastructure.

What does this mean for India?

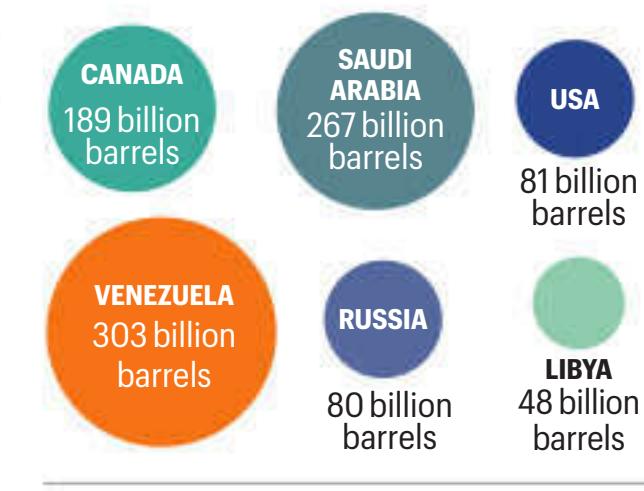
India appears to be well-shielded from any direct impact in the near term, as Indian refiners do not import Venezuelan crude. India is the world's third-largest consumer of crude oil and depends on imports to meet over 88% of its oil needs.

If the US and Venezuela's new leadership can negotiate an easing or suspension of sanctions, it could open the doors for Venezuelan oil to flow more freely in the international market, including to India.

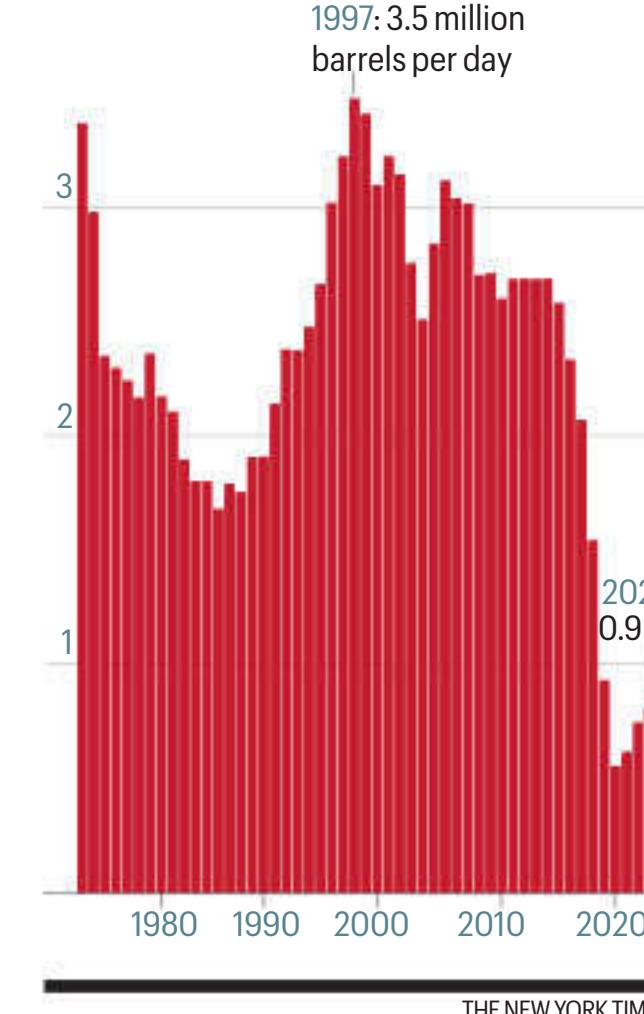
It could also pave the way for ONGC Videsh, the overseas investment arm of the state-owned Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC), to recover over \$500 million in stuck dividends from its shareholding in two Venezuelan oil and gas projects, and cre-

• LARGEST OIL RESERVES, MINUSCULE PRODUCTION

Venezuela has fifth of world's reserves...



...but yearly oil production has fallen



ate opportunities for more Indian investment in Venezuela's oil and gas sector.

ONGC wants to operate projects in Venezuela under the so-called "Chevron model" which allows foreign oil companies to operate in the country after receiving specific approvals from the US. US major Chevron was the first to operate in sanctions-hit Venezuela through this route.

India — specifically private sector refining giant Reliance Industries (RIL) — was a regular buyer of Venezuelan crude before the imposition of US sanctions on Caracas in 2019. Following the sanctions, oil imports from Venezuela stopped within a few months. As per India's official trade data, Caracas was New Delhi's fifth-largest supplier of oil in 2019, providing close to 16 million tonnes of crude to Indian refiners.

In October 2023, the US eased sanctions on Venezuela's petroleum sector for six months. This led to RIL and a few other Indian refiners restarting imports. This stopped again as the US did not extend the sanction waiver after its understanding with Caracas on the conduct of free and fair presidential elections broke down. A few months later, RIL was able to restart Venezuelan oil imports after obtaining a sanctions waiver from the US. But in the summer of 2025, the company halted oil imports from Venezuela after the Trump administration threatened higher tariffs on countries buying Venezuelan oil. No Venezuelan oil has come into India for months now.

• HEALTH

Targeted cancer treatment could be in sight, via nanobots

Rinku Ghosh
New Delhi, January 4



Dr Ambarish Ghosh, professor at IISc, was one of the winners of the 2025 Tata Transformation Prize, announced by New York Academy of Sciences and Tata Sons.

to the targeted tissue. Either the surface or the tip is coated with the drug. The bulk of the body is made with silica, which is compatible with the human body, while the magnetic material is iron, which tops the helical nanostructure, all of which are already in use in medical nanobots.

What makes the nanobot so precise in delivering targeted therapy?

The magnetic field transports the nanobot precisely to the targeted issue, after which it can best respond, based on its spe-

What are nanobots?

• Medical nanobots are microscopic robots designed to navigate biological environments, deliver drugs directly to tumors and distinguish cancerous tissue from healthy tissue.

• This platform has the potential to transform cancer care through targeted, minimally invasive therapies that reduce side effects, shorten recovery and lower costs.

cific properties that can be defined according to the

The Editorial Page

MONDAY, JANUARY 5, 2026

• WORDLY WISE
They make a desolation and call it peace.
— Gaius Cornelius Tacitus

• WEB EXCLUSIVE
Between belonging and refusal, Jammu
lives in me. — Rashid Ali
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10

The Indian EXPRESS

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RAM NATH GOENKA

◆ IN 1932 ◆

BECAUSE THE TRUTH
INVOLVES US ALL

Trump's lawless grab opens risky new chapter

FEW WILL shed a tear for Nicolas Maduro. His autocratic rule hollowed out Venezuela's institutions, crushed dissent, subverted elections and violated human rights. The pre-dawn US operation to capture and transport him to New York on charges of drug trafficking may be presented as making Venezuela a safer place but how it was carried out suggests the opposite. Indeed, the manner in which US President Donald Trump has taken out a sitting president — through an air, land and sea assault that penetrated the capital — sends a message far beyond Caracas. It tells the world that the so-called rules-based order, already frayed, exists largely as a slogan. Be it Vladimir Putin in Ukraine, or Trump himself, first in global trade and now in Venezuela, anything goes. Doesn't matter if it's illegal, lacking Congressional authorisation at home or UN Security Council sanction abroad.

That Washington was moving against Maduro was evident for months. Trump repeatedly claimed, on thin evidence, that the Venezuelan leader was funneling drugs and criminals into the US. The US also carried out more than two dozen strikes in international waters — themselves illegal — against vessels it alleged were involved in drug smuggling, killing over 100 people. The operation fits neatly into Trump's recently unveiled National Security Strategy, which calls for "a hemisphere whose governments cooperate with us against narco-terrorists." The harder question is what comes next for Venezuela, home to the world's largest proven oil reserves. Trump has said the US will "run" the country and that its "broken infrastructure" would be repaired by US oil companies. He has also made clear, for now, that he has little interest in working with the opposition led by Nobel Peace Prize laureate María Corina Machado. Should the US consolidate control over the petro-state's leadership and resources, it would replace an authoritarian regime with an extractive order, the dangers of which include protracted armed conflict with militias and resistance groups, refugee flows and wider regional destabilisation.

Last year, Trump unleashed tariff wars across the globe. This year opens with regime change in Venezuela and the threat of one in Iran. Pushback has been muted. Europe has limited itself to calls for restraint; as expected, Russia, China, Brazil and Iran have been critical. India's direct stakes are limited. New Delhi has called the development a "matter of deep concern." Months after Trump imposed 50 per cent tariffs, a trade deal still hangs fire. Like most countries, India will have to play it by ear. Trump has opened a new, dangerous chapter in regime change and "nation-building." The world can do little but watch how the US handles the day after in a nation of 28 million people whose sovereignty it has so brazenly breached.

For Centre & state finances, a reckoning

2026 COULD be a year of reckoning for the finances of both the Centre and state governments. Data for April-November 2025-26 shows the Centre's fiscal deficit touching 62.3 per cent of the full-year budget estimate, while it was 52.5 per cent during the corresponding eight months of 2024-25. More revealing is the primary deficit (fiscal deficit net of interest payments), which has hit 78.9 per cent of the whole-year (April-March) target, as against 41.8 per cent for April-November 2024-25. The pressure is mainly from tax revenues, with the Centre netting just 49.1 per cent of its budgeted collections till November. With the GST rate cuts clearly impacting revenues, the Centre will have to cut expenditures for meeting its deficit targets.

The challenge is even more for states. On December 30, Andhra Pradesh raised Rs 1,000 crore and West Bengal Rs 2,000 crore through 12- and 17-year government securities at 7.50 per cent and 7.56 per cent interest respectively. A year before, they had paid 7.16 per cent and 7.15 per cent for the same tenor securities to mop up Rs 1,500 crore and Rs 2,500 crore respectively. Interest rates on state borrowings have gone up, despite the RBI slashing its policy "repo" lending rate from 6.50 to 5.25 per cent over this period. The combined fiscal deficit of the states has risen from 2.4 to 3.2 per cent of GDP between 2018-19 and 2024-25 and the primary deficit, too, from 0.8 to 1.5 per cent. Many states today have outstanding liabilities exceeding 30 per cent of their GDP, with these at 35 per cent-plus for some — Punjab, Himachal Pradesh, West Bengal, Bihar, Kerala and Rajasthan. The moment of reckoning will come when bond markets actually start discriminating between fiscally responsible and cavalier governments.

The Indian economy is no longer plagued by the twin balance sheet crisis, with both debt-to-equity and non-performing asset ratios of corporates and commercial banks respectively dropping to multi-year lows. It cannot afford a weak government balance sheet next to act as a drag on growth, including through crowding out private sector borrowings. Governments should focus on their traditional functions of providing public goods and investing in physical and social infrastructure. Instead, they are spending taxpayer and borrowed monies increasingly on freebies and cash transfers yielding short-term electoral gains at best. Unfortunately, this seeming winning formula has been embraced or endorsed by parties across the board. 2026, hopefully, will be the year when the fiscal gravy train slows, if not stops.

FREEZE FRAME

BY EP UNNY



FROM PLATE TO PLOUGH

BY ASHOK GULATI AND
ISHITA MANDLA

VICTOR HUGO once wrote, "No power on earth can stop an idea whose time has come." In contemporary India, in the midst of drought in 2015-16, Prime Minister Narendra Modi floated an idea to double farmers' real incomes by 2022-23. He called it his dream as he knew that if farmers prosper, India will prosper. Even Mahatma Gandhi said that India lives in its villages. But today, the economic condition in villages is not very good. They are lagging in basic infrastructure. To the best of our knowledge, no independent study has been done about the outcomes of doubling farmers' incomes. However, at ICRIER, we have researched this issue, and our conclusion is that the achievement was less than 50 per cent.

Around the same time as the PM envisaged doubling farmer incomes, in the drought-stricken district of Beed in Maharashtra, Mayank Gandhi floated the idea of Krishikul under the Global Vikas Trust (GVT) to augment farmers' incomes.

Our submission: Will Prime Minister Narendra Modi have the time to spend a night at GVT's Krishikul, talk to farmers independently, and then take a call on how to convert this experiment into a nation-wide revolution? Here is a

nanas, etc. The results have been astounding. As per an independent evaluation study by the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) in 2024, the per-acre income of farmers increased by more than 10 times, from Rs 38,700 to Rs 393 lakh, within a short transition period. So far, GVT has planted more than 6.7 crore fruit trees (cumulatively) in about 43,000 acres belonging to roughly 30,000 farm families spread across 5,000 villages. If this can be done in Beed, why can't it be replicated and scaled up to other districts and states? That's where the state and central governments come in.

One is reminded of how the milk experiment in Kheda district, Gujarat, by Verghese Kurien was scaled up through the National Dairy Development Board (NDDB) by taking World Bank loans for Operation Flood. But all this happened as a result of the then Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri spending a night in Kheda district and talking to farmers till 2 am. He then took the call to set up the NDDB with Kurien as its chairman. The rest is history. India ushered in the White Revolution. In 2024-25, India was the largest producer of milk in the world at roughly 248 million tonnes (MT), while the second slot went to the US, producing about 102 MT. And interestingly, this has been done largely by small holders with an average herd size of just four cows/buffaloes.

Our submission: Will Prime Minister Narendra Modi have the time to spend a night at GVT's Krishikul, talk to farmers independently, and then take a call on how to convert this experiment into a nation-wide revolution? Here is a

brief summary and some lessons of what Krishikul did to augment farmers' incomes by more than 10 times (10X).

First, the task was to earn the trust of farmers by listening to their socio-economic problems, analysing them with compassion, and then using science and advanced farming practices (high-density plantation) for fruit crops. Second, the best

quality samplings were procured from diverse nurseries for different fruits. Large-scale buying of saplings by GVT helped them procure these at Rs 30/sapling, which was roughly half the retail price. Farmers were supplied these saplings at a subsidised price of Rs 15 each. The subsidy was provided through CSR funding from various donors, most notably Motilal Oswal Foundation. The Foundation donated Rs 25 crore to build the basic structure of Krishikul on a 25-acre piece of land. It is used to carry out experiments of different crops, and also undertake rigorous training of farmers on how to handle these new crops.

Third, the water table in the area, which had receded to about 400 feet below surface level, was recharged through farm ponds, check dams, and most importantly by putting in about 200 Global River Aqueducts — deep vertical recharge shafts constructed in low-lying riverbeds that channel excess surface water safely into underground aquifers. By filtering silt and debris before percolation, these structures ensure efficient groundwater recharge without contamination. This helped raise the groundwater level from 400 feet to about 50 feet at several places, enabling assured irrigation

comes further once the GVT dives deeper into the marketing of these products directly.

A charitable organisation like the GVT (Krishikul) can demonstrate the proof of concept, which they have already done at some scale. Turning this into an all-India movement requires the government to step in with large resources, more expertise, and policy changes wherever needed to scale it up under a centre-state-NGO-business partnership. We hope that the Modi government can undertake it and realise its unfulfilled dream of not just doubling farmers' incomes but augmenting it manifold.

Gulati is Distinguished Professor, and Mandla is a Research Fellow at ICRIER. Views are personal

In Beed, Mayank Gandhi floated the idea of Krishikul under the Global Vikas Trust to augment farmers' incomes. They convinced farmers to shift from traditional crops to fruit crops. The results have been astounding

Going forward, much depends on states' room for spending



ADITI
NAYAR

TWO QUESTIONS we have heard repeatedly in recent months are: How did some states incur a fiscal deficit higher than 3 per cent of GSDP in recent years, and have welfare schemes curtailed the space for state-led capital spending?

The answer to the first question is fairly straightforward. During FY2021-FY2025, states were permitted additional borrowings over and above their base borrowing limits, allowing them to incur a higher fiscal deficit. Their base borrowing limit was set between 3-4 per cent of the GSDP and an estimated additional borrowing of 0.5-1.1 per cent was allowed by the Union government and/or the 15th Finance Commission. This additional borrowing included loans by the Centre to the states (GST compensation loans and the 50-year interest-free capex loans) and reforms-linked additional borrowings.

During FY2021-FY2022, the Centre disbursed GST compensation loans of Rs 2.6 trillion to states. It also transferred Rs 3.7 trillion during FY2021-FY2025 under the 50-year interest-free capex loans. Such loans were availed by all except for a few states in some of the years. These loans are over and above the normal borrowing limit of the states. The surge in states' capital spending in recent years benefited from the expansion in capex loans to around Rs 1.5 trillion in FY2025 from Rs 0.1 trillion in FY2021.

Alongside, several states had completed one or more reforms prescribed by the Centre in FY2021 and availed total additional borrowings of Rs 1.1 trillion. The 15th FC had recommended additional borrowing flexibility of 0.5 per cent of GSDP for power sector reforms. Some states including Andhra Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, Kerala, Odisha, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal completed the power sector-related reforms and availed a total of Rs 1.3 trillion between FY2022-FY2025.

Interestingly, the Government of India had allowed states to carry forward any unutilised borrowing from FY2021 to FY2022 to support growth amid fragile economic conditions due to the pan-

demic. The 15th FC had also given states the flexibility to carry forward any unutilised borrowings from previous years to the following years of the 15th FC's award period (FY2022-FY2026). The carry-forward provision softened the fiscal deficit constraint of the states in recent years.

To the second question, Spending by state governments plays a vital role in the economic growth of the country. Their spending ability is influenced not only by their revenue position but the borrowing limit fixed by the Union government.

In recent years, several states have enhanced their social welfare spending, which includes items such as social security pensions, transfers to low-income households, cash transfers to women, etc. The combined cash transfers to women across 11 states added up to around Rs 1.5 trillion or a sizeable 0.8 per cent of GSDP in FY2026, up from Rs 120 billion or 0.1 per cent in FY2023.

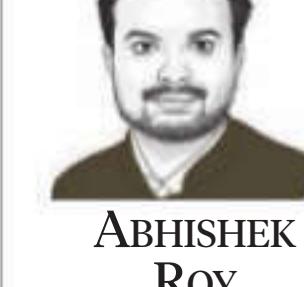
But, despite this, their revenue deficit widened only slightly. An analysis of the components of their revenue spending reveals that to accommodate these cash transfers, some states are curtailing spending under other heads or trimming the outgo in older schemes to keep the total spending under limits. But it is possible that states with reasonable fiscal space available may opt not to squeeze spending under other heads.

It is encouraging that several states have also ramped up their capital expenditure during FY2021-FY2025. The combined capital expenditure and loans and advances of 28 states reported a healthy 18.5 per cent CAGR during this period, doubling to Rs 8.4 trillion.

We now keenly await the recommendations of the 16th Finance Commission. The recommendations, related to the sharing of resources during the commission's award period, the base borrowing limits of states, additional borrowing limits and/or a continuation of carry-forward provisions, will be key to the spending space available to states in the coming years.

The writer is chief economist, head-Research & Outreach, ICRA

No one talks about the slow emergency of Kolkata smog



ABHISHEK
ROY
CHOUDHURY

THERE WAS a time when December in Kolkata meant poetry. The mist hung low over the Maidan, trams looked like moving silhouettes, and the city carried a calm. But the city's "fog" is no longer a seasonal mood. It is, increasingly, particulate pollution wearing a poetic mask. Drive over the Maa Flyover on a winter morning, you'll see it, or rather, not see it. The once-distinct skyline dissolves into a blur. Visibility collapses, and yet traffic rolls on. It's an invisible crisis, one we have decided not to talk about.

Real-time data from Kolkata's air-quality stations show the Victoria Memorial belt repeatedly slipping into the "very poor" bracket, peaking at an AQI of 366 on December 12. The drivers are unglamorous: Dust resuspended by footfall and roadwork, dry soil that lifts easily, and winter inversion trapping pollution close to breathing height. The city's lungs have now turned into a smog chamber. And yet, political energies are spent elsewhere.

Smog is a slow emergency, and that makes it easy to ignore. IQAir's global report puts Kolkata's 2024 annual average PM 2.5 concentration at 45.6 micrograms per cubic metre, almost nine times the World Health Organisation's recommended limit. In any functioning democracy, that statistic would trigger legislative debate. In Kolkata, it barely trends. According to *Down To Earth*'s reports, Kolkata's air "toxicity" spikes sharply once PM 2.5 crosses roughly 70 µg/m³, and that threshold was breached on nearly three-fourths of winter days in the study period.

Politics offers performance, with sprinklers on trucks, anti-smog guns, sweeping drives before VIP visits. Dust becomes the scapegoat because it is visible and politically safe. A West Bengal Pollution Control Board-commissioned study (2019) points elsewhere. In winter, secondary aerosols contribute 32 per cent of Kolkata's fine-particulate load, vehicles 25 per cent, wood burning 15 per cent, and coal 9 per cent. Secondary aerosols, formed when precursor gases such as ammonia and nitrogen oxides react in the air, cannot be swept away. They demand regulation across fuels, vehicles and waste burning, seemingly costly "politics" in an election year. Denial in India, an administrative art. The Centre puts the responsibility for controlling air pollution on the states. The state points to transboundary inflow. The municipal corporation pleads jurisdiction. Everyone is partially right, and therefore fully unaccountable. The World Bank has repeatedly warned that without regionwide coordination, city-level tinkering will hit a wall. Studies repeat the same prescriptions: Phase down dirty vehicles, control open burning, monitor construction, treat Kolkata and Howrah as one airshed, and publish real-time enforcement data.

Imagine if each PM 2.5 spike demanded a ministerial statement the way a central-state fund release does. That would be politics worthy of India's second-most-polluted metro (2024). Until air quality becomes a campaign question, Kolkata's December sky will stay grey. The fog we once loved has turned against us. What remains is not ignorance; it is consent.

The writer is a German Chancellor Fellow (2024-25) with the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation

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40 YEARS AGO

January 5, 1986



Opposition forum for action

ELEVEN REGIONAL and two national political parties have decided to forge a "suitable forum" for discussions and action on various problems and issues confronting the states and the nation. Interpreted by observers as a step towards forming a national alternative to the Congress-I ultimately, the shape, scope and name of the forum are to be decided at the next meeting. The understanding was reached among the leaders of the Janata party, Congress-S, Akali Dal, and DMK, among others.

Centre on violence in Punjab

WHILE THE Centre is prepared to go all out

to help the Punjab government revive the state economy, it is adopting a tough stand on the issue of law and order. The Centre has already expressed its serious concern to the Punjab Chief Minister, Surjit Singh Barnala, over continued violence in the state. The Punjab situation is expected to be reviewed at the highest level. It is felt that the present Akali ministry has not been able to cope with the situation.

Superpowers n-missile pact

THE UNITED STATES and the Soviet Union appear to be reaching a de facto limitation of their immediate nuclear forces as a step to "temporary agreement" they both want.

The limitation seems to concern the number of nuclear missile launchers each side has on European territories.

On Pakistan and US arms

Pakistan's proposal to acquire sophisticated electronic weaponry from the United States at a cost of Rs 410 crore poses no threat to India, the chief of Army Staff, Gen A S Vaidya, has said. To a question, he said "one can't claim without proof that neighbouring countries like Pakistan and China helped terrorists in Punjab with arms, though weapons with Chinese and Pakistani markings were recovered from the Golden Temple complex after Operation Bluestar."

• **WHAT THE OTHERS SAY**
Maduro's removal sends an important message to tin-pot dictators in Latin America... Trump follows through.
— *The Washington Post*



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The Ideas Page

MONDAY, JANUARY 5, 2026

11

In disruptive times, principles underlying business success are unchanged



OVER THE BARREL

BY VIKRAM S MEHTA

A NEW year article warrants reflection. Political and economic commentators have concurred that 2025 has been a convulsive year dominated by US President Donald Trump. He tore up the international rule book, weaponised tariffs, cocked a snook at traditional allies, ignored constitutional checks and balances and made his liking for the descriptor "the Imperial Presidency" quite clear.

My own reflections have a different starting point. I look back through the lens of a former business executive with one foot still in this domain as an independent non-executive director and ask: Has "disruptive" technological innovation around AI/AGI altered the principles underlying business success? I believe not.

Klaus Schwab, founder of the World Economic Forum, wrote a few years ago that the world was in the midst of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. The defining features of this revolution, which began around 2010, were machine learning, AI, big data, quantum computing and the blurring of the lines differentiating the physical, digital, and biological worlds. Schwab contrasted this with the Third Industrial Revolution that started in the 1970s around the internet, robotics, and IT. It shifted production processes from analog to digital and catalysed the growth of the service and knowledge economy. The second revolution, a century earlier, was triggered by electricity, the internal combustion engine, telegraph and telephone, and assembly line production — breakthroughs that transformed communication and transportation systems and catalysed the rise of multinational companies. The first Industrial Revolution started with the invention of the steam engine in 1776. This laid the foundations for industrial mechanisation.

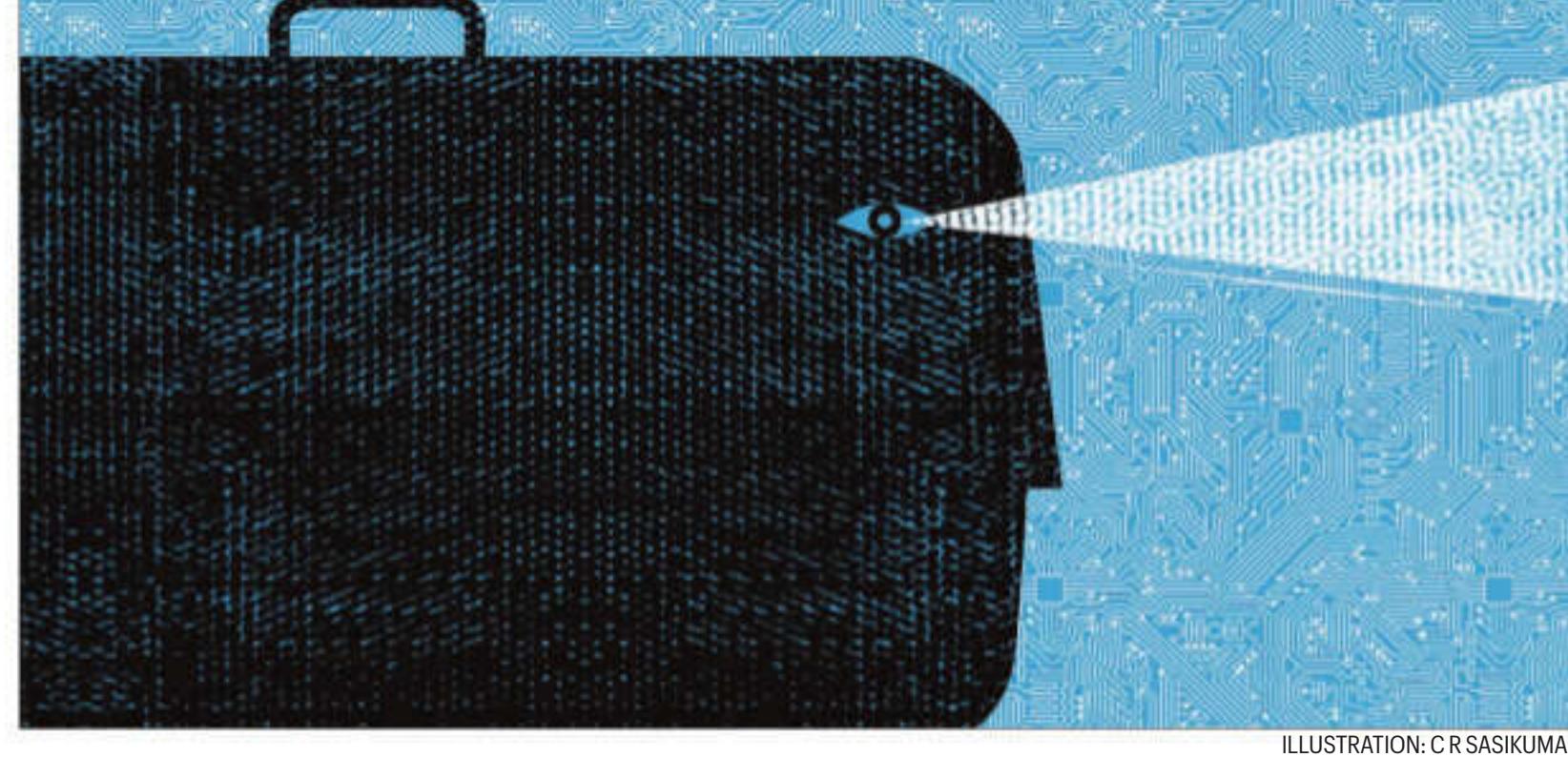


ILLUSTRATION: C R SASIKUMAR

The thread linking these four revolutions is technological innovation. It created new tools for managing business. It did not, however, alter the fundamentals underlying corporate growth and profitability.

I identify four factors that have driven business success in the past and which, I believe, will remain pivotal for its success in the future.

First, cost management. One equation I learnt in first-year economics was that prices tend towards marginal costs. In other words, the price of products falls in line with the declining cost of producing an extra unit of output. Companies that have a high average cost structure, therefore, face increasing pressure to generate a decent return on their investment, especially when they finance their expenditure through debt. The reason Henry Ford succeeded in putting "America on Wheels" with his Ford Model T in the early 20th century was because of a laser focus on cost efficiency. The reason China is today a global manufacturing hub is that it combined scale with operational efficiency to produce world-class products at the lowest unit costs. Companies that take their eye off costs will always struggle to navigate the turn of the business cycle.

Second, access to competitively priced factors of production and control over the supply chain. The billionaire robber barons of the

In time, AGI will surpass human cognitive intelligence.

But if, as a result, human judgment is supplanted or subverted, the pillar upon which the arc of four industrial revolutions was built would be knocked down

19th/early 20th century -- Andrew Carnegie, John Rockefeller, Cornelius Vanderbilt -- used monopolistic and exploitative tactics to secure such access. In the contemporary world, the Chinese government ensured that the country's manufacturers had ready and affordable access to land, capital, power, water, and transport infrastructure. This gave them a competitive head start. By contrast, in India, companies have difficulty acquiring land, the capital markets are shallow, the price of utilities is high, and the road/rail network is inadequate. In consequence, even companies that are world-class in organisation and make products that meet the highest standards of quality struggle to compete in the world market. Business success hinges on supply chain competitiveness, resilience, and control. That has been so in the past. It is so today and will be into the future.

Third, regulatory alignment. In 1911, the US government broke up Standard Oil, the largest and most powerful company in the US, into 34 separate, competing companies on the grounds of "illegal monopolisation". Since then, the regulatory oversight over business has waxed and waned. US President Ronald Reagan and UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher were of the mindset that governments should "get out of the way" of business.

Government, it was said, did not solve problems; it was the problem. Today, industrial policy is back in vogue. These shifts in the regulatory pendulum did not and have not altered one fundamental. Corporates needed/need the implicit, if not explicit, support of the state to generate sustained growth and profitability.

Technological innovations had not/given not given them the power to sidestep the regulator. This fundamental will endure. Regulatory alignment will remain an essential precondition for business success.

Finally, human judgment. I look back and ask: Would templated reasoning of the kind consultants present today have led James Watt to experiment with steam power in the late 18th century? Would Henry Ford have taken the decision to raise the wages of his employees and the prices payable to his vendors to generate demand for the Ford Model T car if he had subjected himself to the logic of linear analysis? Did Steve Jobs decide that design is not just about "how it looks" but about "how it works" on the back of algorithmic signals? Is China's current dominance of the renewable energy business — they produce the lowest cost solar panels, wafers, cells, modules, and wind turbines — the result of a natural resource bequest or the decision by their leaders to set aside the conventional wisdom that renewable energy was uncompetitive and to deem this sector of strategic significance? These are rhetorical questions. The answer is none of these transformative, at times counterintuitive, decisions were the result of only hard data and quantitative analysis. They all bore the imprint of subjective intuition, insight, and leadership.

I dare say that in time, AGI will surpass human cognitive intelligence. But if, as a result, human judgment is supplanted and/or subverted, the pillar upon which the arc of four industrial revolutions was built would be knocked down. The German philosopher Friedrich Hegel wrote, "We learn from history that too often we do not learn from it". At this time of rapid change, business leaders would do well to bear this forewarning in mind.

The writer is chairman and distinguished fellow, CSEP Research Foundation

In Venezuela, a familiar, dismal script of imperial overreach



MANAV SACHDEVA

THE LATEST American strikes in Venezuela arrive wrapped, as so many interventions do, in the language of moral necessity. The "narcotics terrorism" justification is presented as an urgent imperative — decisive, surgical, ostensibly righteous. While it is important to acknowledge, without obfuscation, that Venezuela under Nicolás Maduro has been a tragedy of repression, institutional decay, and economic freefall, and a regime like this demands scrutiny and ultimately transformation, military strikes, as modern human history shows, are never the answer.

Acknowledging Venezuela's reality cannot blind us to a deeper, older truth: Imperialism — whether pursued by Washington, Moscow, Beijing, or any aspiring hegemon — almost always overreaches. And when it does, it drags nations into conflicts they cannot control, burdens they cannot sustain, and moral contradictions they cannot explain away.

What is unfolding in Venezuela today echoes a familiar script. A great power identifies a crisis, interprets it through the prism of its own strategic anxieties, and then proceeds as though its own intervention is both inevitable and redemptive. The rationalisations vary, from counterterrorism and humanitarian rescue to narcotics interdiction, but the underlying impulse remains constant: Control.

We have seen this for decades in American policy. From Vietnam to Iraq to Afghanistan to Syria, and now through the back door of Venezuela, the US repeatedly discovers that invading, reshaping, or "managing" another society produces outcomes it neither anticipates nor is prepared to own.

But to criticise only the US would be intellectually dishonest. Russia's brutal incursion into Ukraine springs from the same imperial muscle memory — the belief that neighbouring nations are chess pieces rather than sovereign societies. The Kremlin's narrative of historical entitlement mirrors, almost perfectly, the rhetoric of exceptionalism that has long animated Washington.

Different flags. Different rhetoric. Same pathology. Empires imagine themselves as engineers of stability. They believe that if they simply remove the "wrong" regime and install the "right" incentives, history will bend toward their vision. Yet history is stubborn.

In Iraq, the toppling of a dictator gave way to sectarian fracture. In Afghanistan, 20 years of occupation dissolved in a week. In Ukraine, a reckless invasion has strengthened NATO, devastated cities, and unleashed a generational trauma — while failing to deliver Moscow's promised victory. And now, in Venezuela, US strikes risk binding Washington to the fate of a fractured state it neither understands nor is ready to rebuild.

Imperial projects always carry hidden costs: Endless commitments, political backlash, moral erosion, and the haunting realisation that force can topple governments — but cannot, by decree, build legitimacy.

Maduro's governance has undeniably harmed Venezuelans. But replacing one form of domination with another is not liberation. María Corina Machado, Nobel Laureate and Opposition Leader, has ostensibly tarnished the Nobel and laid her power intentions bare, by openly praising Trump and imploring military intervention. Any path forward must privilege a far greater set of Venezuelan voices, regional diplomacy, and international frameworks that constrain unilateral adventurism — American or otherwise. This mistake of choosing easily available alternatives haunts the US in Afghanistan and Syria and elsewhere, and history must not be repeated in Venezuela.

The lesson that our times keep teaching — and we keep refusing — is painfully simple: Nations cannot be engineered from outside. Sovereignty is not a favour to be granted. And empires, however enlightened they believe themselves to be, eventually choke on the consequences of their own ambition.

The strikes in Venezuela should therefore not only provoke debate about US policy. They should force us to confront the wider era we inhabit, where multiple powers, convinced of their civilisational missions, reach beyond their limits and discover that the world is not clay. If we are serious about peace — in Caracas, Kyiv, Gaza or anywhere else — then our critique must transcend geography. The real problem is not simply American overreach, or Russian aggression, or any singular villain. The problem is the imperial imagination itself.

The writer is the Humanitarian Food Security & Diplomacy Ambassador, India, for President Zelenskyy's Office

times more than traditional ones, requires massive renewable energy backups, and pure green hydrogen won't surpass old methods until around 2040 without incorporating some cleaner blends. CBAM shortens the timeline: Indian exporters must reduce emissions now and prove it, or risk losing sales to Korea's ready hydrogen centres and Japan's partnerships.

India's abundant RE, low-cost ore and 5MMTpa ambition can dominate green metals. We either spend a decade fighting climate tariffs at WTO, or build the carbon pricing architecture that makes Indian steel the world's cleanest and most competitive. CBAM isn't the end; it could be India's origin story as a green superpower.

The writer is research associate at CSEP. Views are personal

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Dangerous precedent

INDIA MUST unequivocally condemn US action in Venezuela. Even if the Nicolas Maduro regime was undemocratic and repressive, it does not grant the US the mandate to determine Venezuela's future or sell its oil, which is the sovereign right of its people ('Maduro captured, flown out; US to run Venezuela: Trump', IE, January 4). This is nothing but colonialism with a fresh coat of paint. Already, there are costs emerging: Chaos, the impoverishment of Venezuela and justification for any other nation to follow the US's example.

Anany Mishra, Noida

THE US'S operation in Venezuela lacked approval from Congress ('Maduro captured, flown out; US to run Venezuela', IE, January 4). NYC Mayor Zohran Mamdani called the operation illegal and a "violation of international law". The US did the same thing in Panama four decades ago but Donald Trump's plan to "run" Venezuela for the foreseeable future is much murkier. Russia and China, both major backers of Venezuela, criticised the move. Trump also runs the risk of alienating some of his own supporters, who have backed his "America First" agenda and oppose foreign intervention.

S S Paul, Noida



NISHANT SHAH

IN THE life cycle of all digital technologies, there comes a moment when it feels like the tech is everything, everywhere, all at once. One minute, it is still an emerging technology, a technology of the future, something we are still exploring and trying to understand. The next minute, it is in everything, everyone is using it, and we can't remember a time when our lives were not completely bound and intertwined with this technology.

For those of us who have lived through digital emergences and emergencies, this should be déjà vu. We have been here before: With the rise of the World Wide Web, the spread of discussion boards and chat rooms, the proliferation of search engines, the flurry of social media platforms, the datafication of our everyday experiences, and now, here again, with AI. And for many of us in the Global South, we have also seen how these technologies are often imagined elsewhere and imported into our futures, scripted through decisions made in boardrooms and policy circles far away from where their impact will be felt most deeply.

It has been fun, in a poke-your-finger-in-a-socket kind of way, to look at everything and try to remember when it was not AI. It feels difficult, because AI technologies have long been in the making. Automated decision-making, predictive systems, assistive technologies, and the large-scale data

A digital hope & challenge: We can shape our AI future

crunching that drives algorithmic curation of our online lives have been here for years. However, ever since Generative AI applications, which consolidate all of those information-processing and cognitive practices into one bundle, were unleashed, it feels like everything has always been AI and there is no future except the one charted for us by a handful of global tech companies.

As we march into the new year, there is a certain resignation that Generative AI will replace human labour, jobs, functions, creativity, connections, and conversations. Twenty per cent of all YouTube videos are now AI-generated. Teachers complain that students don't write, they prompt; students complain that teachers don't grade; they just run assignments through LLMs. Companies worry they don't have enough skilled people to stay ahead of the AI curve; people worry their jobs will be replaced by machines. Governments despair at what weaponised AI is doing to democratic systems and public trust; citizens are losing faith in state information and creating new structures of governance.

Even when spectacular breakthroughs in science, medicine, and research emerge from AI, the environmental costs, misinformation weaponisation, erosion of care systems, and the degradation of planetary ecologies make it difficult to just celebrate them. It feels like the world is heading into spiralling despair, where only a handful will thrive.

At the symbolic birth of a new year, it is customary to offer hope. But digital hope has proven fickle over the past years. So instead, I offer something that might take us further than hope: A challenge.

Let us refuse to accept these scripted AI futures as inevitable. AI technologies might be unsettling, but they are not settled. They are still in the making. The AI we are offered is not the "natural" state of the technology, but merely one expression of it, shaped by extractive, profit-driven oligarchies that control its development. Other AIs are possible: Technologies with different applications, intentions, and futures, especially if we decentralise ownership and build digital commons that privilege community data trusts, cooperative infrastructures, public-interest platforms, and spaces where marginalised communities have authority, not just access. We can invite new stakeholders to imagine and shape these technologies differently.

Our AI futures cannot be things we merely inherit. They must be things we collectively make. It is only through this collective reimagination of the future that we would be able to hold our governments, corporations, civil societies, universities, and ourselves responsible for opening up the possibility of other AIs.

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The writer is professor of Global Media at the Chinese University of Hong Kong and a fellow at the Berkman Klein Centre for Internet and Society, Harvard University



NANCY GUPTA

INDIAN STEELMAKERS rang in the new year with a grim reality: The EU's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) has exited its transitional phase and entered its definitive implementation, slapping real carbon costs onto every tonne of steel, aluminium and cement crossing into Europe. Indian steelmakers do not need January's carbon invoices from Brussels to feel the sting of Europe's CBAM. Post-Covid, India's iron and steel exports to the EU more than doubled, from USD 2.7 billion in FY21 to nearly USD 6 billion in FY22, briefly accounting for over 9 per cent of all exports to the bloc. But once CBAM's transitional reporting

phase began, that boom reversed sharply: By FY25, steel exports had already fallen 30 per cent versus FY24, even as total exports held steady, and by FY26, when CBAM's definitive phase kicks in, iron and steel shipments crashed by over 51 per cent.

The December 2025 EU ETS (emissions trading system) auction at Brussels was cleared at €87.37 per tonne CO2, 5.7 per cent above recent monthly averages and far exceeding historic floors of €20-30, as buyers like RWE and ArcelorMittal paid uniform price premiums for supply security. EU steel importers continue to source Indian volumes despite the CBAM, valuing the ore-labour cost advantages in decarbonised tonnes over cheaper, dirtier alternatives. CBAM demands reciprocal action: Align India's MRV (measurement, reporting, and verification) systems with ETS equivalents,

phase began, that boom reversed sharply: By FY25, steel exports had already fallen 30 per cent versus FY24, even as total exports held steady, and by FY26, when CBAM's definitive phase kicks in, iron and steel shipments crashed by over 51 per cent.

We either spend a decade fighting climate tariffs at WTO, or build the carbon pricing architecture that makes Indian steel the world's cleanest and most competitive

imports as costs remain three times higher than global benchmarks. Projects like Sembcorp's Tuticorin green ammonia hub face delays due to suppliers refusing to share technology IP, and were stymied by European Hydrogen Bank rules that restrict the use of Chinese electrolyzers to 25 per cent of the capacity, despite their strong bids exceeding targets. India imports most of its electrolyzers from China, followed by Singapore, the UK, and Germany. To accelerate green hydrogen and renewable energy capacity, India should liberalise imports not just of final green products but also intermediate goods and essential inputs, many not inherently green, used in their production. As of 2024, India's average applied tariff stands at 11.4 per cent, double the global average of around 6 per cent.

Building green steel plants costs three

times more than traditional ones, requires massive renewable energy backups, and pure green hydrogen won't surpass old methods until around 2040 without incorporating some cleaner blends. CBAM shortens the timeline: Indian exporters must reduce emissions now and prove it, or risk losing sales to Korea's ready hydrogen centres and Japan's partnerships.

India's abundant RE, low-cost ore and 5MMTpa ambition can dominate green metals. We either spend a decade fighting climate tariffs at WTO, or build the carbon pricing architecture that makes Indian steel the world's cleanest and most competitive. CBAM isn't the end; it could be India's origin story as a green superpower.

The writer is research associate at CSEP. Views are personal



VANDANA CHOPRA

THE RETURN of Shubman Gill and Shreyas Iyer for the home ODI series against New Zealand underlines the selectors' desire for stability at the top, but the composition of the squad raises questions. ('New year, old faces: No surprises in ODI squad for home series', IE, January 4). While injuries forced Gill and Iyer out, their recall comes at the cost of continuity for younger batters who were only just finding their feet. Rituraj Gaikwad's omission, despite his willingness to adapt to the middle order, reflects a stop-start approach. Tilak Varma and Dhruv Jurel too appear to have paid the price for indecision rather than form.

Vandana Chopra, Chandigarh

or cede a share to Korea's linked ETS and Japan's H2 partnerships amid WTO debates.

India's National Green Hydrogen Mission's

Idea Exchange

MONDAY, JANUARY 5, 2026

NEWSMAKERS IN THE NEWSROOM

WHY SHAFALI VERMA

From not being in the original playing squad, cricketer Shafali Verma scripted an extraordinary comeback tale. An injury to Pratika Rawal opened the door for her and she stepped through it to enter the grandest stage and became the Player of the Match as India won the ICC Women's World Cup final to create history.

The swashbuckling opener will soon be in action for JSW Sports co-owned Delhi Capitals in Women's Premier League

Vinayakk Mohanarangan: How has it been since you've become world champions?

On the one-month anniversary, I was remembering that moment. No one in our team can ever forget that day. Whenever we want to revisit that moment, we can. It's the best moment for all of us.

Vinayakk Mohanarangan: What do you think will be the changes we will see in India because of this World Cup win?

It wasn't just our team's victory. It was the victory of women's cricket. We all know how much women's cricket used to be judged. I am very keen to see women's cricket academies open in every state and new girls and stars will come. So, I am very excited to see that.

Vinayakk Mohanarangan: One thing that we found common in everyone's journey in this Indian squad was that when you all started playing cricket, you had to play with boys.

Absolutely, that is the story of all of us. Everyone was inspired by their brothers and fathers. And almost all of us played with boys because there were no academies for girls. We all grew up watching men's cricket. But when girls start playing now, women cricketers will be their idols. I am very thrilled to see that.

Shivani Naik: What was the dugout atmosphere like during Jemimah Rodrigues's semifinal innings while playing against Australia?

It was a goosebumps moment for all. We all know that Australia always stops us from crossing that final line. On that day, she did so well and was in great touch. That moment gave us the biggest confidence boost. We were very pumped after that and said that we would perform no matter what. That was our turning point. After winning that Australia game, we all believed that we were taking one more step and we had to put our lives on the line for the next seven hours (for the final).

Shivani Naik: Can you recall your early days when, due to the scarcity of practice space, you ended up training under flyovers?

Not just under flyovers, outside the park, next to a wall. I learnt to play straight there because if it hit a certain place, it was out and we had to go searching for the ball if we hit beyond the wall. Since it was just my father and I, it was us who had to run to get the ball back. Sometimes, my brother had to play a match and he couldn't come. My father used to stand in his stead. It was a very tough period for me because there were no women's cricket academies at that time. So, we used to look for the right place to practise. We were focused. My father made me work very hard and still stands by my side.

Nihal Koshie: In the World Cup final, you hit a couple of straight sixes. How did you develop that shot? Your father said playing gully cricket made you hit straight.

I would only hit straight sixes because there were houses on both sides. We all know what happens if the ball hits one of the other homes... what kind of fights happen. I used to hit sixes before (the final) as well. But my development happened as I had worked hard for a year to play along the ground. I think hitting sixes is easy for me. But taking singles, being at the crease when there are no boundaries in the last 10 balls, that's the biggest win for me. You all must have seen that I had a different mindset in the final.

Nihal Koshie: That one year before the World Cup must have been challenging for you.

A World Cup at home and my name not being in the team, that was a sad thing. But then I just thought I had to work hard and accept everything. How should I improve so that it doesn't happen to me again? I focused on myself. It was a turning point for me. Seeing my hard work, I think God sent me to play again with the Indian team. I am very grateful that I was able to give a performance on such a big stage. I now have the experience of scoring in the final. I was always sad that I couldn't score in the finals. Now, I have the confidence to perform at a final.

Nihal Koshie: In Haryana, there is a promising cricketer called Deeya (Yadav), who says she has been inspired by you. You have become a role model. What are the questions young women cricketers ask you?

Actually, there are two. Triveni and Deeya. There are other players as well in

'We all grew up watching men's cricket but when girls start playing now, there will be women idols'

Cricketer Shafali Verma on being dropped from the playing XI, her father's role in her success story and how Indian victory is likely to help more girls, especially from Haryana, to follow their cricket dream. The conversation was moderated by Vinayakk Mohanarangan, Senior Assistant Editor, *The Indian Express*

along the ground. You have to respect the ball. I have seen a lot of grass on the pitches in one-day cricket, which helps the bowlers. I have tried to practise more on grass wickets and play along the ground. Sometimes there is swing, and you can't get your bat on the ball. I practised taking singles. I had gone through a lot of net sessions where I didn't hit anything aerily. I have worked a lot on my mindset and fitness.

Nitin Sharma: When you were dropped from the Indian team last year, you did not tell your father at the time since he had a heart attack days before that. Tell us about your bond with your father.

My father talks about life as well as cricket. I always keep my family above anything. And my father, who has always supported me, had a sudden heart attack. It was a strange time for me. After that, I got dropped from the Indian team. I think that was a setback for my family and my career as well. That was the saddest bit about my life. I was broken at that time. I didn't tell my father about getting dropped from the team because he was already in so much pain due to his health. When he got a little better, somebody in the family told him. I wanted to tell my father on my own and my father could not even speak but he told me that it would all get better.

Nitin Sharma: How challenging was it mentally when you were dropped from the Indian team?

To be very honest, *mera mental health pura hil gaya tha and main cricket chhodne par aa gai thi* (My mental health had taken a beating and I was at the cusp of leaving cricket). What do I have now? I am left with nothing. So I should leave cricket and start looking for a job. And I was just crying for one or two weeks. I don't know why but thoughts of leaving cricket would come to mind. At that time, my brother was the person who told me that this phase would also end. After we won the final, when I held the 'player of the match' trophy, my brother told me: 'See, I told you it would get better.'

ON WOMEN CRICKETING LEGENDS

Women's cricket was kept alive by legendary former cricketers: Mithali di, Jhulan di, Anjum di and others... We were able to arrive here because of them

that period.

Amit Kamath: When there is a big game, do you see any indicators in your mental thoughts or physical fitness that tell you that you will have a good day on the field?

When we take the first step onto the ground, we understand the positivity and negativity because we have been playing cricket for so many years. For me, that first step matters a lot because I don't even knock about the ball before I go into bat. This is something I have been doing since childhood. I used to do a lot of net sessions before the match, but not on game day. But for me, that first step matters a lot. From that step, I understand what I am going to do today.

Vinayakk Mohanarangan: On the night of the World Cup, you all celebrated with legends at the venue.

I feel that we are living in a golden period. Women's cricket was kept alive by these legendary former cricketers: Mithali di, Jhulan di, Anjum di and so many more. We didn't want to live that moment by ourselves. We wanted to show them that we were able to arrive here because of them. That's why we were sharing the trophy with them. We were trying to share the happiness with them.

Vinayakk Mohanarangan: You have opened with two of the greatest in women's cricket: Smriti Mandhana and Meg Lanning. What is it like batting with them?

When I started batting at the top for India, Smriti is someone who always keeps me confident in the field. And Meg is someone who always keeps telling me that I should be positive and play my shots. Being an Australian cricketer, to tell an Indian player so much about how to bat positively, I found that very supportive. The turning point for me was when I started opening with Meg. I was very keen to just play with her. She has won five or six World Cups for her country. I was very keen to know her mindset. After batting with her, my mindset changed a lot. Both of them have been crucial in my life.



ILLUSTRATION: SUVAJIT DEY

Haryana. Whenever I go to play domestic cricket, I always try to talk about my experience with the players. As for Deeya, she has a lot of potential. She is very tall. One day, I sat with her and said, 'You have very good shots along the ground. If you start playing over the top, your game will shine even more.' I am so glad she listened. The following year, she worked hard. Her shots looked different. Obviously, it's a different feeling when you have a female idol in front of you. Members of our champion team have always had a male cricketer as an idol. But now, everyone has their own women's cricket idol. I am very happy about that.

Tushar Bhaduri: When you were drafted into the World Cup squad before the semifinals, you said that it was God's will that you got a chance at that time. How did you feel that a higher power had sent you to do something?

I was neither in the main 15 nor among the stand-bys. If I still somehow made it to the team, it had to be God's will. Before the semifinal, when I was addressing a press conference, I had a feeling from within that

'yes, God has sent me to do something.' And I am so grateful for that. I was working hard. Being dropped from the team made me feel bad and I didn't accept it easily. I wasn't able to do well in the semifinals because a lot of things were going on in my mind after I got out. Only I know how much I cried. We were happy that the team won but I was sad that I wasn't able to perform. After that, I just thought that if we win the match, hopefully everything will be fine. Then God managed a miracle and we won the World Cup.

Vinayakk Mohanarangan: How important was Harmanpreet Kaur and Smriti Mandhana's leadership during the World Cup?

The team was very welcoming when I joined before the semifinals. I was very happy to see that. It drove me even more to score and make the team win. When I had my first practice session, both of them told me that I just have to play my game. I have to do what I have been doing. I don't have to take any pressure. When you join the team and your seniors speak

to you so gently, it gives you a different boost. The entire team accepted and welcomed me.

Shankar Narayan: When you were asked to bowl in the final, what thoughts crossed your mind? Were you practising your bowling in the nets during the domestic T20 tournament?

Yes, I was. When the finals started, we all thought that we needed to contribute as much as we could—that all of us would dive and stop runs. At the time, I was bowling in the domestic tournament and I really like bowling. When I got the ball, I thought that I just had to pick up a wicket now because we saw how good a partnership Sune Luus and Laura Wolvaardt were building. When I got the wicket on the second ball, I couldn't express my happiness. Then I wanted to take the wicket of Marizanne Kapp and I was happy when I removed her as well. After that, I thought that I had to give as few runs as possible and increase the dot balls. So I had a plan in my mind and I was en-

joying my bowling. I always ask Harry di (Harmanpreet) to give me the ball during fielding and I'm glad she did that day.

Shankar Narayan: Have perceptions about women's cricket changed in your village over the years. Have you had any time to spend there recently? You once said that you had to cut your hair short so that you could pass off as a boy.

Yes. When I had gone to Rohtak, there were so many people who had come, and I had not seen many of their faces before. To see the region where you grew up, worked hard, welcome you, it was really wonderful. It was visible in everyone's eyes that yes, we will also send our daughters out, give them a reason to follow their passion. Because of cricket and only for cricket, I cut my hair. All those decisions that I took in my childhood, that my father helped me make, are all working today.

Lalith Kalidas: In the year away from the national squad, what have you learned about one-day cricket in your own game?

I have accepted that you have to play



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Tragedy and farce

Trump's Venezuela strikes constitute the latest act of U.S. imperialism

Tragedy has followed every act of imperialism by the U.S., but under President Donald Trump, the consequences have also taken on a farcical character, typical of the Theatre of the Absurd. In 2003, the invasion of Iraq, on false premises to depose a dictator and "export" democracy, instead rendered the nation asunder, birthed outifts such as ISIS, and destabilised West Asia. The same playbook was used later in north Africa. In 2026, the world is witness to another tragedy that is also a farce: a repeat of the imperial script in Venezuela, orchestrated by a Trump administration that has traded coercive diplomacy for bombing campaigns and naval blockades. The apprehension and forced exile of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro is a flagrant violation of international law and also flouts Article 2 of the UN Charter. By conducting "interdictions" of oil tankers and illegally killing civilians on boats in Caribbean waters under the unproven guise of anti-narcotics operations, the U.S. has bypassed the UN Security Council to position itself as judge and executioner. This intervention is driven by a familiar calculus. The first is the resurrection of the Monroe Doctrine to re-establish U.S. hegemony in the Americas, an order that regimes such as Venezuela's sought to upend through alternative alliances with Cuba. The second is the desire to sever Latin America's ties with China, as the Maduro regime looked eastward for investment and oil trade. The third is the cynical drive to control Venezuela's very large crude reserves. These resources represent a "prize" for U.S. business.

In any case, the U.S.'s claims of victory could be pyrrhic. While Maduro's governance was authoritarian, the United Socialist Party of Venezuela retains a strong support base. The Bolivarian movement rose to tackle the rampant inequality fostered by previous U.S.-backed elite regimes. By forcibly installing a new order, the U.S. is not "liberating" the people but validating their fears of colonial looting. The hypocrisy is stark. While the Trump administration justifies Maduro's removal by labelling him a cartel leader without public evidence, it ordered the release of the narcotics-trafficking convicted former leader of Honduras, Juan Orlando Hernández, and helped facilitate the rise of the pro-Washington Nasry Asfura. The hope that a globalised, interdependent world would yield a stable liberal order following the Cold War has been repeatedly belied by the actions of the U.S. and Russia. Yet, by withdrawing from climate accords and escalating tariff wars, the U.S. has signalled a contempt for international norms that surpasses other egregious acts. Venezuela's invasion is the natural, violent conclusion of this isolationist-imperialist hybrid of Trumpism. If the international community remains silent, it ratifies a world order where sovereignty exists at Washington's pleasure.

High and dry

Social security for gig workers must be made accessible and secure in practice

The day after the strike by a lakh or so gig workers across India on December 31, the CEO of one platform commanded police intervention to help the platform meet demand. This backdrop was unmissable shortly after the Labour Ministry had published draft Rules to operationalise the refreshed labour codes for public consultation. According to the Rules, these workers will be inducted into the new framework only on social security, not on wages or working conditions, rendering their strike more urgent. While the Code on Wages will apply across sectors and job categories, it excludes gig work from an 'employment' relationship for wage purposes. Instead, it is being treated as distinct and the platform is only obligated to make a gross contribution to a social security fund. The workers' demands, including over algorithmic rate cuts and opaque incentive structures, thus remain unaddressed. Similarly, the OSH&WC (Central) Rules are built around employer compliance via the Shram Suvidha Portal, but this is a conventional model that does not address concerns of app-mediated work. Only the social security changes are concrete. The draft Rules here require gig workers to register on a portal and every aggregator to upload details of engaged workers and update them every quarter. The Centre may also notify additional eligibility conditions; in any case, a worker must have engaged for at least 90 days with an aggregator or 120 cumulative days across aggregators in the financial year.

However, one calendar day can count as multiple days if a worker earns via multiple aggregators that day: if this helps workers qualify faster, it does not constrain platforms on how they organise work. The windows could also penalise workers for care-giving work or those responding to a demand slump beyond their control. To these ends, the draft Rules need to be redesigned so that the social security they promise is accessible and secure in practice. For instance, the 90- and 120-day thresholds must include explicit protections for illness, maternity and demand collapses, and should not lapse because a worker had a bad quarter. The Rules should also specify what benefits exist, how disputes will be resolved, the minimum benefits the Social Security Fund will support, and a time-bound claims and appeals process not dependent on platforms' goodwill. Finally, aggregators should give every worker a periodic statement of jobs, hours logged, earnings and deductions, and workers must be able to contest irregular data. Without these changes, the new regime will leave the insecurity that produced the strikes structurally intact.

Hubris and caution – China's posture as 2026 begins

As 2026 begins, China presents a paradox: a nation wrestling with economic challenges yet projecting strategic confidence; a leadership tightening political control domestically while expanding its diplomatic and institutional reach abroad; and a system that is both anxious and assertive. For India, this Chinese posture and the shift in the stance of the United States toward Beijing and New Delhi have narrowed strategic space and complicated the management of a fraught relationship. India's diminishing prominence in the foreign policy calculus of Washington and Beijing alike adds to the complexity.

The shift in China's overall mood has been striking. Until late 2024, Track 2 dialogues revealed palpable anxiety among Chinese interlocutors about U.S. containment and economic slowdown. By mid-2025, a sense of regained momentum – sometimes bordering on hubris – permeated Beijing's strategic community. Many believed China had gained ground in a recalibrated great power competition with the U.S., managed escalation dominance more effectively, and secured tactical advantages in trade and tariff disputes. This confidence was bolstered by China's expanding influence in the Global South, its deepening alignment with Russia, and its ability to stabilise key relationships – with the notable exception of Japan – without altering core positions.

Yet, beneath this confidence lies a leadership aware of structural challenges at home and a difficult international environment. The Fourth Plenum in October 2025 and the Central Economic Work Conference in December saw President Xi Jinping doubling down on national security, technological self-reliance, and the "real economy" as organising principles, while persisting with exports as a key growth driver even as he spoke of boosting domestic consumption.

Economic strains and the turn inward
China's 2025 economic growth was weaker than official figures (about 5%) suggest. Domestic demand remained weak, and the overbuilt property sector continued to weigh on confidence. Deflationary pressures (producer prices in negative territory for 38 consecutive months), sluggish productivity and tepid corporate profits persisted. Local governments face fiscal stress, limiting stimulus options.

Instead of boosting consumption, Beijing reinforced a state-led model, prioritising advanced manufacturing, semiconductors, Artificial Intelligence (AI), green energy, and dual-use technologies. Massive industrial policy support aims for "whole-chain breakthroughs" and the 15th Five-Year Plan (2026-30) underscores technological self-reliance and supply chain insulation.

This inward turn occurs even as China's export dependence grows to compensate for weak domestic demand. China's trade surplus crossed \$1 trillion in the first 11 months of 2025. It is increasingly dominating global value chains in manufacturing across high-tech industries such as electric vehicles, batteries, solar panels and industrial machinery. This "China Shock 2.0" is generating serious disruptions for developed and developing economies alike. As IMF Managing



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Director Kristalina Georgieva warned in December, China is now too large to export its way out of a slowdown without aggravating global trade tensions. For India, China's advantages in scale, technology and system-wide efficiency and upstream control of critical inputs (rare earths to battery precursors) have not only expanded the trade deficit, expected to exceed \$110 billion in 2025, but also intensified vulnerabilities in sectors ranging from pharmaceuticals to electronics, green energy and rare earth magnets.

Domestically, 2025 was marked by further political consolidation. The leadership tightened information control, reinforced ideological discipline, and expanded the remit of national security. Yet, dysfunctionalities of the party-state were also evident in large-scale sacking of generals.

The PLA continued to expand its conventional and nuclear capabilities. Emerging nuclear doctrinal shifts, such as movement toward an "early warning counter-strike" posture, suggest a more assertive and risk-tolerant military.

The Great Power dynamics

The most consequential external development was the recalibration of U.S.-China relations under President Donald Trump's second term. Under the U.S. National Security Strategy 2025, China is no longer framed as a systemic rival but primarily as an economic competitor. The Indo-Pacific is no longer the strategic centre of gravity; the Western Hemisphere has taken precedence, reflecting a more inward-looking "America First" approach. However, America's military intervention regime change in Venezuela, which seriously affected Chinese interests and investments and elicited sharp reactions from Beijing, have shown that the U.S.-China strategic rivalry is intact.

The Trump-Xi meeting in Busan in October produced de-escalation, including modest tariff adjustments and a selective easing of export controls. These were transactional bargains, not steps toward a G2. Yet the perception of a "G2 overlay" – a shadow of tacit coordination – has serious consequences, as even limited China-U.S. accommodation can constrain the choices of other states.

For India, the implications are sobering. The long positive trajectory of the India-U.S. partnership has been disturbed by friction over trade, Russia, and Pakistan. The U.S. remains committed to preventing Chinese hegemony in Asia but is less inclined to prioritise relations with India as a strategic counter to China. Meanwhile, China believes it has gained relative advantage *vis-à-vis* the U.S., while Chinese interlocutors increasingly argue that India's interest in stabilising relations with China stems from turbulence in India-U.S. ties. These twin perceptions make China less inclined to accommodate India's concerns.

With Europe, instead of leveraging trans-Atlantic tensions to drive a wedge between Brussels and Washington, China adopted a tough posture – digging in on EV subsidies, refusing to curb industrial overcapacity, pushing back hard against EU trade-defence actions, and consolidating its strategic linkages with Russia. Europe, despite growing alarm over China's "strategic enabling" of Russia's war in Ukraine and fears of industrial hollowing out, found itself

constrained due to economic headwinds, dependencies on China, and strategic distractions.

China's attempts to stabilise major-power ties were undercut by its harsh response to the Japanese Prime Minister's comment on Taiwan. Beijing signalled that its outreach has clear limits and that it remains unwilling to accommodate divergence on issues it deems sensitive.

Mr. Xi is attaching strategic priority to the Global South, positioning China as its leader and as a stabilising partner amid western retrenchment, and stepping up BRI projects, diplomatic initiatives and influence operations. But this expanding presence has also stirred unease over opaque financing, debt vulnerabilities, environmental concerns, and political leverage Beijing can derive from economic dependence. Even as China deepened its influence in Southeast Asia, the Gulf, Africa, and Latin America and pushed a China-centric institutional architecture through the AIIB, NDB, and expanded BRICS and SCO, many countries remain cautious about loss of policy autonomy.

China continued to treat South Asia as its strategic periphery and pursue a "two-ocean strategy" that normalises PLA Navy operations in the Indian Ocean.

On India-China relations

India-China relations in 2025 witnessed cautious stabilisation but no substantive progress on structural issues. The summit-level meeting in Tianjin and other high-level exchanges helped rebuild a damaged relationship. Yet, the situation along the borders remains stable but not normal. Disengagement has not been accompanied by de-escalation or de-induction. "Buffer zones" continue to restrict India's patrolling rights and grazing access. If these temporary arrangements become permanent, China will have achieved incremental gains consistent with its grey-zone playbook.

China's tactical outreach has not addressed India's core concerns. Negative signals included China-Pakistan battlefield collusion (Operation Sindo), work on a massive hydropower project in Tibet near the border, denial of rare earth magnets, delays in clearing key components, and repeated efforts to flag territorial claims in Arunachal Pradesh. India has prudently opted for step-by-step improvement in ties.

China is likely to persist with its current strategy: managed competition with the U.S., stabilisation of major relationships along with hardball diplomacy, intensified outreach to the Global South, incremental assertiveness in maritime and border theatres, and prickliness on its "core interests". The PLA will persist with grey-zone tactics while avoiding major kinetic actions.

New Delhi must pursue calibrated engagement to reduce immediate risks while strengthening asymmetric deterrence and accelerating domestic technological and industrial capabilities. External balancing remains relevant, but its dependability must be conservatively assessed in an era of U.S.-China tactical accommodation. India must prepare for a long haul – clear-eyed, resilient, and strategically patient.

The views expressed are personal

Security camps, the game changer in the Maoist fight

Maoism in India has been significantly curbed. The dip in Maoist-related violence, especially over the last two years, has restricted the insurgency to few pockets in the Bastar division of Chhattisgarh. Government data show that violent incidents have reduced by almost 90% from 2010 to 2025. The number of Left Wing Extremism (LWE)-affected districts fell from 126 to 90 in April 2018, 70 in July 2021, 38 in April 2024, 18 in April 2025 and only 11 in October 2025. Only three districts – Bijapur, Narayanpur and Sukma, in south Bastar – are categorised as most affected.

Maoists entered the Dandakaranya region (DKR) in the early 1980s due to mounting pressure in Andhra Pradesh. Thickly wooded and tough terrain, and abutting parts of several States such as Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra, Odisha and Telangana made DKR the most appropriate 'rear area' for the Maoists, with the Bastar division as the hub.

A gradual change
The DKR of the early 1980s was characterised by several peculiarities that favoured the Maoists. Its geographical remoteness, rugged terrain, marginalised tribal inhabitants and the official policy of maintaining tribal belts as exclusive areas were the major factors that characterised the administrative neglect of the region. The governance deficit was the most crucial factor that enabled the Maoists to expand and establish their parallel government.

In addition, the state's focus on the extraction economy and the tribal struggle for *jal-jungle-zameen*, provided the overall context to the conflict. The setback to Maoism has been a function of the inroads made by civil administration into remote areas under Maoist



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The advantages have been many, helping the civil administration reach out to local populations

control. The game-changing initiative of the government has been the establishment of security camps in the remote areas, regions of erstwhile Maoist domination. Initial attempts to establish camps did face local resistance. However, local resistance subsided following the benefits that accrued to the local population. The advantages of the new camps have been multifaceted.

Path to progress

First, the camps enhanced the security footprint in remote areas. A boost in police to population ratio deterred the Maoists from operating with impunity.

Second, the reaction time for the security forces in response to emergencies was considerably reduced, putting the Maoists on the defensive. The security forces now operate with more confidence and higher motivation levels.

Third, the local population witnessed the security forces gaining an upper hand, which was also a psychological setback to the Maoists. The local population is more assured now that the wherewithal for their welfare and development is with the government and not with the Maoists.

Fourth, the cascading effect of the advantages gained by security forces improved the human intelligence (HUMINT) scenario for the forces in a zero sum manner.

Fifth, the camps have also seen the construction of roads, and erection of mobile towers, thereby transforming the local lifestyle.

Sixth, the civil administration has piggy-backed on the support provided by the security camps. The local population that till now had only seen a policeman or a forest guard as representative of the government is now seeing the collector, *tehsildar* and *patwari* reaching out to them. As

progress is further consolidated along the axes provided by security camps, the future is both encouraging and promising. As a corollary, the appeal of Maoists has waned. The scope of capability development in terms of recruitment, weapons and ammunition acquisition and funding for the Maoists has diminished. Large numbers of cadres along with their leaders have either surrendered or have been neutralised by the security forces. It indeed is a matter of time when the physical presence of Maoism will cease to exist.

Implement constitutional guarantees

However, the challenge in the mid- and long term can only be overcome if the structural issues are addressed. Now that the local population is expected to come out of seclusion, rights-based issues will come to the fore. Several Maoists leaders who have surrendered in recent days, declaring their intent of carrying on with the struggle for the tribal cause in a democratic manner. The task at hand for the government hereafter becomes difficult, warranting transparent and mature handling.

Implementation of constitutional guarantees enshrined in Acts such as the Panchayats Extension to Scheduled Areas Act and Forest Rights Act should form the basis of the approach ahead. Civil administration, in most of the areas that had minimal governance, has to start from scratch.

A task force with a prospective plan for the region, till 2047, as part of the *Viksit Bharat* vision, will not be too ambitious to ask for. The security forces have toiled, made sacrifices and managed the conflict well, giving a platform to the government to carry forward the mission for sustainable peace.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Imperialism as liberation

The U.S.'s detention of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro signals a volatile shift in global geopolitics, blurring the

lines between judicial accountability and regime change. "Running" a sovereign nation – the U.S.'s line – evokes dark echoes of colonialism. U.S.

President Trump's focus on oil companies fixing infrastructure suggests that economic extraction, more than democratic restoration, is America's

primary motive.

Dr. Vijaykumar H.K., Raichur, Karnataka

Whatever the provocation might be, blatant disrespect

for and a violation of international borders and sovereignty of nations cannot be condoned. Mr. Trump has lived up to his growing image of a global trigger-happy cowboy.

Dr. George Jacob E., Kochi

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

The struggle to count women's labour

In the poem, *The Woman's Labour* (1739), Mary Collier writes: "When Harvest comes, into the Field we go, And help to reap the Wheat as well as you. Or else we go to the Ears of Corn to glean; No Labour scorning, be it e'er so mean; But in the Work we freely bear a Part, And what we can, perform with all our Heart." It is a powerful way of pointing to how women's labour often goes unseen. A 2023 United Nations report showed that globally, women spend 2.8 more hours than men on unpaid care and domestic work. The struggle to count women's labour continues.

While domestic labour has increasingly entered the public discourse, the emotional and mental labour in sustaining relationships, managing household dynamics, and supporting the well-being of others continues to go largely unacknowledged. This uncounted labour which plays a critical role in the smooth functioning of families and societies, is rarely measured or rewarded.

Shirin Rai, a professor, argues that "...many who cope with this work in contexts of poverty and of violence, are constantly told that their everyday labour – both paid and unpaid to maintain the rhythms of life-ecology do not count in/as production... as a global society, we fail to recognise this labour in our everyday lives, and we continue to deny its appropriate inclusion in discourses about work, in our national budgets, and in policy frameworks".

This raises a critical question: what structural and ideological forces render this labour unseen and undervalued? Feminist scholars such as Isabella Bakker, Nancy Fraser and Shirin Rai have argued that economic and policy priorities have long marginalised care work by framing it as secondary to "productive" labour traditionally performed by men.

The privileging of male breadwinner employment, the



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Recognising women's labour requires a major policy shift

relentless focus on GDP growth, and the emphasis on physical infrastructure investment over social infrastructure have all contributed to the systemic devaluation of care-related work. These priorities often result in the diversion of public resources away from services that support caregiving, such as childcare, elder care, and mental health services domains that are disproportionately occupied by women.

Antonella Picchio, a professor at Cambridge, argued that "the biological aspects of human reproduction were used to hide the historical and social aspects of the gender division of labour. The separation between the process of production and that of social reproduction of labour between men and women took new forms and shaped new power relationships within the traditional context of women's subordination". Thus, in our view, the act of non-inclusion of women's direct and indirect labour is a continuation of the subjugating practice of considering women's labour as non-productive. A closer look at global legislation and statutes reveals that the efforts to recognise women's labour institutionally are very scattered.

Few countries have introduced laws, constitutional provisions or policies recognising unpaid care work/domestic/emotional labour. Article 338 of the Bolivian Constitution recognises that work at home is an economic activity that creates added value and produces social welfare and wealth. Housewives are entitled to social security in accordance with the law. Trinidad and Tobago has the Counting Unremunerated Work Act, 1996 requires the statistical authorities to measure unremunerated work (housework, caring for children/elderly/disabled), break it down by gender, and assign a monetary value. Similarly, Argentina enacted a law recognising employment contracts

for domestic workers where women can get pension credits (equivalent to social security contributions) for unpaid care work they have done raising children. But no law and policy recognises the mental and emotional labour put in by women to run the economy and the family.

In India, there is still no legal framework that recognises or compensates this form of unpaid work, despite it being the backbone of families and, by extension, the economy. However, courts have begun to challenge this silence. In *Kannaiyan Naidu and Others vs Kamsala Annal and Others* (2023), the Madras High Court ruled that a wife who performed household duties and cared for the family contributed, albeit indirectly, to the acquisition of family assets. Therefore, she was entitled to an equal share in the property. These efforts to recognise women's labour must be accompanied by a structural reconfiguration of gendered social relations, wherein men actively participate in and co-shoulder care responsibilities. Without such a transformation, the burden of unpaid care work will remain disproportionately feminised. It will either continue to constrain the full participation of women in the formal economy or force women from marginalised socio-economic locations to sustain the reproductive labour of households where other women from dominant groups engage in formal employment.

Any revaluation of labour must also encompass the often invisible factor of emotional labour, which plays a critical role in sustaining households, communities and broader economic systems, yet remains systematically unacknowledged in policy and practice.

The writers acknowledge the help of Professors Rachel Rose, Eve Dickson, Shirin Rai, and Chris Newfield, and also Prof. Vanza Hamzic and Rashmi Satyal for inputs

Kerala's battles with the SIR

What has been palpable from the beginning is the trust deficit

STATE OF PLAY

Tiki Rajwi
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Over the past weeks, Kerala has had a roller-coaster ride with respect to the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls. The element of amusement has been missing from it. Of the 2.78 crore voters who were issued forms during the house-to-house enumeration phase, 24.08 lakh found themselves excluded when the draft roll was published on December 23 under the Election Commission of India (ECI)'s extended time-table. A further 19.32 lakh electors on the draft roll are in limbo – 'no mapping' cases in ECI parlance – as they could not be linked to the 2002 SIR roll, which serves as the base list.

Kerala is now in the phase where claims and objections by electors are being filed on the draft and notices for personal hearings are being issued to them. The office of the Chief Electoral Officer (Kerala) has said that election officials have generated 17.71 lakh notices and served 18,915 notices in the case of the 'No mapping' electors. Election officials maintain that excluded voters, if eligible, can still add their names by enrolling afresh using Form 6, or, in the case of overseas electors, Form 6A.

The CPI(M)-led Left Democratic Front (LDF) government and the State's political parties have repeatedly blamed the SIR for an injustice where voters are made to feel that their citizenship is in doubt. Citizens who have been active voters for decades stand deleted from the rolls just because they have been marked in the Absent/Shifted/Dead (ASD)

list as 'Untraceable' or 'EF Refused' (the ECI description for electors who decline to accept enumeration forms or return them). Political parties and individual electors have highlighted instances where such categorisations have been erroneous. The ASD list, in the case of some polling stations at least, has been outright unbelievable with over 500 voters listed as 'Untraceable', 'Permanently Shifted' or 'EF Refused'. These issues have grabbed the headlines with several citizens, high-profile individuals included, finding themselves in the ASD list or in the grey, fuzzy zone of 'No Mapping' electors.

Barring differences in the data, what is playing out in Kerala is likely to find an echo in other States where the SIR is on. But the huge expatriate population in Kerala makes some elements of Kerala's SIR singular in nature. Political parties allege that little has been done so far to ensure the inclusion of overseas electors. They have also asked the ECI to allow authorised representatives to appear on the behalf of such electors if they are summoned for hearings by the Electoral Registration Officers (ERO).

The fact that the SIR coincided with the 2025 local body elections – an overlap that led to much of the protest against the SIR – has also led to inevitable comparisons. The voter roll maintained by the State

Election Commission, which is responsible for the local body elections, listed 2.86 crore electors at the time of polling in December. The roll maintained in Kerala by the ECI, which handles the Assembly and Parliament elections, saw a dip from 2.78 crore voters to 2.54 crore voters after the publication of the draft SIR roll.

To be fair, the Kerala CEO has strived to make the SIR palatable and participatory by holding weekly meetings with the political parties and allowing a media presence. The CEO, Rathan U. Kelkar, has also said that all eligible electors will be included in the final list, to be published on February 21, and that there will be no harassment in the name of hearings. But what has been apparent and constant from the beginning is the trust deficit.

Political parties, primarily those aligned with the LDF and the Congress-led Opposition United Democratic Front (UDF), view the ECI and the SIR as convenient tools employed by the BJP and the RSS to further their larger political and ideological agenda. The hardship Kerala has had to undergo to secure extensions in its SIR schedule – the Supreme Court had to be petitioned at one point – has only served to strengthen such notions.

At this juncture, it is pertinent to remember that in the past, cumbersome nationwide exercises such as voter enrolment, the conduct of elections and the decennial Census have enjoyed the public perception of impartiality and bureaucratic efficiency. To say that public trust in the SIR hinges on guaranteeing the inclusion of all eligible voters in the roll in a trouble-free, citizen-friendly atmosphere would not be overstating it.

India loses 0.4% of its GDP every year to natural disasters

As the scale of economic loss escalates, disaster risk finance has moved to the forefront of policy

DATA POINT

The Hindu Data Team

Emerging Asian economies that comprise India, China, and the ASEAN-11, face an escalating threat from natural disasters that are growing in both frequency and intensity (**Chart 1**). Over the past decade, the region has had an average of 100 disasters annually, impacting approximately 80 million people. The nature of these threats varies by geography: while floods and storms are the primary drivers of risk in India, tropical cyclones frequently batter the Philippines and Vietnam. Meanwhile, China and Indonesia contend with significantly higher seismic risks (**Chart 2**). The human and economic toll of this vulnerability has been punctuated by several landmark catastrophes.

As the scale of economic loss escalates (**Chart 3**), disaster risk finance has moved to the forefront of regional policy. To design an effective response, governments must first establish a data-driven foundation. From 1990 to 2024, India sustained average annual disaster-related losses equivalent to 0.4% of GDP (**Chart 4**). The composition of these losses is geographically distinct. India's vulnerability is primarily hydrological (non-storm-related floods and landslides), whereas Myanmar's losses are predominantly meteorological (extreme temperatures and cyclonic storms).

The regional risk framework also includes climatological factors (drought and wildfire), and geophysical hazards (seismic activity and volcanic eruptions) too. Among the Asian economies analysed, India ranks second only to the Philippines in the World Risk Index (**Chart 5**). The index calculates risk as the geometric mean of exposure (population burden) and vulnerability (a combination of structural susceptibility, coping capacity, and long-term adaptation).

Asia's climate bill is rising

The charts were sourced from the OECD development centre's "Economic Outlook for Southeast Asia, China and India 2025: Enhancing Disaster Risk Financing" report released in December 2024.

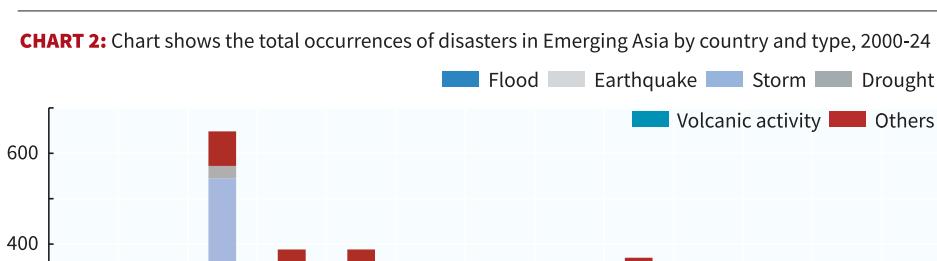
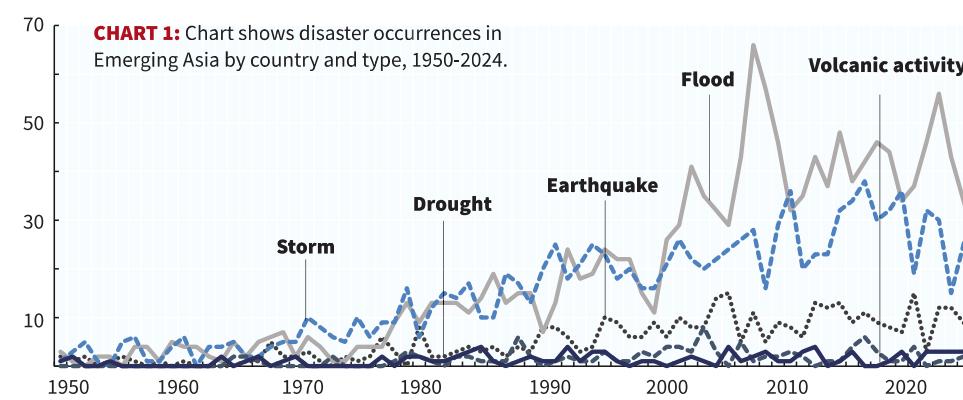
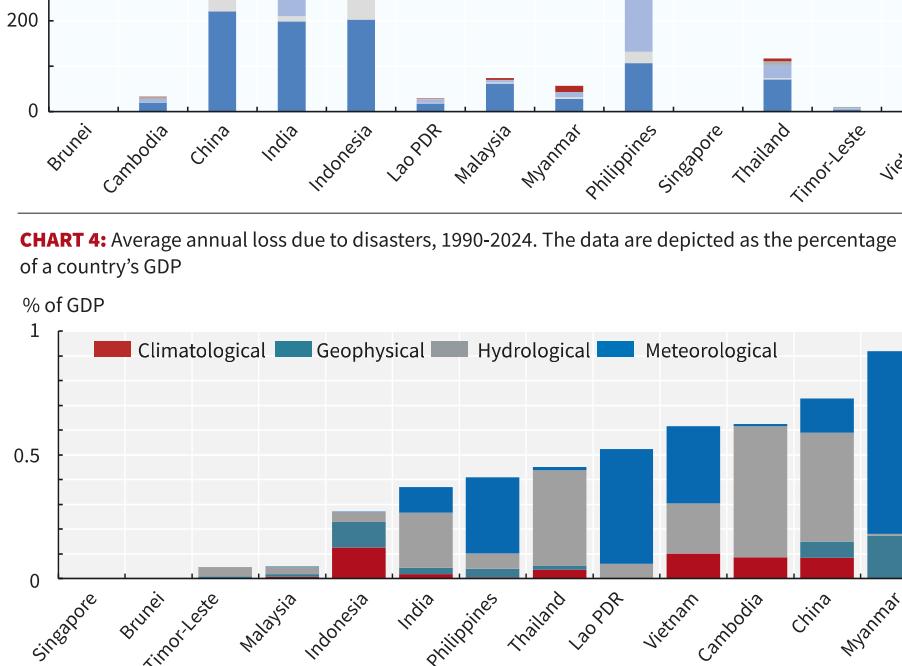


CHART 4: Average annual loss due to disasters, 1990-2024. The data are depicted as the percentage of a country's GDP



Counting losses: A convenience shop owner assesses the damage after floods in southern Thailand in November 2025. AP

CHART 3: Total disaster-related damage among Emerging Asian countries (1980-2024). The data are depicted in \$ billion

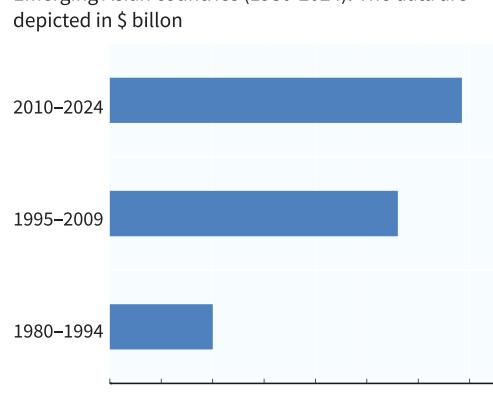
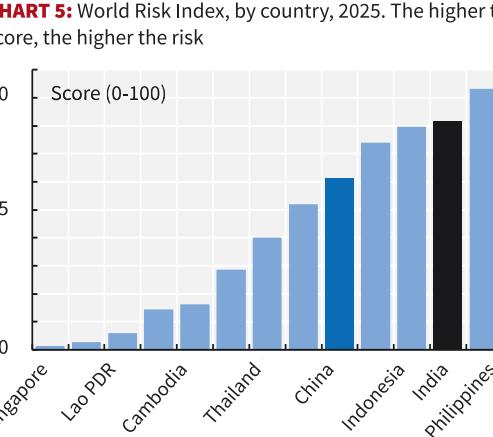


CHART 4: World Risk Index, by country, 2025. The higher the score, the higher the risk



FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Hindu

FIFTY YEARS AGO JANUARY 5, 1976

Foreign specialists to study SITE

United Nations, Jan. 4: A team of specialists in space technology and high-level mass media officials from 14 developing countries will visit India this month for an in-depth study of the Satellite Instructional Television Experiment (SITE) launched by India to accelerate national development through community television programmes.

The Indian experiment, started in August last, has created widespread interest among the developing countries facing similar communications problems in carrying knowledge and information on agriculture, animal husbandry, family planning and other developmental concerns to the rural millions. The countries that will be represented in the visiting team are: Bolivia, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Kenya, Kuwait, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippines, Sudan, Thailand, Tunisia and Turkey.

In line with its policy of sharing the benefits of its technological advance and systems planning, India recently offered to the United Nations to host representatives from interested developing countries to a "Winter School" to explain how India planned and implemented the SITE as a means of breaking the barrier hindering the advancement of the rural masses.

The U.N. accepted the offer and decided to include the Indian "Winter School" programme in the U.N. programme on Space Applications for 1976. The UNESCO is also being associated with the programme.

The team will be accompanied by the U.N. expert on space applications, Mr. H.G.S. Murthy.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO JANUARY 5, 1926

Protection for the ship-building trade

Calcutta, Jan. 4: Messrs. J.H. Bates and W.B. Balfour, on behalf of Messrs. Burn and Company, gave evidence before the Tariff Board to-day. They stated that the need for protective duties on imported vessels and their component parts was at present greater than in the year 1923. That was because of the imposition of a protective duty on steel and galvanised sheet, the rise in the exchange affecting home fabrication costs and the fall in the price of steel.

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Share of psychiatric patients who did not receive timely care

80 in per cent. The Indian Psychiatric Society has expressed deep concern over the high mental health treatment gap in India, noting that nearly 80-85% of individuals do not receive timely or appropriate care. This stark reality was highlighted during the curtain raiser event of the 77th Annual National Conference of the Indian Psychiatric Society. PTI

Percentage increase in unsold homes in 2025 across top seven cities

4 in per cent. Unsold housing units rose to nearly 5.77 lakh units last year across seven major cities as supply of new homes exceeded demand, according to Anarock. Housing sales in these cities fell 14% annually last year. As per the data, the unsold housing stock fell in Mumbai Metropolitan Region and Hyderabad, but rose in Delhi-NCR, Pune, Chennai, Bengaluru and Kolkata. PTI

Share of MoUs signed in Tamil Nadu since 2021 under execution

80 in per cent. Tamil Nadu has attracted investments to the tune of ₹12.16 lakh crore since 2021 and about 80% of the MoUs signed by the government are under various stages of execution, State Industries Minister T. R. B. Rajaa said. He stressed nearly 80% of the MoUs signed as on date were under various stages of execution. PTI

Number of cities in Iran affected by sporadic protests

40 Sporadic protests broke out in the Iranian capital on Saturday evening, according to local media, which also reported intensifying clashes in the west of the country. The demonstrations first kicked off last Sunday when shopkeepers staged a strike over economic concerns, but have since spread in size and scope, with protesters making political demands. AFP

Yemeni separatists killed in fighting, strikes since Friday

80 At least 80 troops from Yemen's secessionist Southern Transitional Council (STC) have been killed in fighting with Saudi-backed forces and strikes since Friday, a military official said on Sunday. At least 152 members of the UAE-backed STC forces were wounded and 130 were taken captive, the official added. AFP

COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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The uncertainty after Maduro

The U.S. apprehends Nicolás Maduro to face charges of drug trafficking and narco-terrorism, following months of pressure on Venezuela; Republican hawks hope for regime change, but most of the government and military remain intact; removing Maduro alone is unlikely to transform politics and may spark challenges

WORLD INSIGHT

Andrew Gawthorpe

Venezuela's president, Nicolás Maduro, has been apprehended and flown to the U.S., where the U.S. attorney-general has announced he will face charges of drug trafficking and narco-terrorism. The U.S. military's operation to snatch Mr. Maduro was carried out in the early hours of January 3 and follows months of steadily mounting pressure on the Venezuelan government.

Now it appears that the U.S. operation to remove a leader it has designated as a "narco-terrorist" has come to fruition. But whether the capture and removal of Mr. Maduro will lead to regime change in the oil-rich Latin American country remains unclear at present.

The U.S. campaign against Venezuela is the product of two distinct policy impulses within the Donald Trump administration. The first is the long-held desire of many Republican hawks, including U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio, to force regime change in Caracas. They detest Venezuela's socialist government and see overturning it as an opportunity to appeal to conservative Hispanic voters in the U.S.

The second impulse is more complex. Mr. Trump campaigned for election in 2024 on the idea that his administration would not become involved in foreign conflicts. But his administration claims that Venezuela's government and military are involved in drug trafficking, which, in Washington's thinking, makes them terrorist organisations that are harming the American people. As head of the country's government, Mr. Maduro, according to the Trump administration's logic, is responsible for that.

During Mr. Trump's first administration, his Department of Justice indicted Mr. Maduro on charges of "narco-terrorism". Now U.S. Attorney General Pam Bondi says there might be a new indictment which also covers Mr. Maduro's wife, who was taken into detention with him. The fact that U.S. law enforcement was involved in their capture reinforces the idea that they will now face those charges in a New York court, despite an early claim by opposition sources in Venezuela that Mr. Maduro's departure may have been negotiated with the U.S. government.

What comes next?

The big question is what comes next in Venezuela, and whether either the Republican hawks or the "America first" crowd will get the outcome that they want: ongoing U.S. military presence to "finish the job" or simply a show of U.S. strength to punish its adversary which doesn't involve a lengthy American involvement.

The U.S. has discovered time and again in recent decades that it is extremely difficult to dictate the political futures of foreign countries with military force. The White House might want to see the emergence of a non-socialist government in Caracas, as well as one which cracks down on the drug trade.

But simply removing Mr. Maduro and dropping some bombs is unlikely to achieve that goal after nearly three decades of building up the regime under Mr. Maduro and his predecessor Hugo Chavez.

The Trump administration could have learned this lesson from Libya, whose dictatorial government the U.S. and its



Frayed tempers: A supporter of Nicolás Maduro waves a national flag while standing on a median strip in Caracas, Venezuela, on Saturday. AP

aliates overthrew in 2011. The country collapsed into chaos soon after, inflicting widespread suffering on its own citizens and creating problems for its neighbours.

In the case of Venezuela, it is unlikely that the American military's strikes alone will be enough to fatally undermine its government. Mr. Maduro may be gone, but the vast majority of the country's governmental and military apparatus remains intact. Power will likely pass to a new figure in the regime. The White House may dream that popular protests will break out against the government following Mr. Maduro's ousting. But history shows that people usually react to being bombed by a foreign power by rallying around the flag, not turning against their leaders.

Nor would Venezuela's descent into chaos be likely to help the Trump administration achieve its goals. Conflict in Venezuela could generate new refugee flows which would eventually reach America's southern border. The collapse of central government authority would be likely to create a more conducive environment for drug trafficking. Widespread internal violence and human rights violations could hardly be portrayed as a victory to the crucial

conservative Hispanic voting bloc. If the Trump administration dreams of establishing a stable, pro-American government in Caracas, it is going to have to do more than just arrest Mr. Maduro. Bringing about durable regime change typically involves occupying a country with ground troops and engaging in "nation building". The U.S. tried this with decidedly mixed results in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Mr. Trump has pledged to avoid such entanglements and Mr. Rubio has said that, for now at least, the U.S. has no plans for further military action against Venezuela. Mr. Trump has a penchant for flashy, quick wins, particularly in foreign policy. He may hope to tout Mr. Maduro's capture as a victory and move on to other matters.

Nation-building failures
In almost no recent U.S. military intervention did the American government set out to engage in nation-building right from the beginning. The perceived need to shepherd a new government into existence has typically only come to be felt when the limits of what can be accomplished by military force alone become apparent.

The war in Afghanistan, for instance, started as a war of revenge for the terrorist attacks on the U.S. on September 11, 2001, before transforming into a 20-year nation-building commitment. In Iraq, the Bush administration thought that it could depose Saddam Hussein and leave within a few months. The U.S. ended up staying for nearly a decade.

It's hard to imagine Mr. Trump walking down the same path, if only because he has always portrayed nation-building as a waste of American lives and treasure. But that still leaves him with no plausible way to achieve the divergent political outcomes he, his supporters and America's foreign policy establishment want with the tools that he has at his disposal.

Meanwhile, the U.S. president will face pressure from a range of constituencies from Republican hawks to conservative Hispanic voters to force wholesale regime change in Venezuela. How Mr. Trump responds to that pressure will determine the future course of U.S. policy towards the country.

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THE GIST

▼ The U.S. apprehends Venezuelan president Nicolás Maduro and flies him to the United States to face charges of drug trafficking and narco-terrorism, marking the culmination of months of mounting pressure on Caracas.

▼ Removing a leader through force or arrest has rarely delivered stable political outcomes, as past U.S. interventions show.

Without nation-building or long-term engagement, U.S. goals of a non-socialist, stable government in Caracas are unlikely to be achieved.

WORLD INSIGHT

Political instability, constitutional change, and the military's hold over Pakistan

Pakistan's political history shows a recurring pattern in which civilian governments struggle to assert authority amid deep social divisions and weak institutions; the appointment of Asim Munir as Chief of Defence Force reflects continuity rather than rupture in how power operates in the country

Dhananjay Tripathi

Tabshir Shams

In December 4, 2025, Pakistan witnessed something both familiar and unsettling. Field Marshal Asim Munir was formally appointed the country's first Chief of Defence Force (CDF) while still serving as Chief of Army Staff (COAS). Recent constitutional amendments handed him extensive authority. Many analysts quietly described it as a silent coup, as no military on the streets, no dramatic announcements, just a slow tightening of control.

By late 2025, Pakistan had already experienced yet another shift in real power. The 27th Amendment ushered in legal immunity, curtailed judicial oversight, and centralised unprecedented authority in the hands of the military leadership.

Gen. Asim Munir's rise did not happen overnight. After Operation Sindoor, where the public was told that Pakistan gained the upper hand against India, his stature grew. His meetings with world leaders, sometimes overshadowing the civilian Prime Minister, Shehbaz Sharif, reinforced the impression that Pakistan's elected government was no longer steering the ship.

The first coup

Pakistan's early years were turbulent. After Partition in 1947, seven Prime Ministers came and went within just 11 years. Behind these political tremors lay a society divided along ethnic, linguistic, and regional lines.

One of the major factors behind political tension was language. The founding fathers made Urdu the national language, contemplating it to be a unifying force. However, Urdu was spoken by only 3-5% of the population. Bangla, on the other hand, was the mother tongue of more than 50%. In 1952, widespread protests erupted in Dhaka demanding the recognition of Bangla and protesting the systemic neglect of East Pakistan. This mobilisation on linguistic grounds gradually led to the rise of Sheikh Mujibur Rehman.

In 1958, a dramatic confrontation between Prime Minister Feroz Khan Noon and President Iskander Mirza opened the door for the military's entry into politics. Mirza dismissed the Prime Minister, imposed martial law, and appointed General Ayub Khan as Chief Martial Law Administrator. Gen. Ayub had his own ambitions. Within weeks, he ousted Mirza, sent him abroad, and assumed control.

Gen. Ayub justified the takeover in his political autobiography, *Friends not Masters*. "From a soldier's position. There would be large-scale disturbances across the country, and the civil authority, already groaning under the heels of politicians, would be incapable of dealing with the situation. It was the Army alone that could step into the breach." Thus, by imposing martial law, Gen. Ayub thought he was shaping Pakistan's destiny.

In 1959, Gen. Ayub declared himself Field Marshal without having won any war. It was Field Marshal Ayub Khan, who later planned Operation Gibraltar and Grand Slam in 1965. Operation Gibraltar was to invoke a local uprising in Kashmir, while Grand Slam aimed to capture Akhnoor, which, according to him, was



Big move: Field Marshal Asim Munir was formally appointed the country's first Chief of Defence Force while still serving as Chief of Army Staff. AFP

the "jugular vein of India". These plans failed. The war that followed left Pakistan shaken, and Gen. Ayub politically vulnerable and unpopular across the country.

From Ayub to Yahya Khan

As the 1960s drew to a close, Ayub's rule became increasingly fragile. Economic inequality grew, protests erupted, and the once-popular military ruler found himself unwelcome on the streets. In 1969, exhausted and isolated, he handed power to another military chief, General Yahya Khan.

Gen. Yahya presided over Pakistan's first general elections in 1970, a moment filled with promise. But when Sheikh Mujibur Rahman won a majority in East Pakistan, while Zulfikar Ali Bhutto dominated the West, the military and the West Pakistani elite refused to accept the democratic outcome. What followed was brutal repression in East Pakistan, a mass uprising, and eventually the 1971 war with India that ultimately left Pakistan divided, with the emergence of Bangladesh. The defeat and surrender in Dhaka dealt a severe blow to Pakistan's national psyche. Facing public anger and opposition within the army, Gen. Yahya stepped down in December 1971.

The Zia years

As Pakistan attempted to rebuild, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto emerged as the political leader. But even Bhutto's charisma and brilliance could not bridge Pakistan's internal divides. His political style alienated various groups, especially Urdu-speaking citizens who felt marginalised. Moreover, the disputed 1977 elections plunged the

country into chaos.

At this juncture, Army Chief General Zia-ul-Haq seized power under Operation Fair Play, ousted Bhutto, and later sent him to the gallows – a wound that still aches in Pakistan's collective memory.

Gen. Zia ruled for 11 years. Always smiling in photographs, he combined discipline and ruthlessness. Under his regime, blasphemy laws were tightened, jihadist ideology took root, textbooks were rewritten, and opponents were crushed. Contrarily, Pakistan's economic growth improved, but Ayesha Siddiqa, in *Military Inc.*, calls it "rentier economic growth," fuelled by foreign aid and the Afghan jihad rather than domestic strength. Smuggling networks, weapons trafficking, and informal markets flourished under Gen. Zia. It was also Gen. Zia who planned terrorism in Kashmir.

His death in a mysterious plane crash in 1988 ended an authoritarian era, but not the military's hold over Pakistan's destiny.

A General as Chief Executive

Benazir Bhutto won the 1988 elections, becoming the hope of a wounded nation. But the Army establishment soon clipped her wings, and her government fell within two years. The main reason was that Benazir was asserting herself and developing differences with the then Army chief Mirza Aslam Beg.

The 1990s saw a cycle of hope and disappointment. Governments fell one after another – Sharif, Benazir, Sharif again – as Pakistan struggled to define democracy. In 1999, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif reached out to India. The

image of Atal Bihari Vajpayee's bus rolling into Lahore inspired many across South Asia. But while the leaders extended hands of peace, the Pakistani Army was planning something else. General Pervez Musharraf secretly launched Operation Koh-e-Paima (Kargil), hoping to seize strategic heights in Kashmir. This operation, carried out during India's peace efforts, damaged Pakistan's credibility and destroyed trust between Gen. Musharraf and Mr. Sharif. By October 1999, Gen. Musharraf overthrew the elected government.

Unlike past dictators, Gen. Musharraf presented himself as a reformer, promoting media openness, decentralisation, and "enlightened moderation." But beneath the modern veneer, the military footprint remained strong. A series of crises, the suspension of Chief Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry, the Lal Masjid siege, and Benazir's tragic assassination eroded Gen. Musharraf's support. His party collapsed in the 2008 elections, and he stepped aside.

From favourite to foe

Between 2008 and 2018, Pakistan saw four Prime Ministers – Yousaf Raza Gilani, Raja Pervaiz Ashraf, Nawaz Sharif, and Shahid Khaqan Abbasi – none completing a full term. The civilian-military tension remained a defining feature of governance.

In 2018, Imran Khan, once the Army's favourite, rose to power with promises of reform and justice. Many in the Pakistani army believed he would be different. But like Bhutto and Mr. Nawaz, he eventually challenged the very institution that had helped elevate him. The moment he tried to assert autonomy, he faced resistance. Mr. Imran Khan became the first Pakistani Prime Minister to be removed through a no-confidence vote. Soon after, he was entangled in court cases, his party's election symbol was stripped, and he was jailed.

Yet in the 2024 elections, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf-backed independents won more than 90 seats, a testament to his enduring popularity. Even so, a coalition led by Shehbaz Sharif, supported implicitly by the Army, formed the government.

Mr. Imran Khan remains popular but powerless, a reminder that in Pakistan, public support alone does not guarantee political survival.

Why the pattern persists

Since its birth, Pakistan's civilian governments have struggled to control the state. The early loss of Jinnah, deep ethnic and linguistic divides, corruption, radicalisation, geopolitical entanglements, and the persistent weakness of civilian institutions have all allowed the military to emerge as the country's most cohesive and powerful organisation.

The rise of Gen. Asim Munir is, therefore, not extraordinary. It is simply another chapter in the same story.

Until Pakistan rebuilds its political institutions, heals its internal divides, and strengthens civilian governance, the cycle will continue, and the military will remain the shadow behind every government – silent, steady, and always present.

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

THE DAILY QUIZ

A quiz on former India cricketer Mansur Ali Khan Pataudi on his 85th birth anniversary

V. V. Ramanan

QUESTION 1

He became the Nawab of Pataudi in 1952 on the death of his father. Where is Pataudi located in independent India?

QUESTION 2

Mansur Ali Khan was an Oxford Blue and the first Indian captain there. At which Oxford college did he study?

QUESTION 3

Why is July 1, 1961, an important date in the life and career of Mansur Ali Khan?

QUESTION 4

Following an injury to regular skipper Nari Contractor, Mansur Ali Khan became the

youngest Test captain ever at 21 years and 77 days. Against which country?

QUESTION 5

Thanks to his superb athletic ability and speed while (particularly) patrolling the cover area, what nickname was given to him?

QUESTION 6

Under his captaincy, India scored its first-ever series win overseas in 1968. Against which country?

QUESTION 7

Name his popular actor wife and son.



Visual Question:
Name the trophy, instituted in 2007 to mark India's 75th anniversary of its first-ever Test against England, that Mansur Ali Khan is handing over to Rahul Dravid. GETTY IMAGES

Questions and Answers to the previous day's daily quiz: 1. Many years ago, a couple of paintings of this Post-Impressionist artist were stolen from a museum in Amsterdam, but they were also recovered quickly. This artist died by suicide. Name the artist. **Ans: Van Gogh**

2. Last year, a gang of thieves broke into the Louvre Museum in Paris and stole the French crown jewels. Some of them belonged to an empress, who was the wife of Napoleon III. **Ans: Eugénie**

3. Some people believe that this painting by da Vinci shot further to fame only after it was stolen. Today, it can be found in a museum in a bulletproof glass display case and visitors are allowed to stare at it only for about 15 seconds. **Ans: Mona Lisa**

4. This painting has been stolen twice and recovered. It shows an agonised face against a colourful sky lit up by a setting sun. **Ans: The Scream**

5. In 2008, an 11th-century Chola bronze sculpture of Dancing Shiva was stolen from a temple in Tamil Nadu and sold to a

museum in Australia. An art dealer was found responsible and emerged as a major antiquities smuggler. **Ans: Subhash Kapoor**

Visual: A stolen painting from Italy by artist X was found in a black

bag by a gardener in 1997. X was a huge source of inspiration for

the Indian designer, Rahul Mishra. Name X. **Ans: Gustav Klimt**

Early Birds: K.N. Viswanathan | Erfanly Oosmany | Parimal Das | Rajvi Sharma | M. Suresh Kumar



KNOW YOUR ENGLISH

She sounded contrite after the meeting

It will take you a couple of months to learn the ropes

S. Upendran

What is the meaning and origin of the expression 'know one's ropes'? (J. Aditya, Chennai)

An individual who 'knows the ropes' is someone who is experienced; he is not only good at his job, but also knows the rules and regulations. He is someone who can get things done, and also, guide others.

If you have problems, talk to Sharma. He is patient and knows the ropes.

A person who has just joined a profession and needs to figure out how things are done, has to 'learn the ropes'.

As to the origin, both come from the world of sailing. In the past, when ships depended on the wind to get from one place to another, one of the important things that every sailor had to learn was how to tie different types of knots. When he became proficient, he applied the newly-acquired skill in securing the various sails and masts of a ship.

How is the word 'contrite' pronounced? (S. Dilip, Vellore)

How you pronounce the word depends on which side of the Atlantic you are from. The British tend to pronounce the first vowel like the 'a' in 'china', and then rhyme the second syllable with 'right', 'bright' and 'fright'. They pronounce the word 'ken-TRITE', with the stress on the second syllable. Many Americans, on the other hand, rhyme the first syllable with 'con', 'don' and 'on'; they pronounce the word CON-trite, with the stress on the first syllable. The word comes from the Latin 'conterere', meaning 'to grind or wear down'. Nowadays, the word is mostly used to mean to feel extremely sorry about something bad you have said or done – there is a sense of genuine regret in your apology.

Meera looked and sounded contrite when she apologised.

The Minister was adamant that he had done nothing to be contrite about.

What is the meaning of 'Gen Z stare'? (S. Mukesh, Lucknow)

Every generation born after the Second World War has been given a label. Those born between mid 1940s and 1960s are called 'Baby boomers'; the generations that followed are labelled 'Generation X' (1965-79), Generation Y (1980-95), and Generation Z (1996-2014), respectively. We all have something good and bad to say about the generation that follows ours. As far as Gen Z is concerned, one thing that everyone agrees on is that the people born during this period are tech-savvy. But the problem is, these individuals are so dependent on their computers, cell phones, etc. that they are at a loss without them.

When they are asked a very simple question like 'How may I help you?', they merely look at the individual awkwardly and provide no verbal response. The expressionless stare that the people of this generation give when asked a simple question is known as the 'Gen Z stare'. It is an expression coined by social media.

When he asks his students questions about their plans, all he gets is the Gen Z stare.

All parents have experienced the Gen Z stare.

upendrankye@gmail.com

Word of the day

Disparate:

fundamentally different or distinct in quality or kind

Synonyms: contrary, diverse, unrelated

Usage: The report combines disparate ideas.

Pronunciation: newsth.live/disparatepro

International Phonetic Alphabet: /dɪspərət/

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

Challenges from abroad

Financial sector robust, but external risks abound

The recently released Financial Stability Report (FSR) has taken a rather serious view of global risks to the financial system arising out of geo-politics and trade, while emphasising that India's financial system is well placed to weather turbulence and shocks.



The report flags the fragility arising out of "AI optimism" and the growth of stablecoins, with ample liquidity supporting "risk-on" sentiment across asset classes. Remarkably, it hints at dangers of "rising interconnectedness" across assets, pointing to high hedge funds leverage and opaque private credit markets. In India's case, however, there is no major cause for worry as balance sheets are sound across the corporate, banks and NBFC segments and reserves are ample. But uncertainties could increase exchange rate volatility, dampen trade and reduce corporate earnings, the FSR says. A sharp correction in US equities could impact domestic equities and tighten financial conditions, it observes. However, the asset quality of Indian banks has improved with the reduction in risky infrastructure and project finance lending. Gross NPAs and net NPAs were down to historic lows of 2.2 per cent and 0.5 per cent, respectively, by September 2025. Capital buffers are also robust with capital to risk assets ratio at 17.2 per cent and liquidity coverage ratio at 131.7 per cent, which are well above the statutory requirements.

But the shift in bank credit from large industries to retail loans is not necessarily desirable. Credit growth to large companies has slowed to 5.8 per cent by September 2025. But, in their bid to grow their business, banks have increased their unsecured retail loan portfolios, which carry higher risk. The gross NPAs remain elevated in this category at 1.8 per cent compared to 1.1 per cent for retail advances in general. Private sector banks have been taking higher risk in this category, holding 56.8 per cent of unsecured retail credit as of September 2025 and accounting for 75.8 per cent slippages in this category.

The report also flags a few challenges for banks. One, banks are finding it hard to garner deposits, as markets are offering attractive returns. With banks also raising funds at a higher rate from the bond market, their net interest margins could come under pressure. Two, the steepening of the yield curve and increasing spread between State government securities and G-secs is leading to more funds being parked in the former, especially by private sector banks. State government bonds held by private banks have registered 29 per cent increase in September 2025, year on year. This trend can impact credit growth. Three, the rise in bond yields will impact treasury income, as a third of banks' income comes from other income. Four, increase in acquisition of loans originated by NBFCs by banks through securitisation, pass through certificates and co-lending arrangements can create problems as the quality of these assets is inferior to their own. In sum, this is a time for cautious optimism.

FROM THE VIEWROOM.

Don't let the dogs down

PT Jyothi Datta

For several animal lovers in the country, the new year brings in sleepless nights and anxiety, as the fate of community dogs on the streets and in residential and office buildings continues under a dark cloud. A Supreme Court hearing on managing community dogs is expected this week. But against the backdrop of this discussion, well-meaning citizens working for the welfare of neighbourhood animals have been threatened, or have had to go searching for community dogs and have them picked up and relocated. It's the same story, be it Mumbai, Bengaluru or Chennai.

Picking up all community dogs because a few are reportedly aggressive is as illogical as taking all cars off the road because of a car accident; or attacking all men, when a rape is reported.

Countries including Bhutan and the Netherlands, for example, have illustrated scientifically on how community dog numbers can be managed, without cruelty. It's called Animal Birth Control

(ABC) — involving sterilising the animal and returning it to the exact location from where it was picked up; besides promoting the adoption of local dogs.

Community dogs are in the dock today, because the birth control programmes seen ineffective or tardy implementation. This has been pointed out by bureaucrats, politicians, actors, and citizens — many coming out on Sunday to say, "Awara Nahin, Hamara Ha" (community dogs belong to the community). Government data for 2024 (January to December) puts the number of rabies cases (death) at 54 — nowhere close to the 20,000 bandied in reports, say representatives involved with animal welfare. While even one case is one too many, addressing it needs to be done along with authentic pro-animal groups and feeders. Locking dogs away for life in ill-budgeted shelters will be a source for zoonotic diseases, besides a death sentence to community dogs who are companions to even the poorest of the poor, besides being unofficial guardians of our streets. In their welfare, lies our welfare too.

◎ BELOW THE LINE



Oil and cricket

With debates and discussions happening on whether the US strike on Venezuela was all about oil, all eyes are on how the crude oil market

will open on Monday. Meanwhile, the social media is flooded with some interesting narratives and diggs. A tweet on Iceland Cricket@icelandcricket — the official X page of the Icelandic Cricket Association — read: "Venezuela has oil. Greenland has rare earth minerals. Luckily Iceland has only volcanoes, glaciers, and very average cricketers." The same was updated with: "Our players have requested a change to the tone of this post. They did not

like being referred to as 'very average' and instead prefer the term 'seriously overwhelming'. So much for oil! **Election bonanza** One of the topics that invariably crops up when people meet in Chennai or other parts of Tamil Nadu is politics. People ask about the impact of actor Vijay, whose TVK party is set to debut in the polls this year. Some among the youth seem to be crazy about the actor, though no one is sure whom they will vote for. However, the ruling DMK has hit the

panic button, going by its approach to the Tiruparkundram issue, the introduction of an assured pension scheme for government employees and doling out ₹3,000 to below poverty line families as a Pongal gift. **A search for exit** Covering any event with top ministers in attendance comes with its own set of challenges. Take the case of a recent college event in Chennai that saw a top Union Minister grace the occasion. While it is understandable that one has to be seated almost an hour before the

Minister and his Z Security team arrive, the exit from the campus proved to be a 'Hunger Games' style maze challenge. Every lane that we drove into was barricaded, with security officials asking us to take diversion. After many diversions, which even flummoxed the security, we were back where we started — at the auditorium. Finally, after some more manoeuvring, we hit the exit gate. Maybe, next time, the logistics team could use AI and map routes. **Our Bureaus**

The coming decline of parivars

Both major political protagonists might be drifting away further from their respective parivars

LINE &
LENGTH.

TCA SRINIVASA RAGHAVAN

With everyone else writing about Venezuela, it seems necessary to draw attention to major phenomena in Indian politics. Observers of them are now agog with two delicious speculations. One pertains to the Gandhi family. The other to the prime minister.

The former is whether Priyanka Gandhi will replace her brother Rahul as the Congress president. The latter is about whether Narendra Modi will — as Margaret Thatcher aspired to — go on and on and on. Or not.

The speculation about the Gandhi family arises from a number of factors, the most important of which is that Rahul Gandhi is a terrible politician. He has lost almost 100 elections since he became the party's leader.

His sister hasn't done much better but the BJP is happily encouraging talk about a rift in the family late. It's hard to tell why. She is seen as a people's person, in contrast to Rahul, who is regarded as very inept when it comes to people.

In all this the role of Sonia Gandhi is unclear. But everything is indicative of her helplessness. This is perhaps what is emboldening members of the party to start murmuring about Rahul's continued usefulness.

Way back in 2004 when brother and sister joined politics I had pointed out two things. One, that the fourth generation of any dynasty anywhere in the world presides over its emasculation and eventual disappearance.

Two, that Rahul and Priyanka are like Bonnie Prince Charlie, grandson of James II in England. During the first half of the 18th century he wanted to regain the British crown only to fail after two decades of trying. But he had a lot of popular support.

This is where the Congress stands now. It has about 20 per cent of the popular vote but is totally bereft of effective political leadership.

A 3-4 per cent increase in vote share is what it needs to tip the BJP off its current perch. But it has neither the organisation nor the leadership to do that.



THE MODI PROBLEM

Paradoxically, the BJP has a similar problem that it needs someone to succeed Narendra Modi but there's no one in sight. And just as no one can challenge the Gandhi family's dominance, no one can challenge the Modi dominance.

This TINA thing will probably enable him to carry on for several years. But the Welles Hangen question — After Nehru, Who? — will remain.

When Nehru died in May 1964 the Congress leadership chose Lal Bahadur Shastri. But unfortunately he died in January 1966. It then chose Indira Gandhi who was soon challenged by Morarji Desai. She outmanoeuvred him

completely, in a manner not unlike how

In the 27 years since 1998 the incumbent prime minister has never been openly challenged from within their parties. This situation is likely to continue

Modi outmanoeuvred LK Advani to become the party's choice for PM.

In 1977, Morarji was finally made prime minister, but over the claims of Jagjivan Ram and Charan Singh. Both abandoned him in 1979 and Charan Singh actually became prime minister for six months, albeit in a caretaker capacity.

After that Indira Gandhi and her family ruled the Congress roost until PV Narasimha Rao became prime minister in 1991. But he was soon challenged by Arjun Singh and ND Tiwari who left the party but failed to do anything much.

After the 1996 general election Rao was succeeded by two nondescript politicians from the Opposition for about a year each. Their government fell in 1998.

And here's the thing: in the 27 years since then the incumbent prime minister has never been openly challenged from within their parties. This situation is likely to continue unless someone from within the BJP plays a Tendulkar type of match winning innings and emerges as an alternative to Modi just as Advani did to Modiji in September 2013.

THE UMBILICAL CORD

There is another aspect to it all. Back in 2010 I had written an article in this newspaper that the BJP needed to rid itself of the RSS and the Congress needed to rid itself of the Gandhi family. That process has perhaps now begun.

Two years ago a challenger appeared for the post of Congress president. He didn't have the family's approval and lost.

But it was the second stirring of an idea that started with the letter that 22 senior Congress leaders wrote to the party president.

A third was when Digvijay asked Rahul to emulate the RSS.

As to the BJP, for the first time ever, it's not a RSS man who has been appointed as its president. Nitin Nabi might be a nobody but he is an out and out Modi-Shah choice. The RSS has acquiesced.

That's why, as the saying goes, there's a flutter in the political dovecotes. Change is in the air. 2026 will clarify things even more, wherein both the major political protagonists may well be seen drifting away further from their respective parivars.

US' action in Venezuela, a dangerous precedent

It risks the gradual erosion of the rules-based international order that major powers themselves claim to uphold

Deepanshu Mohan

On January 3, large-scale US airstrikes on Caracas were set against the backdrop of heightened tensions in the Caribbean and recent interdictions of vessels alleged to be carrying narcotics in Venezuelan waters. The White House framed 'this operation' as a necessary effort aimed at dismantling narco-terrorist efforts threatening to destabilise the region.

It is important to situate America's aggressive military action into perspective. The large-scale operation on Venezuelan territory and the capture of its leader is based on much more than just the drug-trafficking and weapons charges being levelled against the Venezuelan President.

President Donald Trump alleged that Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro maintained close ties with powerful drug cartels responsible for the flow of narcotics into the US, contributing to rising overdose deaths, and that his government possessed dangerous weapons hostile to US interests.

Long-standing concerns over irregular migration from the southern hemisphere were also folded into this narrative, with the President claiming that Caracas deliberately emptied its prisons and facilitated the entry of criminals and patients from mental institutions into the US, claims that critics argue may serve as post hoc justification for the use of force.

Reports suggesting the capture of

President Maduro, however, point towards objectives extending beyond law enforcement. They indicate a possible attempt to operationalise regime change, consistent with a revamped US national security strategy that treats American primacy in the Western Hemisphere as non-negotiable.

Venezuela's close relationship with the Kremlin under its left-leaning government thus appears to be a central trigger for Washington's response.

The White House has since stated that it seeks to oversee a "safe, orderly, and judicious" transition of power in Venezuela, signalling continued US involvement in the country's political future. Alongside this, Washington indicated plans to revive Venezuela's oil sector, a move with clear strategic benefits given that the country holds the world's largest proven oil reserves. The promise of economic reconstruction, however, remains inseparable from the political and geopolitical costs of the intervention.

THE REAL STAKES

The American operation reveals a broader geo-economic strategy embedded in US-Latin America relations, one that extends beyond counter-narcotics justifications. It unfolded against the backdrop of Venezuela's vast hydrocarbon reserves and Maduro's sustained refusal to reopen large-scale oil trade or allow meaningful American corporate participation in Venezuela's energy sector.

As a result, US business involvement



EYEING. Venezuela's oil reserves REUTERS

and extraction activity in Venezuela have remained negligible, while China has emerged as the country's principal importer of crude oil.

Despite economic decline, Venezuela remains central to global energy markets and US strategic competition with China and Russia. Even as the US administration urged renewed engagement, American oil firms reportedly stayed away amid political volatility, making regime change and the prospect of a US-backed government increasingly appealing.

Legally, the strike sits on uncertain ground. International law prohibits the use of force against another state's territory unless authorised by the United Nations Security Council or justified as self-defence against an armed attack.

Drug trafficking, however serious, does not meet that threshold under established international jurisprudence and violates an important precedent of *Nicaragua vs United States* (1986) truly

reflecting the quote "history does not repeat itself but what it does is rhyme".

Legal scholars argue that such US action sits uneasily with customary international law, as the undertaking of a large-scale military strike and the pursuit of regime change amount to a direct breach of Venezuela's sovereignty in the name of national security.

EROSION OF RULE OF LAW

Analysts warn that Washington has risked not just erosion of rule of law as the UN Security-General stated but also brought itself at the doorstep of potential war crimes under International Humanitarian Law if the hostilities are recognised in light of severe civilian damage.

By framing military action as a law-enforcement necessity, Washington risks diluting the legal distinction between policing and warfare, a boundary that has long protected weaker states from unilateral intervention.

The broader implication is the gradual erosion of the rules-based international order that major powers themselves claim to uphold. If military strikes become an accepted tool for managing economic risks, criminal networks or political defiance, international law risks being reshaped by power rather than principle.

The writer is Professor of Economics and Dean, OP Jindal Global University. Saksham Raj and Aditi Lazarus, students at OP Jindal Global University and Research Analysts at Centre for New Economic Studies, contributed to this article

FROM THE VIEWROOM.

Don't let the dogs down

PT Jyothi Datta

For several animal lovers in the country, the new year brings in sleepless nights and anxiety, as the fate of community dogs on the streets and in residential and office buildings continues under a dark cloud. A Supreme Court hearing on managing community dogs is expected this week. But against the backdrop of this discussion, well-meaning citizens working for the welfare of neighbourhood animals have been threatened, or have had to go searching for community dogs and have them picked up and relocated. It's the same story, be it Mumbai, Bengaluru or Chennai.

Picking up all community dogs because a few are reportedly aggressive is as illogical as taking all cars off the road because of a car accident; or attacking all men, when a rape is reported.

Countries including Bhutan and the Netherlands, for example, have illustrated scientifically on how community dog numbers can be managed, without cruelty. It's called Animal Birth Control

Tackling climate anxiety

Some tools to cope, flourish amidst climate crises

BOOK REVIEW.

Sudhirendra Sharma

If recent tragic incidents across mountain slopes in various parts of the country are any indication, losing sleep at night over uncertain mornings may not be unusual for those who have been dwelling on such mountain slopes, which are now considered vulnerable. Dreadful videos of people and property falling victim to such unprecedented natural catastrophes are nightmarish.

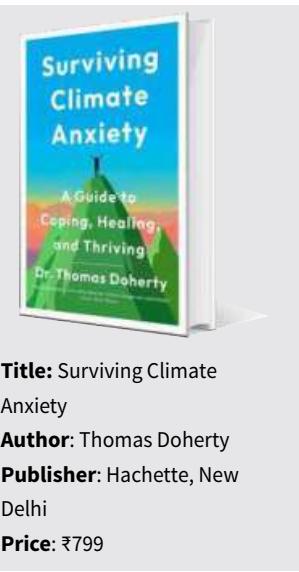
Thomas Doherty, a clinical psychologist and mental health therapist, offers a unique perspective about climate change and how one should relate to it. He guides the reader to keep himself equipped with the tools needed for navigation through climatic exigencies. A father and widower, Doherty uses his own life experience, and client stories to help the reader navigate his/her own feelings about climate change and how to take action in a world that is consequentially suffering from climate change's effects.

FIVE-PART PROCESS

Another aspect about the book is that it discusses social justice, environmental justice, eco-advocacy, marginalised groups and environmental racism. These are no less important issues, and the intersectionality between all of them is essential to discuss climate change through all levels of advocacy. Doherty also leaves us with a reminder that advocacy is needed at all levels — whether front-lines or behind the scenes — and our role is important.

It is a five-part process, starting with small coping skills, to skills drawn from therapy, to reclaiming happiness, and to taking action. In this book, Doherty promises to help reframe climate anxiety and make it work for us, rather than against us. It is written with the rare combination of scientific clarity and deep psychological compassion. Rather than pathologising climate distress, he normalises it as a sign of moral attunement — a natural response to an unnatural situation. A simple, 'calm down' may not work when anxiety is embedded deep.

Doherty doesn't think if 'calm down' or 'think positive' will work in such anxieties. Instead, he looks to metabolise fear, guilt, grief, and outrage into something usable — into care, connection, and action. In fact, the climate disaster cycle is upon all of us



Title: Surviving Climate Anxiety

Author: Thomas Doherty

Publisher: Hachette, New Delhi

Price: ₹799

right now; either amid a disaster, recovering from one or anticipating the next.

Climatic anxiety is no less prevalent, with tragic human stories from different regions piling up. Sita and her family faced storms and wild fires; Jesse and her family were witness to their destroyed homes; there are any number who withstood coastal flooding. Once isolated, such stories are now common for generating sympathetic analysis. Doherty argues that retelling such stories is a way to unburden ourselves from the weights of the environmental transgression people seem to be burdened with.

This book may seem to have been written ahead of its time. But climate change anxiety is one of the biggest mental health threats afflicting a growing population, irrespective of its economic and social status.

From the geologist haunted by images of melting glaciers to the young couple agonising over their own survival, *Surviving Climate Anxiety* provides the tools to cope, heal, and flourish even in such challenging times.

This book is different as it is about coping and possibly thriving in the face of climatic change from a psychological perspective.

Hopeful and profoundly empathetic, this book is a comprehensive and comforting manual, and Doherty, a competent and benevolent guide. There are moments when the book acts like a gentle reminder to remain both awake and vigilant. If you care deeply about the world and are finding it harder to hold that caring without breaking, this book belongs on your nightstand.

The reviewer is an independent writer, researcher and academic

Bihar's myth-busting entrepreneur

SIS, promoted by RK Sinha, has emerged as the largest security services company in India and Down Under

BOOK REVIEW.

S Adikesavan

Bihar is an unlikely host to entrepreneurship which has made a mark not merely at the national level but beyond India's boundaries too. Neither is providing security to industrial and commercial establishments exactly an exciting service to attract foreign investments.

And it is only quite recently that the RBI issued guidelines for bank funding inside India of mergers and acquisitions. Yet, nearly 20 years ago, State Bank of India's international banking group proactively assessed a leveraged acquisition proposal and gave a loan to this Bihar enterprise for acquisition of an Australian company (of the well-known Chubb group) eight times the size of the acquiring company.

The deal was successful and yielded good returns. Perhaps a very good example of how an audacious entrepreneur backed by proper banking due diligence and stringent credit appraisal can support Indian companies' foray into even developed country markets.

SIS Ltd, a listed company based out of Patna, has busted a few such myths. It has revenues of about ₹14,000 crore, has three lakh employees on its rolls and is the largest security service provider in India. Thanks to some international acquisitions it is the largest security provider in Australia, third largest in New Zealand and the fifth in Singapore.

Its promoter, Ravindra Kishore Sinha, was a journalist with *Hindustan Samachar* when the late Jayaprakash Narayan suggested to him in the 1970s to do something to better the lot of ex-servicemen. "Ravindra, these ex-servicemen have dedicated their lives

to the safety of our nation and now they need the nation's support and care. I am hopeful that you will find a way to do something for them," advised JP.

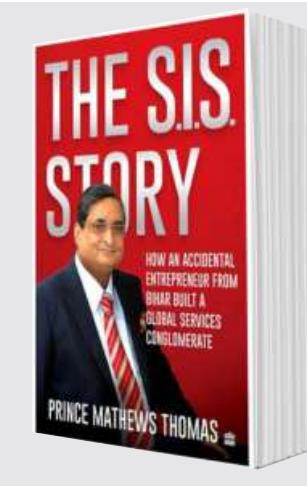
RK Sinha thus started recruiting retiring defence personnel to provide security services to industrial units in Bihar. A hostile territory for all business, Bihar 50 years ago was in the grip of mafias and gangs who ran virtually parallel administrations. For every coal mine there was a mafia which needed to be paid before even the mining companies could operate the fields.

GLOBAL PRESENCE

In *The SIS Story*, veteran business journalist Prince Mathews Thomas (who had a stint with *businessline* too) narrates the rise and rise of Sinha's companies, now operating worldwide and trusted by marquee investors like DE Shaw and CX Partners. A first-generation entrepreneur, Sinha had nothing but guts and grit to begin with apart from grooming by and exposure to voluntary work through the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). That the security services business is typically a very asset-light (capital-light too) activity helped.

The author takes us through the journey of SIS, the scaling up of its services business, leapfrogging with acquisitions and partnerships and its "people-first" culture. It is a fascinating tale of how the ability to take business risks, rooted in conviction that along with commerce there is a simultaneous attempt to be socially committed (by bringing jobs to a relatively poorer State), proves successful.

In his famous enunciation of "The Seven Sins", Gandhiji included "commerce without morality" as one. Reading this book, one gets the feeling that the key reason for the sustainability and continued relevance of the SIS business model is because of the



Title: The SIS story: How an accidental entrepreneur from Bihar created a global services conglomerate

Author: Prince Mathews Thomas

Published: Harper Business

Pages: 268

Price: ₹699

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Prince Mathews Thomas is a financial journalist with 21 years of experience. He has written about leading business houses across industries, analysing their business models and management style.

adherence to ethical values of the promoters.

For instance, the author refers to an incident where the chairman of the company receives a call from a security guard. Sinha listened to the guard, noted the feedback and ensured that his office

got back to that employee. Sinha says: "We have no labour union in SIS. You know why? Because every guard in this organisation has my phone number. What can a trade union guy do that the chairman can't?"

Perhaps this attitude is why the home-grown SIS has been able to withstand competition from the likes of even the British multinational G4S and float a joint venture with the Spanish major Prosegur for cash movement and ATM management in India.

The company got listed in 2017. At the time of listing, a leading merchant banker told Sinha that it is better to move the company's registration from Patna to Delhi. "It would be good for optics," the banker said, to which Sinha's reply was forthright: "It's not happening during my lifetime. My tax will be paid in Bihar. My GST will be paid in Bihar, my registered address and the registered address of my business shall remain in Bihar."

LEADERSHIP TRANSITION
RK, as he is known in industry circles, has ensured a smooth transition of leadership too, to initially Uday Singh, a childhood friend, and then to his London-educated son, Rituraj Sinha, who, in fact, has been behind a number of the latter-day corporate deals.

The 250-page book makes for breezy reading, of the story of rustic entrepreneurship which remains rooted to the ground despite the resounding success of both its organic and inorganic growth.

As the country's economic growth propels it to a larger position among the comity of nations, we need a number of Sinhas to emerge from the erstwhile "Bimaru States". There is always the legacy of the Mauryas and Magadha to live up to.

The reviewer is a commentator on banking and finance

NEW READS.



Title: A CEO's Brew
Stirred with Passion, Purpose and Humblition

Author: Sanjiv Mehta

Publisher: Penguin Business

The author's three-decade career offers a wealth of leadership lessons that bridge legacy and innovation



Title: The Dig: Keeladi and the Politics of India's Past

Author: Sowmya Ashok

Publisher: Hachette India

Blending sharp insight with humour, the book reveals how political battles over science and history continue to shape our understanding of India's past



Title: Corporate Hostages: Roads to Captivity, Paths to Liberation Paperback

Author: N Raj Mohan

Publisher: Rupa Publications India

The book explores the strained and shifting relationship between employees and employers, which has deepened since the pandemic

thehindu businessline.

TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

January 5, 2006

Govt receives more than 30 Eols for Maruti stake

The Government has received Expression of Interest (EoI) from more than 30 entities for picking up an 8 per cent stake in Maruti Udyog Ltd. "The response to the Expression of Interest offer has been very good. We have had more than 30 parties responding. We will now invite financial bids from interested parties shortly and then firm up the process," a senior Government said.

First phase scrutiny to cover 3,000 drug patent requests

The initial signs of activity have commenced with the patent office taking up for examination over 3,000 of the 7,000-odd pharma-related patent applications in the mailbox, a ministry official said. About a year into the product-patent regime, the patent office has received requests from companies to take up their patent applications for examination.

Sensex rally continues

Stock prices moved up for the second day in a row with key stock indices closing at their all-time high as foreign investors continued to invest in Indian equities. At close, the BSE Sensex rose 108.71 points to 9,648.08 and the NSE S&P CNX Nifty was up by 21.05 points to close at 2,904.40.

Short take

The MSME digitalisation imperative

Harjit Singh

India's Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) contribute a substantial share of the country's overall economic output and act as one of the largest creators of livelihoods across urban and rural India. Be it a food-processing unit in Assam, a handicraft cluster in Rajasthan, or a logistics startup in Bengaluru, MSMEs bring opportunities closer to communities. As India advances toward its "Viksit Bharat 2047" vision, MSMEs are poised to assume an even more pivotal role in shaping the nation's economic transformation.

Most of this transformation will be propelled by the deployment of digital tools across public and private enterprises. From our experience

working directly with MSME entities, we have seen how AI-enabled tools are already helping small manufacturing units optimise supply chains, predict stock shortages, and improve fulfilment capacity. Similarly, cloud-based solutions are offering flexibility and security while removing infrastructure barriers. To maximise the impact of technologies such as AI, MSMEs must strengthen foundational capabilities by reimaging their business with customer at the core, digitising processes, standardising data systems, and training teams to utilise digital tools effectively. AI is not a plug-and-play solution; it works best when integrated with core operations and supported by a data-ready environment.

Creating such readiness requires customised solutions that balance affordability with impact. This is where

technology and telecom service providers play a crucial role. Bundled offerings that combine reliable connectivity, cloud access, and AI-driven business tools can help MSMEs adopt technology without heavy upfront investments. Subscription-based models are already easing adoption barriers and encouraging smaller enterprises to experiment, scale, and refine their digital journeys.

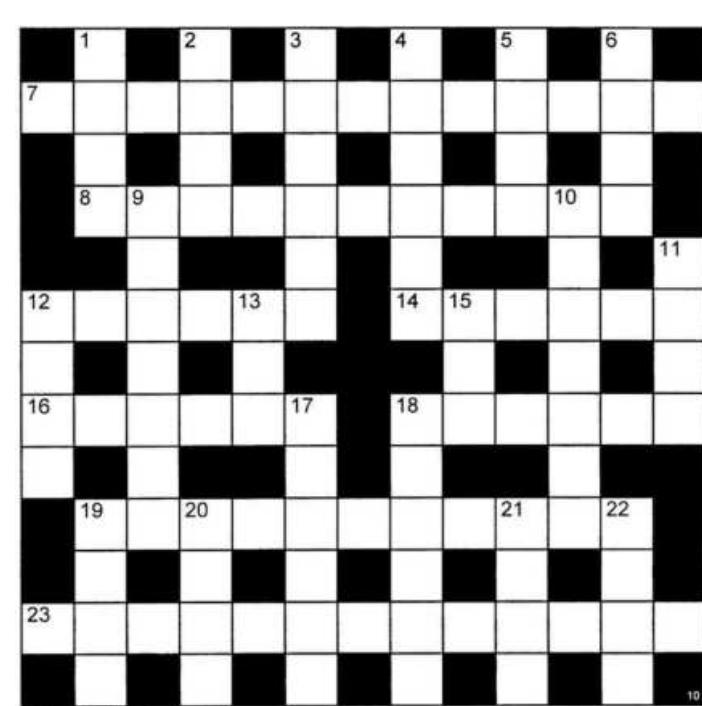
Manufacturers using IoT-enabled predictive maintenance are reducing downtime significantly, optimising their supply chains. Healthcare enterprises are adopting AI-assisted diagnostics and cloud-based record systems to increase efficiency. Fintech innovators using machine learning are facilitating faster, more inclusive access to credit for small businesses. These examples illustrate

that when equipped with the right tools and training, MSMEs can harness AI for a long-term enterprise edge.

Likewise, cloud tools are enabling them to innovate, scale, and operate confidently in an increasingly digital landscape. According to the SME Digital Insights Study, half of Indian MSMEs now prioritise cloud adoption to expand operations, driven by enhanced security and improved customer centricity. Nearly 20 per cent have already migrated more than half of their workloads to the cloud, a clear proof of their commitment to digital transformation. With the right combination of digital infrastructure, financial support, and capability building, MSMEs can expand their contribution to the country's GDP, exports, and job creation.

The writer is Managing Director, Tata Teleservices

BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2590 EASY



EASY

ACROSS

- 7. In way helpless against attack (13)
- 8. Former sport using dogs to worry animal (4-7)
- 12. Delicate, neat (6)
- 14. Elgar Variations (6)
- 16. Turned, made embittered (6)
- 18. Right-leaning type (6)
- 19. Male principals (11)
- 23. Personal money order payable into account (7,6)

DOWN

- 1. Plant used for seasoning (4)
- 2. Greek letter 'B' (4)
- 3. Sore-encrusted (6)
- 4. Drain, channel, water-gate (6)
- 5. Italian sparkling wine (4)
- 6. Solid line of cast type (4)
- 9. One with refined taste in food (7)
- 10. One to worry at trifles (7)
- 11. Not of the professional clergy (4)
- 12. Particular preparation of food (4)
- 13. Lowest part of front (3)
- 15. Mechanism for tightening, slackening bow (3)
- 17. Draught regulator (6)
- 18. Small invertebrate creature (6)
- 19. Engage taxi (4)
- 20. Recess at east end of choir (4)
- 21. Equally balanced (4)
- 22. Blend of blues, jazz, gospel, pop (4)

NOT SO EASY

ACROSS

- 7. In manner of one facing charge without an answer (13)
- 8. Put up with teasing that was once thought entertaining (4-7)
- 12. A neat and not a clumsy delicacy (6)
- 14. Imagine one leaves what could turn out to be a puzzle (6)
- 16. How to use rod that left one embittered (6)
- 18. It may give one the right slant on getting letter printed (6)
- 19. Principals smashed rate of exchange (11)
- 23. Went over soundly to verify a written form of payment (7,6)

DOWN

- 1. A lady's first business may go to pot (4)
- 2. Wager it's the first letter, but the Greeks put it second (4)
- 3. Baby's upset about crib-top looking so encrusted (6)
- 4. Clue is obscure as to this sort of drain (6)
- 5. Wine sparkles in an amphora, stimulating consumption (4)
- 6. Shot a pest in the garden (4)
- 9. Form of pie is the remedy for a fussy eater (7)
- 10. He's fussy about giving up gin, breaking leg right at end (7)
- 11. One found in a lake in France is not of the clergy (4)
- 12. What is served up, of course, for a good-looking girl (4)
- 13. This cap is to be found in front of boot (3)
- 15. Hazel, a case that may be considered mental (3)
- 17. Is not as dry as a mute (6)
- 18. Is at home to a dissenting body like a flea (6)
- 19. To engage one held in her awkward embrace (4)
- 20. This may be the end where church-builders are concerned (4)
- 21. So handed as to be just flat (4)
- 22. Not a one? Nobody there, but a spirit (4)

SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2589

Urban Disconnect

The release of Uttar Pradesh's draft electoral rolls has done more than trigger routine political anxiety - it has revealed a structural disconnect between India's urban reality and its electoral administration. When a large share of proposed deletions is concentrated in cities, the issue is less about political intent and more about how democracy copes with mobility. At first glance, the deletions appear procedural: uncollected enumeration forms, duplication, and address mismatches.

But the pattern is telling. Urban constituencies show disproportionately higher numbers of deletions not because city residents are disengaged, but because cities host a floating population that does not see the urban address as politically permanent. Millions who migrate from villages for work consciously retain their voter registration in their native places, where family ties, land, and local influence still matter more than the anonymity of the city.

In that sense, the draft rolls are reflecting a choice as much as an omission. The city functions as an economic space, while the village remains the political anchor. When door-to-door verification takes place in urban booth areas during working hours, migrant workers are often absent, rentals change hands quickly, and documentation trails reality. What follows is administrative logic, not exclusionary design. What the revision process is also revealing is the scale of a long-ignored contradiction in voter behaviour.

For years, electoral rolls quietly absorbed duplication created by migration, as individuals remained registered in their native villages while living and working elsewhere. That arrangement was politically convenient and administratively tolerated, but it was never legally sustainable. The current exercise is, at its core, an attempt to realign the rolls with the principle of single, place-based electoral registration. The political consequences, however, are real. Urban electoral strength depends not only on voter preference but on voter presence on the rolls. When large numbers are flagged for deletion in cities, established assumptions of political parties like the BJP about urban voting behaviour are unsettled.

Parties with dense booth-level networks and constant voter engagement are better equipped to guide people through correction mechanisms. Those relying on past majorities or broad sentiment discover that organisational slack can quickly translate into electoral risk.

Seen this way, the deletions do not represent exclusion but consolidation. They mark the point where administrative practice is finally catching up with social reality. Migrant voters are not being denied participation; they are being asked, perhaps for the first time, to make a clear choice about where their political citizenship resides.

The discomfort this creates for urban centric parties like the BJP is understandable, but it is also unavoidable. But its outcomes underline a deeper institutional reality: India's political geography still lags behind its economic geography. Cities absorb labour at scale, but aren't sites of political belonging for millions who live and work within them. As migration reshapes India's cities, electoral politics will increasingly reflect this tension between economic movement and political rootedness. The draft rolls merely reflect where the vote truly belongs despite social mobility.

Unaffordable

A new political slogan is travelling fast across wealthy democracies: affordability. It is invoked with urgency, often paired with the language of crisis. Voters are told that prices are out of control, that everyday life has become unmanageable, and that something fundamental has gone wrong. The claim resonates emotionally. But as with many powerful political narratives, the truth is more complicated than the slogan suggests.

Prices have undeniably risen in recent years, sometimes sharply. Housing costs in major cities, childcare, healthcare, and food have all become more expensive, creating visible pressure points in household budgets. These increases are felt acutely because they affect items people buy frequently or cannot avoid. Yet when examined in aggregate, incomes in most advanced economies have risen faster than inflation over the same period. Measured broadly, purchasing power has not collapsed. In many cases, it has improved.

This gap between economic data and public sentiment reveals something important about how people experience the economy. Affordability is not assessed through national averages or wage indices. It is judged through lived encounters: the rent renewal that jumps unexpectedly, the grocery bill that feels higher than last month, the price of entry into home ownership that seems permanently out of reach. People anchor their sense of well-being to specific prices, not to abstract comparisons of income growth.

Politics thrives in this space between perception and reality. Calls to "fix" affordability often begin by correctly identifying local distortions - shortages, regulatory bottlenecks, or supply constraints that push prices higher than they need to be. But these insights are frequently followed by policy prescriptions that promise immediate relief while ignoring longer-term consequences. Price caps, subsidies without supply reform, or pressure on independent institutions may feel decisive, but they often worsen the very shortages they aim to address.

The deeper tension lies in contradictory public demands. Voters want higher wages, but also lower prices. They want rising asset values for what they already own, and falling prices for what they hope their children can buy. They want protection from market volatility, yet also expect abundance, choice and innovation. These goals cannot all be met simultaneously without trade-offs.

Affordability, then, is not a single economic condition but a political mirror. It reflects anxieties about fairness, opportunity and security more than it does absolute living standards. The danger is not that these concerns are illegitimate, but that they are channelled into policies that confuse symptoms with causes. The challenge for governments is to resist slogans and confront structure: boosting supply where shortages exist, removing barriers that inflate costs, and being honest about the limits of what policy can deliver without unintended damage. Otherwise, affordability risks becoming not a solution to economic frustration, but a slogan that deepens it.

Development Paradigms ~II

What exactly is development and what kind of development do we want for Viksit Bharat? True development must be multidimensional, encompassing not just purchasing power but health, education, opportunity, job, dignity, security, inclusion, and a whole lot of other things. Income of course is important as higher income levels are strongly correlated with better health outcomes, higher educational attainment, and greater state capacity

The artificial classifications of the World Bank and IMF at best serve their limited institutional purposes - to determine for eligibility of poorer developing countries for concessional loans, favourable trade terms etc., and for phasing these countries in or out of aid windows. They may provide a framework for organising global macroeconomic data but suffer from many serious flaws. They ignore inequality - the USA has a high per capita income of \$84000, but is a highly unequal country where the richest 1 per cent of households own almost 30 per cent of the nation's total wealth, while the bottom 50 per cent hold only about 3 per cent. The top 10% own more than two-thirds of total wealth, and this share has increased steadily over the decades. In contrast, Japan, also an advanced economy, has low inequality. In our dream of Viksit Bharat, do we want an unequal society where a million billionaires account for 80 per cent of the nation's GDP?

The classifications also ignore social outcomes - South Africa and Vietnam have similar income levels but vastly different inequality and employment structures. They ignore human development and economic structures, and cannot distinguish between a diversified modern manufacturing economy with a high skill base like China, an upper middle-income country, from Saudi Arabia, a high-income rentier state that is dependent on a single commodity, oil, and has very narrow domestic skill base.

A singly-commodity export dependent country has very different development prospects from a diversified economy, even though both may be at the same income levels. There are many such examples - South Korea vs. Kuwait, Norway vs. Qatar - all high-income countries yet vastly different in diversification and skill. Nobody would advocate an economic structure like that of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait or Qatar for a Viksit Bharat. Vulnerability to external shocks, productivity growth and income and employment are all structural features invisible in income averages. They also



MISSION DEVELOPED INDIA

ignore the capacity of the states to deliver public goods such as access to quality healthcare, education, social protection, etc. that depend not just on income but on state capacity and policy choices, which often lag income growth.

This brings us to the fundamental question, what exactly is development and what kind of development do we want for Viksit Bharat? True development must be multidimensional, encompassing not just purchasing power but health, education, opportunity, job, dignity, security, inclusion, and a whole lot of other things. Income of course is important as higher income levels are strongly correlated with better health outcomes, higher educational attainment, and greater state capacity.

Even the UNDP's widely-reported Human Development Index (HDI) which gives equal weightages to income, health and education is imperfect because of this strong correlation - it automatically favours countries with higher income.

As a single-number summary, income remains one of the most powerful predictors of average living standards, and is necessary for development, but not a sufficient condition. Further, the Western concept of equating money with well-being is not relevant for India and many other countries. Income gains do not automatically translate into improved well-being without adequate investments in human capital and building institutional capacity. True development will shift the focus away from income growth to build a diversified, resilient, inclusive economy, not bound by the narrow definitions of outdated institutions like the UN, World Bank or IMF which have outlived their utility and are unfit to address the realities and complexities of a world that is unrecognisable to the one in which they were created.

A State's performance is judged by the coverage and efficiency in its delivery of public goods, and for that we need not be a high-income country. It depends more on the state's capacity and vision more than income. Poverty still prevails in India, but absolute poverty seen in the 1970-films of Mrinal Sen or Ritwik Ghatak is certainly a thing of the past.

Nobody dies of hunger in today's India.

thanks to the food security provided by the State. The quality of education in public schools falls way short of expectation, but almost all children attend schools where they get at least one nutritious meal every day.

Quality of public health delivery is way below optimal, but everybody has access to healthcare and thanks to Ayushman Bharat, families do not fall into poverty due to medical expenditure. Welfare benefits reach every household without leakage, law and order is generally stable, and good quality roads and electricity are available even in the remotest villages. By and large, institutions function as they should, elections are fair

and free, and press is freer than in most countries. All these have been achieved at a low-income level, demonstrating that income is a weak proxy for the well-being of citizens.

Developed countries also offer all these and quality is an equal concern with them too. The UK National Health Service is in a deep crisis where patients wait for weeks if not months to get an appointment. The public healthcare systems in the USA, many European countries, or South Korea are under deep stress due to inadequate finance, as are their public

transportation systems which are "on the edge of a cliff" due to shrinking funding. The abrupt collapse of institutional mechanisms being seen in the USA now make our systems feel vastly superior. One may then question why we should be considered undeveloped just because our per capita income is low? Of course, this is not to say that we have no problem - starting with unemployment and issues of quality, the inventory of our problems would be a long list, but addressing them is aspirational and a continuous, ongoing process.

While sustained high growth and continuous rise in per capita income remain central to the idea of Viksit Bharat, the idea of Vikas must go much beyond these. It must be the

discount." Investors responded to a \$518 billion AI chip strategy, improved capital returns and corporate value-up reforms.

alongside a favorable technology cycle. In a world fragmenting into rival trade blocs, South Korea converted hardware strength into diplomatic leverage. By anchoring global HBM and logic chip supply chains, it secured a central role in the artificial intelligence economy. Industrial policy and geopolitics increasingly converged amid persistent global instability.

Diplomacy reflected the same pragmatism. At the APEC summit in Gyeongju, Seoul leaned into transactional realism. Securing a 15 percent tariff ceiling with Washington while maintaining semiconductor ties with Beijing underscored a deliberate strategy. Seoul no longer seeks alignment with every partner but aims to remain too important to exclude.

Cultural exports complemented this repositioning. From Tony-winning

vision of a future in which India is not only an economically richer, militarily stronger, technologically advanced, strategically autonomous, environmentally responsible, and institutionally strong digital superpower, but also one in which every citizen feels empowered and included in the process of development. The government's vision of Viksit Bharat@2047 conceptualises it as a high-income inclusive society in which economic growth would be structurally transformative, based on eight interconnected pillars of economic transformation, digital empowerment, social inclusion, education and skill development, healthcare for all, developed infrastructure and urban growth, sustainable development, and citizen participation.

A defining feature of this transformation would be technology-led governance and innovation. Digital public infrastructure is positioned as a scalable model for service delivery, financial inclusion, and state capacity enhancement, especially in strategic sectors such as clean energy, semiconductors, artificial intelligence, and advanced manufacturing. Institutional reform and cooperative federalism occupy a central place in this vision, and states are viewed as key drivers of development. Finally, sustainability and global engagement are integral to the vision. Climate resilience, energy transition, and India's role in global governance are seen as inseparable from development. The agenda for Viksit Bharat is thus multi-dimensional and transformative, moving beyond income metrics to emphasise capability, resilience, and institutional strength, not framed solely through economic or technological metrics.

Even then, it would be incomplete if we are unable to integrate our civilisational ethos into the scheme of Viksit Bharat. This includes the Chaturvarga: Dharma, Artha, Kama and Moksha. Translated into the language of governance, Dharma means that ethics and morality must inform governance and all public policy, integral to which would be transparency in public finance, accountability, social justice and individual responsibility, where long-term public goods would be prioritised over short-term political gains.

Artha would imply economic growth that would lead to Sarvodaya - the upliftment of all including the most vulnerable, rather than the inefficient Western concept of trickle-down development, and technological progress would reduce, not deepen, social inequalities. Kama would mean fulfilment of aspirations, Artha and Kama. Moksha would imply union with nature in which harmonious and purposeful living would underpin all development, treating the environment as a living entity, preventing material prosperity from becoming aimless. This civilisational template would be a moral and cultural compass to navigate modernity to realise ancient India's universal peace mantra, Sarve Bhavantu Sukhinah/ Sarve Santu Nirayayah/ Sarve Bhadrani Pashyantu/ Maa Kashchit Duhkhabhag Bhavet. Om Shanti, Shanti, Shanti.

(Concluded)

The Korea Herald

2025: Year of recalibration

South Korea began 2025 amid constitutional rupture and ends it with renewed confidence in technocratic governance. The year's most arresting moments were political. A presidential impeachment closed one era, and the rapid inauguration of the Lee Jae Myung administration opened another, compressing the institutional shock into the space of a few months.

Yet the more consequential transformation unfolded away from the assembly hall. In 2025, Seoul stopped patching aging systems and began rewriting them. What emerged was not ideological fervor but strategic recalibration, shaped by the recognition that incremental fixes no longer matched the scale of national risk.

The pivotal shift was institutional. For decades, the State Prosecutors' Office served as the country's most dominant power center, a legacy of hypercentralized rule. Legislation passed this year set in motion its dismantling after 78 years,

separating its functions and recalibrating authority across the state.

By decoupling investigation from prosecution, South Korea moved toward a legal architecture that places weight on process rather than discretion. The transition has been bruising and politically costly, with implementation extending beyond this year, but it signalled an effort to curb power rather than merely rotate it. That recalibration was reinforced by high-profile probes into past state affairs, including ongoing investigations involving former President Yoon Suk Yeol and former first lady Kim Keon Hee. Their significance lies less in individual outcomes than in signaling that no officeholder stands beyond scrutiny.

Markets offered a parallel, if more volatile, verdict. The Kospi's breach of the 4,000 threshold this year signaled a reassessment of the long-standing "Korea

discount." Investors responded to a \$518 billion AI chip strategy, improved capital returns and corporate value-up reforms.

alongside a favorable technology cycle. In a world fragmenting into rival trade blocs, South Korea converted hardware strength into diplomatic leverage. By anchoring global HBM and logic chip supply chains, it secured a central role in the artificial intelligence economy. Industrial policy and geopolitics increasingly converged amid persistent global instability.

Diplomacy reflected the same pragmatism. At the APEC summit in Gyeongju, Seoul leaned into transactional realism. Securing a 15 percent tariff ceiling with Washington while maintaining semiconductor ties with Beijing underscored a deliberate strategy. Seoul no longer seeks alignment with every partner but aims to remain too important to exclude.

Cultural exports complemented this repositioning. From Tony-winning

productions like "Maybe Happy Ending" to the continuing global reach of K-pop, Korean content reinforced international presence without bearing the weight of formal diplomacy.

Yet the social balance sheet remains unsettled. South Korea's fertility rate showed tentative signs of recovery, rising close to 0.8 by the year-end. Monthly increases and cautious projections point to the first sustained improvement in years, though the rate remains the world's lowest. Material success is pulling ahead of social foundations. Gangnam's luxury towers signal concentrated wealth, while expanding semiconductor complexes grow detached from the communities meant to sustain them.

The parliamentary inquiry into the Jeju Air disaster reinforced this warning. It revealed gaps in oversight, reminding the public that advanced systems cannot substitute for institutional trust or social resilience.

Letters To The Editor | editor@thestatesman.com

Systemic traps

Sir, Apropos "Mankind's Chakravyuhas" we are not victims of complexity; we are its architects. The systems we celebrate as progress, economic growth, technological speed and limitless consumption have quietly turned into traps.

We know how to build, expand and accelerate, but we lack the courage to pause, or the wisdom to step back.

Confidence now runs faster than understanding and ambition moves ahead without accountability. Leadership today often mistakes action for insight and success for scale. In this race, reflection is treated as weakness, restraint as failure. Yet every crisis we face is a reminder that unchecked momentum destroys more than it creates.

Real strength lies not in forcing outcomes, but in recognizing limits of nature, of systems and of ourselves. If we continue choosing convenience over conscience, complexity over clarity, we will remain trapped in cycles we created. Escape is possible, but only when wisdom guides courage, responsibility guides power and humanity chooses balance over blind progress.

Yours, etc., Aditya Kamble, Kalaburagi, 1 January.

Gold rush

Sir, Modern economies do not run on metal alone; they rely on flexible exchange rates, credible institutions, transparent regulation, and disciplined fiscal policy. Long-term stability flows from trust in

governance, not from gold locked away in vaults. The renewed global rush to gold reflects unease rather than wisdom. While gold has value as a reserve and hedge, treating it as a currency substitute offers false comfort.

Central bank buying may calm markets briefly, but it cannot replace sound policy. Emerging economies should instead deepen trade settlement systems, strengthen financial regulation, diversify reserves, and rein in reckless public spending.

Yours, etc., Avinashiappan Mylsami, Coimbatore, 29 December.

Transparency

Sir, This refers to the news report "TMC delegation meets state CEO, raises concern

over voters' list discrepancies & hearing process" (December 30). There is hardly any logic in excluding booth-level agents to facilitate overseeing the SIR process.

The transparency would have been better maintained had the BLAs been allowed to be present during the verification process. The Election Commission reserves the right to accept or reject the BLA's suggestion but their presence should not be dispensed with.

The TMC leaders are quite justified in asking the Election Commission to publish the voters' list with some alleged discrepancies to make the people aware of it. Why are the names being suppressed and for whose vested interests?

Yours, etc., Arun Gupta, Kolkata, 30 December.



Somnath: 1,000 years of unbroken faith

NARENDRA MODI

Somnath... hearing this word instils a sense of pride in our hearts and minds. It is the eternal proclamation of India's soul. This majestic Temple is situated on the Western coast of India in Gujarat, at a place called Prabhavati. The Dwadasa Jyotirling Stotram mentions the 12 Jyotirling across India. The Stotram begins with "सौराष्ट्रे सोमनाथं च", symbolising the civilisational and spiritual importance of Somnath as the first Jyotirling. It is also said:

सोमलिङ्गं नरो दद्य सर्वपापैः प्रमुच्यते ।
लभते फलं मनवाञ्छितं मृतं स्वर्गं
समाश्रयेत् ॥

It means: Just the sight of Somnath Shivaling ensures that a person is freed of sins, achieves their righteous desires and attains heaven after death.

Tragically, this very Somnath, which drew the reverence and prayers of millions, was attacked by foreign invaders, whose agenda was demolition, not devotion.

The year 2026 is significant for the Somnath Temple. It has been 1,000 years since the first attack on this great shrine. It was in January of 1026 that Mahmud of Ghazni attacked this Temple, seeking to destroy a great symbol of faith and civilisation through a violent and barbaric invasion.

Yet, one thousand years later, the Temple stands as glorious as ever because of numerous efforts to restore Somnath to its grandeur. One such milestone completes 75 years in 2026. It was during a ceremony on 11 May 1951, in the presence of the then President of India, Dr. Rajendra Prasad, that the restored Temple opened its doors to devotees.

The first invasion of Somnath a thousand years ago in 1026, the cruelty that was unleashed upon the people of the town and the devastation that was inflicted upon the shrine have been documented in great detail in

various historical accounts. When you read them, the heart trembles. Each line carries the weight of grief, cruelty and a sorrow that refuses to fade with time.

Imagine the impact it had on Bharat and the morale of the people. After all, Somnath had great spiritual significance. It was also on the coast, giving strength to a society with great economic prowess, whose sea traders and seafarers carried tales of its grandeur far and wide.

Yet, I am proud to state unequivocally that the story of Somnath, a thousand years after the first attack, is not defined by destruction. It is defined by the unbreakable courage of crores of children of Bharat Mata.

The medieval barbarism that began a thousand years ago in 1026 went on to 'inspire' others to repeatedly attack Somnath. It was the start of an attempt to enslave our people and culture. But each time the Temple was attacked, we also had great men and women who stood up to defend it and even made the ultimate sacrifice. And every single time, generation after generation, the people of our great civilisation picked themselves up, rebuilt and rejuvenated the Temple. It is our privilege to have been nurtured by the same soil that has nurtured greats like Ahilyabai Holkar, who made a noble attempt to ensure devotees can pray at Somnath.

In the 1890s, Swami Vivekananda visited Somnath and that experience moved him. He expressed his feelings during a lecture in Chennai in 1897 when he said, "Some of these old temples of Southern India and those like Somnath of Gujarat will teach you volumes of wisdom, will give you a keener insight into the history of the race than any amount of books. Mark how these temples bear the marks of a hundred attacks and a hundred regenerations, continually destroyed and continually springing up out of the ruins, rejuvenated and strong as ever! That is the national mind, that is the national life-current.

It is this same spirit that is visible in our nation, one of the brightest spots of global growth, having overcome centuries of invasions and colonial loot. It is our value systems and the determination of our people that have made India the centre of global attention

Follow it and it leads to glory. Give it up and you die; death will be the only result, annihilation, the only effect, the moment you step beyond that life current."

The sacred duty of rebuilding the Somnath Temple after independence came to the able hands of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel. A visit during Diwali time in 1947 moved him so much that he announced that the Temple would be rebuilt there. Finally, on 11 May 1951, a grand Temple in Somnath opened its doors to devotees and Dr. Rajendra Prasad was present there. The great Sardar Sahib was not alive to see this historic day, but the fulfilment of his dream stood tall before the nation.

The then Prime Minister, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, was not too enthused with this development. He did not want the Honourable President as well as Ministers to associate with this special event. He said that this event created a bad impression of India. But Dr. Rajendra Prasad stood firm and the rest is history. No mention of Somnath is complete without recalling the efforts of KM Munshi, who supported Sardar Patel very effectively. His works on Somnath, including the book, 'Somanatha: The Shrine Eternal', are extremely informative and educative.

Indeed, as the title of Munshi Ji's book conveys, we are a civilisation that carries a sense of conviction about the eternity of spirit and of ideas. We firmly believe that what is eternal is indestructible, as outlined in the famous Gita verse "नैन छिन्दन्ति शस्त्राणि...". There can be no better example of our civilisation's indomitable spirit than Somnath, which stands gloriously, overcoming odds and struggles.

It is this same spirit that is visible in our nation, one of the brightest spots of global growth, having overcome centuries of invasions and colonial loot. It is our value systems and the determination of our people that have made India the centre of global attention



today. The world is seeing India with hope and optimism. They want to invest in our innovative youngsters. Our art, culture, music and several festivals are going global. Yoga and Ayurveda are making a worldwide impact, boosting healthy living. Solutions to some of the most pressing global challenges are coming from India.

Since time immemorial, Somnath has brought together people from different walks of life. Centuries ago, Kalikal Sarvagna Hemchandra Charya, a respected Jain monk, came to Somnath. It is said that after praying there, he recited a verse, "भवीजाइकुरजनना रागाद्याक्षयमुपगता यसा". It means - Salutations to That One in whom the seeds of worldly becoming are destroyed, in whom passion and all afflictions have withered away." Today, Somnath holds the same ability to awaken something profound within the mind and soul.

A thousand years after the first attack in 1026, the sea at Somnath still roars with the same intensity as it did back then. The waves that wash the shores of Somnath tell a story. No matter what, just like the waves, it

kept rising again and again.

The aggressors of the past are now dust in the wind, their names synonymous with destruction. They are footnotes in the annals of history, while Somnath stands bright, radiating far beyond the horizon, reminding us of the eternal spirit that remained undiminished by the attack of 1026. Somnath is a song of hope that tells us that while hate and fanaticism may have the power to destroy for a moment, faith and conviction in the power of goodness have the power to create for eternity.

If the Somnath Temple, which was attacked a thousand years ago and faced continuous attacks thereon, could rise again and again, then we can surely restore our great nation to the glory it embodied a thousand years ago before the invasions. With the blessings of Shree Somnath Mahadev, we move forward with a renewed resolve to build a Viksit Bharat, where civilisational wisdom guides us to work for the welfare of the whole world.

Jai Somnath!

(The writer is Prime Minister of India and is also the Chairman of the Shree Somnath Trust.)

100 Years Ago



OCCASIONAL NOTE

The comments of the London Sunday journals show how little opinion at Homo has been impressed by the proceedings of the National Congress at Cawnpore. As the Observer puts it if the Swarajists attempt the plan of civil disobedience "their own movement will be its first victim." Swaraj, indeed, is already feeling the effect of the divorce of its new policy from the realities of politics. There is no future for any political party in India that is not prepared to work on constitutional lines. If any reinforcement of that view were necessary it would be found in the speech of Sir Abdur Rahim, which is a plain warning that unless and until Moslems and Hindus work together as one community there will be a stronger resistance to Swaraj, in the accepted meaning of that word, inside India than is ever likely to be offered by outside forces. Desertion of the Councils by Swarajists will be followed not by civil disobedience but by the disappearance of the Swaraj party from practical politics.

News Items

NEW GOVERNMENT

BASED SOLELY ON ARMED FORCES

Athens, Jan.

M. Pangalos's announcement was made at a banquet given by the officers of the Republican Guard, and evoked demonstrations of enthusiasm, which were renewed by the Guard during a parade of the streets in the evening. M. Pangalos said that he was preparing an administration based solely on the armed forces.—Reuter.

WIDOW'S PENSIONS

NEW SCHEME IN FORCE TO-DAY

(British Official Wireless.)
Leafield (Oxford), Jan.

Claims for new pensions for widows and orphans, which will be paid for the first time on Tuesday under the contributory scheme established by the Act of Parliament passed last year, have been received from more than 130,000 widows and from about 9,000 orphans. The original estimate of the numbers was 174,000 widows and 27,000 orphans. It is known however that many claims in respect of many large orphanage institutions have yet to be received. Many of the claims already sent in have still to be considered, but it is believed that to-morrow the post offices in England and Wales will be paying out between 70,000 and 100,000 pensions.

SENATE ELECTIONS OFFICIAL

EXPLANATION OF POSTPONEMENT

Athens, Jan.

It is officially explained that the postponement of the Senate elections is due to certain party leaders persisting in giving them a political complexion which will thus defeat the Government object of obtaining a cessation of the increasing political tension.—Reuter.

IT CAME TO MIND | MANISH NANDY

The little house

Memories fade, mementos remain. Desires dwindle, longing lingers. My head hovers over the hinterland of ideas, but my heart hinges on the lean peninsula of hopes and hurts, dreams and despair.

Words come and go, yellowing pages turn one by one, tired eyes float seeing and not seeing. Whatever we wanted, we let go. Whatever we cherished slipped from our fingers, fragile and futile. The shining toys of our birthdays are covered by the thin, opaque dust of oblivion.

Yet there are enduring whiffs of assurance.

Where the woods end, the road slithers past the fallen twigs and crushed leaves and gently bends around the small lake. As you take a quick turn, you see the small, solitary house. Its unpainted bricks spell a simple stolidity that looked even calmer in that autumn dusk. The plain wooden door had a glass pane that glimmered from a lamp as we approached.

A friend, who had the key, opened the door and waited for me to enter.

"I believe it will suit you," he said.

A small foyer, followed by a large living room, next to a moderate kitchen and dining alcove. On one side, two fair-sized bedrooms with their privies and, on the other, a

smaller guest room and a comparable study.

"Is the space adequate?" my friend asked.

"More than enough." The main bedroom seemed sumptuous, the study inviting.

I walked over to the balcony at the back. The sun was setting with aplomb, the lake glittered as scores of birds seemed to be heading, singing, to their nests. Curious house, it had peace written all over it.

I had little doubt. "Yes, it will suit me," I said with inordinate rashness.

That little house, neighbourly to the lake and brotherly to the woods, exuded a special charm: ample enough to be comfortable, small enough to be intimate. It felt familiar and friendly, relaxed and restful. Its large windows brought in the sunny day; its gray shades kept the noontime at bay. Its modest kitchen was discreetly reassuring to its study at night: I could literally hear my pencil drop.

The scene changed when my friends came. The rafters shook as they laughed and emptied beer glasses. But the biggest change was when one who was very special came. The little house turned festive even without wreaths and festoons. Only a few candles. The place looked resplendent.

chose a quiet burial before the snows came. And the snow! It dripped and poured, drizzled and cascaded to the point my windows narrowed and my door blocked. No harm done, for nobody came, not even the mailman, leaving me content with my jugs of coffee and boxes of biscuits.

Yes, the house suited me. My favourite room quickly became the study. The walls filled on all sides with books: my favorites, poetry and drama, near at hand; fiction and philosophy on the left and politics and religion on the right. My desk faced a large window: as my work ended in the evening, I could see brown finches and red cardinals fly back home.

I sat in a rocking chair in the corner to read, a glass of iced Campari within reach. A small Bose speaker in the other corner played my old favorites from the computer. My home was prettily quiet at night: I could literally hear my pencil drop.

The scene changed when my friends came. The rafters shook as they laughed and emptied beer glasses. But the biggest change was when one who was very special came. The little house turned festive even without wreaths and festoons. Only a few candles. The place looked resplendent.



Illustration by : Debabrata Chakrabarty

Charles Lamb had worked thirty-odd years in a London firm and felt, when he retired, that the wood from the desk had entered his soul. The little house did something else to my itinerant city soul. I felt a gentle air had breezed through my restless heart.

Now I live in another town, in a fancy apartment that overlooks a verdant lawn and an appealing pergola. I work at a steel desk that obediently springs higher when I want to write standing or read even higher. I listen to sard and harp as the evening darkens and slice

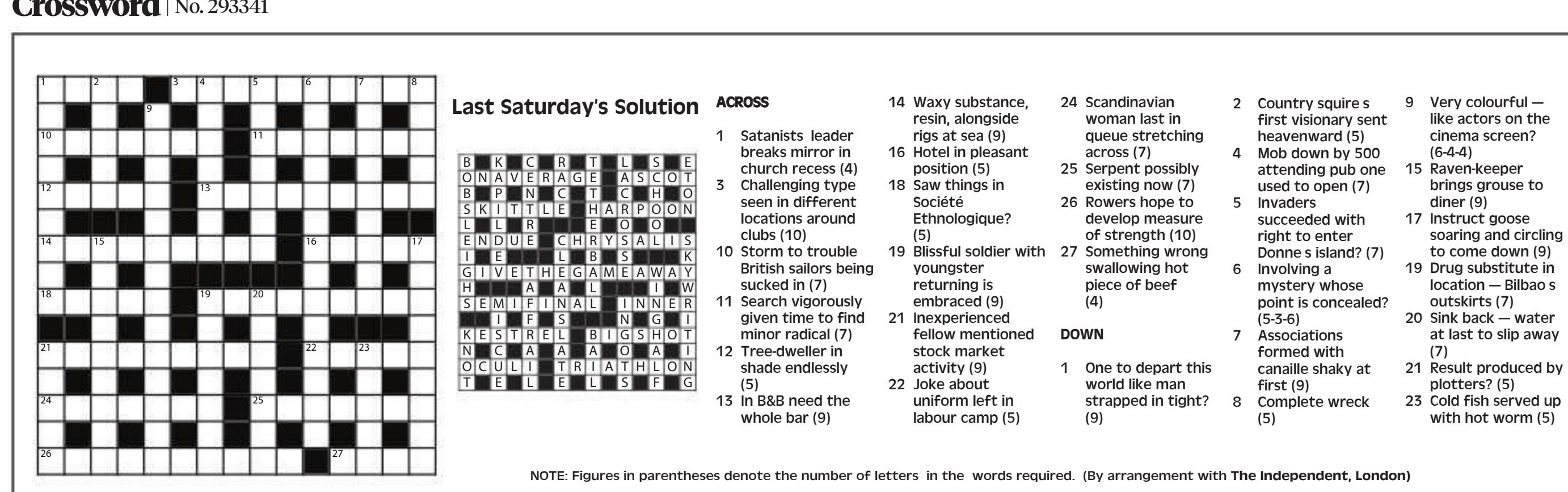
my pizza into tiny morsels that are carelessly picked and casually ingested.

I am okay. But when the night deepens, I think of the little house snuck between the water and the oaks that ensconced me in its mellow womb and covered me with the comforting warmth of easy acceptance.

Memories fade, mementos remain. Yearnings yield, attachments endure.

(The writer is a US-based international development advisor and had worked with the World Bank. He can be reached at mnandy@gmail.com)

Crossword | No. 293341





Editor's TAKE

Venezuela and the return of naked imperialism

The US attack on Venezuela on pretext of combating narco terrorism revives concerns over imperial overreach and the violation of national sovereignty

In the world of realpolitik, nothing is sacrosanct—not even the sovereignty of nations. When the United States attacked Venezuela without any provocation or immediate threat to its own existence, it became clear that little has changed over the years. Power, and the pursuit of self-interest, continues to dictate the conduct of nations. When that power belongs to a superpower, it often feels no obligation to heed global opinion or institutions such as the United Nations.

The United States' attack on Venezuela and the capture of its president, Nicolás Maduro, cannot be justified on any grounds. Under the guise of combating "narco-terrorism" and authoritarianism, the intervention represents a blatant violation of international norms and civilised conduct—particularly ironic for a nation that prides itself on being a global custodian of democracy. In truth, the United States has a long and ignominious history of meddling in the affairs of sovereign nations. Far from defending democracy or regional stability, this action appears driven less by principle than by strategic and economic interests, most notably Venezuela's vast oil reserves. While the US has engaged in such tactics before, this assault is unprecedented in one crucial respect: it marks the first direct US military attack on a South American country.

Uncle Sam has long played the role of the bully in the Americas. From Mexico in the 1840s to Cuba, Haiti, Brazil, Chile, Panama, and beyond, the region has borne the heavy cost of US interventions. The pretexts may change, but the underlying rationale remains the same. Such actions have been justified in the name of saving democracy from communism, stabilising nations, countering narcotics, or addressing human rights violations. The ultimate sufferer has always been the violated nation—its institutions weakened, instability prolonged, civilians subjected to hardship, and puppet regimes installed to serve American interests rather than the will of their own people. This time, however, there may be an additional factor: the erosion of US President Donald Trump's credibility following the surfacing of his name in the Epstein files, which has further damaged his standing and stature. This intervention is not about the rule of law or human rights; it is about reasserting hegemony. Such naked aggrandisement reduces Latin America to US colony, denying nations their fundamental right to determine their own political futures. The capture of Maduro evokes memories of the 1989 invasion of Panama and the arrest of Manuel Noriega—another episode justified on drug-trafficking charges. That intervention left hundreds of civilians dead and resulted in the installation of a US-favoured government, while Panama endured long-term political and social consequences.

Claims that the US will "run" Venezuela until a "proper transition" takes place should ring alarm bells within the United Nations. What lies ahead for Venezuela is prolonged instability, fragmentation of state authority, and a future shaped by foreign interests rather than national reconciliation. The world must come together to condemn this brazen display of power and the total disregard for international law that it represents.

Somnath Swabhiman Parv: A 1000 Years of Unbroken Faith (1026-2026)

If the Somnath Temple, which was attacked a thousand years ago and faced continuous attacks thereon, could rise again and again, then we can surely restore our great nation to the glory it embodied a thousand years ago before the invasions



NARENDRA MODI



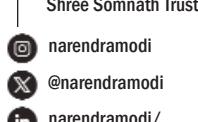
Somnath...hearing this word instils a sense of pride in our hearts and minds. It is the eternal proclamation of India's soul. This majestic Temple is situated on the Western coast of India in Gujarat, at a place called Prabhavati. The Dwadasa Jyotirling Stotram mentions the 12 Jyotirlingas across India. The Stotram begins with "सोमनाथं शोभनाथं च ...", symbolising the civilisational and spiritual importance of Somnath as the first Jyotirling.

It is also said: "सोमनाथं नन्दे दद्यन् वरपापे प्रमुच्यते। तपते कर्ते मोक्षान्तरं पूर्णं स्वर्गं समाप्तेत्॥" It means: Just the sight of Somnath Shivaling ensures that a person is freed of sins, achieves their righteous desires and attains heaven after death. Tragically, this very Somnath, which drew the reverence and prayers of millions, was attacked by foreign invaders, whose agenda was demolition, not devotion. The year 2026 is significant for the Somnath Temple. It has been 1,000 years since the first attack on this great shrine. It was in January of 1026 that Mahmud of Ghazni attacked this Temple, seeking to destroy a great symbol of faith and civilisation, through a violent and barbaric invasion. Yet, one thousand years later, the Temple stands as glorious as ever because of numerous efforts to restore Somnath to its grandeur. One such milestone completes 75 years in 2026.

It was during a ceremony on May 11, 1951, in the presence of the then President of India, Dr. Rajendra Prasad, that the restored Temple opened its doors to devotees. The first invasion of Somnath a thousand years ago in 1026, the cruelty that was unleashed upon the people of the town and the devastation that was inflicted upon the shrine have been documented in great detail in various historical accounts.

When you read them, the heart trembles. Each line carries the weight of grief, cruelty and a sorrow that refuses to fade with time. Imagine the impact it had on Bharat and the morale of the people. After all, Somnath had great spiritual significance. It was also on the coast, giving strength to a society with great economic prowess, whose sea traders and seafarers carried tales of its grandeur far and wide. Yet, I am proud to state unequivocally that the story of Somnath, a thousand years after the first attack, is not defined by destruction. It is defined by the unbreakable courage of crores of children of Bharat Mata. The medieval barbarism that began a thousand years ago in 1026 went on to 'inspire' others to repeatedly attack Somnath. It was the start of an attempt to enslave our people and culture. But,

THE SACRED DUTY OF REBUILDING THE SOMNATH TEMPLE AFTER INDEPENDENCE CAME TO THE ABLE HANDS OF SARDAR VALLABHBHAI PATEL. A VISIT DURING DIWALI TIME IN 1947 MOVED HIM SO MUCH THAT HE ANNOUNCED THAT THE TEMPLE WILL BE REBUILT THERE

Narendra Modi is the Prime Minister of India and is also the Chairman of the Shree Somnath Trust

 narendramodi
 @narendramodi
 narendramodi/

each time the Temple was attacked, we also had great men and women who stood up to defend it and even made the ultimate sacrifice. And every single time, generation after generation, the people of our great civilisation picked themselves up, rebuilt and rejuvenated the Temple. It is our privilege to have been nurtured by the same soil that has nurtured greats like Ahilyabai Holkar, who made a noble attempt to ensure devotees can pray at Somnath. In the 1890s, Swami Vivekananda visited Somnath and that experience moved him. He expressed his feelings during a lecture in Chennai in 1897 when he said, "Some of these old temples of Southern India and those like Somnath of Gujarat will teach you volumes of wisdom, will give you a keener insight into the history of the race than any amount of books. Mark how these temples bear the marks of a hundred attacks and a hundred regenerations, continually destroyed and continually springing up out of the ruins, rejuvenated and strong as ever! That is the national mind, that is the national life-current. Follow it and it leads to glory. Give it up and you die; death will be the only result, annihilation, the only effect, the moment you step beyond that life-current."

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recalling the efforts of KM Munshi, who supported Sardar Patel very effectively. His works on Somnath, including the book, 'Somnath: The Shrine Eternal', are extremely informative and educative. Indeed, as the title of Munshi Ji's book conveys, we are a civilisation that carries a sense of conviction about the eternity of spirit and of ideas. We firmly believe that which is eternal is indestructible, as outlined in the famous Gita verse "तत् त्वं निदन्ति शस्त्राणि ...". There can be no better example of our civilisation's indomitable spirit than Somnath, which stands gloriously, overcoming odds and struggles.

It is this same spirit that is visible in our nation, one of the brightest spots of global growth, having overcome centuries of invasions and colonial loot. It is our value systems and the determination of our people that have made India the centre of global attention today. The world is seeing India with hope and optimism. They want to invest in our innovative youngsters. Our art, culture, music and several festivals are going global. Yoga and Ayurveda are making a worldwide impact, boosting healthy living.

Since time immemorial, Somnath has brought together people from different walks of life. Centuries ago, Kalikal Sarvagna Hemchandracharya, a respected Jain monk, came to Somnath.

It is said that after praying there, he recited a verse, "प्रदेवाजादकुरुजनान् रामायाः कृत्यपाता यत्प्रा". It means - Salutations to that One in whom the seeds of worldly becoming are destroyed, in whom passion and all afflictions have withered away." Today, Somnath holds the same ability to awaken something profound within the mind and soul. A thousand years after the first attack in 1026, the sea at Somnath still roars with the same intensity as it did back then. The waves that wash the shores of Somnath tell a story. No matter what, just like the waves, it kept rising again and again.

The aggressors of the past are now dust in the wind, their names synonymous with destruction. They are footnotes in the annals of history, while Somnath stands bright, radiating far beyond the horizon, reminding us of the eternal spirit that remained undiminished by the attack of 1026. Somnath is a song of hope that tells us that while hate and fanaticism may have the power to destroy for a moment, faith and conviction in the power of goodness have the power to create for eternity. If the Somnath Temple, which was attacked a thousand years ago, could rise again and again, then we can surely restore our great nation to the glory it embodied a thousand years ago before the invasions. With the blessings of Shree Somnath Mahadev, we move forward with a renewed resolve to build a Vriksh Bharat, where civilisational wisdom guides us to work for the welfare of the whole world. Jai Somnath!

The Pioneer
SINCE 1865

When Survival Meets Coexistence



SANJAY CHANDRA

2ND OPINION THE PIONEER

I begin most mornings the same way: with a cup of tea in one hand and the newspaper in the other. It is a ritual that took root early in my childhood and, to my mild surprise, has survived into later life—one of the few habits to do so. Some friends insist that both tea and newspapers now contribute equally to acidity, given the tone of contemporary headlines. Still, I persist. There is something especially satisfying about reading the paper on the first day of the year, when the noise of daily updates gives way to reflection and summary. This year, too, the tradition held. One article that caught my attention focused on Project Tiger. On the surface, it carried good news: years of sustained conservation have led to a welcome rise in tiger numbers. Yet success, as so often happens, comes with com-

plications. The growth in population has not been matched by a corresponding expansion of habitat. As a result, nearly a third of India's tigers now roam beyond core forest areas, edging closer to human settlements. This immediately brought back memories of a visit to the Masai Mara in Kenya, where we once saw three cheetahs wandering casually through a village. Our driver and several tourist vehicles bounced excitedly over rough ground to follow them, while the villagers watched with practiced indifference, as though this were an entirely ordinary sight. My wife remarked that there are now reports of big cats living almost alongside humans, not unlike stray dogs in our cities. Dogs, after all, diverged from wolves thousands of years ago, forging a mutually beneficial relationship with humans. Ironically, after perfecting coexistence, we refined it further by dividing dogs into two rigid categories: pets and strays. We now find ourselves locked in fierce—and sometimes ugly—debates over their right to exist, arguing like proverbial cats and dogs over whether they deserve protection or removal. The past year saw these tensions erupt following a court ruling on the issue, proving that few things ignite public emotion as quickly as a moral argument.

Centuries from now, historians may note how humans first separated animals into wild and domestic, and then subdivided the domestic into pet and stray—an evolution-

ary detour entirely of our own making. At the heart of this lies our selective application of two ideas: survival of the fittest and peaceful coexistence. As the dominant species, we expand as though it were our unquestionable right, encroaching on forests, fields, and coastlines. Yet we also reserve for ourselves the authority to decide when coexistence should be promoted and when compassion should be exercised. Too often, peaceful coexistence becomes a corrective tool, invoked only when our own comfort is threatened. This pattern repeats not just across species, but within humanity—between communities, nations, and ideologies. Even outer space is not spared.

I sometimes wonder how things might have unfolded had dinosaurs, or some other prehistoric species, survived to become dominant. Would they have made room for humans? Animals do fight for territory, but usually for food, mates, and survival—not for ideology or excess. Watching wildlife today, one often sees different species sharing a water hole, birds cleaning parasites from a resting lion, and scavengers performing their quiet, essential role. Each contributes to a fragile balance that sustains the whole. That humans might need to relearn peaceful coexistence—or even collaboration—from the animal world is a humbling thought, and one well worth serious reflection.

The writer is the founder of Kala, an author, speaker, coach, arbitrator, and strategy consultant.

Biopic 'Ikkis' revives patriotic cinema

Among the Christmas-New Year releases, the Hindi film Ikkis, a biopic on Second Lieutenant Arun Khetarpal, is poised to create box-office records in India and abroad. Directed by Sriram Raghavan, the film is a poignant tribute to the bravery and idealism of India's youngest recipient of the Param Vir Chakra. Young actor Agastya Nanda delivers a stellar performance that anchors the narrative with restraint and dignity.

Set during the 1971 Indo-Pak War, the film traces Arun's journey from rigorous military training to the battlefield, highlighting themes of courage, friendship, and ultimate sacrifice during the Battle of Basantar, where he laid down his life at the age of twenty-one. Ikkis also marks the final on-screen appearance of the legendary Dharmendra, lending the project an added layer of emotional resonance. With its thoughtful writing, strong performances, and judicious use of technology, Ikkis demonstrates how patriotic stories, when grounded in truth and sensitivity, can be both compelling and commercially successful. One hopes the film inspires more directors to approach such themes with seriousness rather than empty bombast, and encourages audiences to reflect on service, family, and the true cost of freedom.

Urgent action needed to save the birds

Animals and birds have always held a special place in the human heart. Pets provide comfort, companionship, and emotional support, while wild birds serve as a living connection to our planet's ancient past. Nearly ten thousand species of birds continue to survive across the world, enriching ecosystems and human imagination alike. Pet birds such as parakeets, budgerigars, and parrots often enjoy safety and care under the protection of their owners. Unfortunately, the same security is rarely available to birds in the wild. Wild birds, like many other animals, face mounting threats from shrinking habitats, climate change, pollution, and relentless human intrusion. The illegal trade in exotic birds, frequently driven by organised criminal networks, demands firm and uncompromising action.

National Bird Day, observed on 5 January, reminds us that every bird matters and that human awareness and responsibility are crucial.

Spreading awareness, rescuing injured birds, supporting shelters, and protecting both domestic and wild species from cruelty and predators are essential civic duties. Collective action today can ensure that future generations inherit skies filled with colour, song, and the delicate beauty of freedom.

Railways moves towards safety & comfort

Indian Railways is set to launch its first Vande Bharat sleeper service between Guwahati and Kolkata later this month, with Railway Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw assuring passengers that fares will remain significantly lower than those of air travel. This marks an important step in expanding affordable, high-quality long-distance rail connectivity. Looking further ahead, India's first bullet train is scheduled to commence operations on August 15, 2027, with services introduced in phases along the Mumbai-Ahmedabad High-Speed Rail Corridor.

Once fully operational, the train is expected to cover the 508-kilometre distance in just two hours and seventeen minutes, dramatically transforming intercity travel for millions. The Vande Bharat sleeper train features a sleek, aerodynamic design inspired by modern bullet trains and is equipped with the indigenous KAVACH anti-collision system. These advancements highlight significant progress in safety, comfort, and punctuality, while also reflecting growing confidence in India's domestic engineering capabilities and commitment to sustainable transport.

The focus now must be on completing projects on schedule, ensuring transparency in costs, and keeping fares affordable for ordinary passengers.

S. Sankaranarayanan | Chennai

INDORE WATER FIASCO: CLEANLINESS RANKINGS MASK CIVIC FAILURE

In Indore, the city celebrated as India's cleanest for eight consecutive years, the outbreak of a water-borne disease in Bhagirathpura, claiming several innocent lives, has devastated families. Laboratory reports indicate that infection spread through leaks in the drinking-water network and contamination from foul sewage.

Such gross negligence by the civic administration has proved fatal. For ordinary citizens, breaking through the web of mismanagement within the municipal corporation and other civic agencies has become impossible.

The proverb about digging a well only after the house has caught fire fits Bhagirathpura, where inspections of the entire pipeline have begun only now. Meanwhile, blame and counter-

blame dominate public discussion, overshadowing the tragedy of polluted water and the suspicious accounting of deaths.

Transparency, speedy repair, and independent monitoring are urgently required. Residents deserve safe water, not excuses and statistics.

It is also noteworthy that Bhagirathpura falls within the Indore-1 Assembly constituency of the state's Urban Development and Housing Minister, Kailash Vijayvargiya.

That fact inevitably raises serious questions about accountability, responsibility, and the apparent indifference of those charged with protecting public health, in a crisis of trust today for all. The incident must be probed and responsibilities must be fixed as soon as possible.

Yugal Kishore Sharma | Faridabad

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

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Urgent action needed to save the birds

Animals and birds have always held a special place in the human heart. Pets provide comfort, companionship, and emotional support, while wild birds serve as a living connection to our planet's ancient past. Nearly ten thousand species of birds continue to survive across the world, enriching ecosystems and human imagination alike. Pet birds such as parakeets, budgerigars, and parrots often enjoy safety and care under the protection of their owners. Unfortunately, the same security is rarely available to birds in the wild. Wild birds, like many other animals, face mounting threats from shrinking habitats, climate change, pollution, and relentless human intrusion. The illegal trade in exotic birds, frequently driven by organised criminal networks, demands firm and uncompromising action.

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Ganapathi Bhat | Akola





A regulator in turbulence: How the DGCA lost its way

As India enters a new year and nears a century of civil aviation regulation, the DGCA finds itself under unprecedented scrutiny. Once led by pioneering airmen and technocrats, the regulator is now exposed by airline mismanagement, regulatory inertia and repeated safety lapses. The IndiGo saga has underscored the urgent need to reform India's aviation sector

FIRST
Column



SANJAY
LAZAR

As we herald another new year, almost a century after Lt Col (later Sir) Francis Claude Shelmerdine established India's Department of Civil Aviation in 1927 and went on to become the country's first Director General of Civil Aviation, he must surely be turning in his grave. The sordid IndiGo saga has exposed the tender underbelly of Indian aviation and the DGCA alike.

The year 2025 is one that Indian aviation would rather forget. Looked at more charitably, however, 2026 could yet prove to be a harbinger of much-needed change. That golden generation of airmen and aviation traditions—beginning with the great J.R.D. Tata, Aspi Engineer, Purshottam Kabali, Shelmerdine and Sir Victor Sassoon, and carried forward by Indian Air Force pilots and technical heads of the DGCA—has long since passed.

The glory years of the 1970s and 1980s, when Air Marshals such as Jafar Zaheer and Air Vice Marshal C.K. Shantaram Raje—both decorated and eminently distinguished Director Generals of Civil Aviation—led the regulator, effectively ended with the tenure of the last technical head, Mr Kanu Ghosh, who demitted office in 2007.

A course correction under the UPA resulted in airmen and technocrats being permanently supplanted by IAS officers. Over the past 17 years, the post has effectively become a bureaucratic preserve and a plum posting. This is not to say that non-IAF officers did not serve with distinction in the interregnum. Some did so with great honour—among them Mr H.S. Khola, Mr M.R. Sivaraman, and Dr S.S. Sidhu, who later went on to become ICAO Secretary General.

In recent times, the DGCA has come under fire for numerous sins of commission and omission, despite—or perhaps because of—the fact that it is currently headed by an eminently distinguished bureaucrat. The AI-171 tragedy, incidents of GPS spoofing, Airbus software issues, the mess at IndiGo, and the alleged scams within the system have exposed long-festering cracks in the Directorate's armour. It took the bloodletting of both the Indian



INDIA URGENTLY NEEDS A CLEAR SEPARATION OF ADMINISTRATIVE AND TECHNICAL FUNCTIONS, WITH SEASONED AVIATORS AND PROFESSIONALS LEADING THE REGULATOR

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populace and the political class to realise that the DGCA had perhaps become a large cesspool of red tape, shielded for years from public scrutiny under the guise of public safety. In 2025, that final veil was torn apart by a cascading series of failures that made Indian aviation appear farcical.

In an earlier article, we traced the IndiGo crisis and how blinkered—or creatively selective—vision at the regulator triggered a domino effect across the aviation market. The DGCA has grown too large, too unwieldy, and at times, dangerously dysfunctional.

Today, the DGCA comprises 19 divisions, headed by officials of the rank of Economic Adviser (EA), Joint Director General (JDG), or Deputy Director General (DDG), all reporting upwards to the EA or DG. Each division is vested with

defined oversight responsibilities, yet when the system collapses, accountability is conspicuously absent.

The IndiGo crisis is a textbook example: its roots lie across multiple DGCA divisions, yet no one is ever found culpable. Schedules were approved by the DDG (AED) and his superior without verification, but no action followed—on the contrary, the approvals were quietly defended using antiquated rules.

The JDG (DAT) and the Chief Flight Operations Inspector were responsible for flight standards and pilot oversight at IndiGo, yet appeared unaware that 120 pilots had been let go or that recruitment had been paused as early as May.

The regulator conveniently forgot the airline's requests for deferment of Phase II of the CAR in September 2025, as well as the seven dispensations sought.

Either the left hand did not know what the right was doing—or plausible deniability was the chosen refuge. A recent transfer of a DGCA official appeared ominous amid the IndiGo crisis but turned out to be a routine, long-pending change.

The real questions remain unanswered: why do officers facing vigilance inquiries continue to occupy sensitive positions years beyond permissible norms? Why did previous DGs freeze serious investigations?

A genuine purge—post an independent external inquiry—would inevitably have to include senior JDGs, DDGs and the CFOI, if the government has the will to clean its Augean stables. Political expediency, however, often weighs heavier.

At the heart of the problem lies the continued exploitation of archaic rules—most notably those governing pilot

Dealing with Delhi's toxic air: A governance failure, not a seasonal anomaly



PARUL
SHARMA

Every winter, Delhi's air pollution crisis returns with grim predictability. Schools shut, hospitals issue advisories, flights are delayed, and public anger briefly peaks. The debate that follows is equally familiar: stubble burning versus vehicles, construction dust versus coal plants, individual behaviour versus government failure. Yet despite years of discussion and data, the air remains toxic. This persistence points to two deeper truths: a lack of public clarity about the issue, and a failure of public systems—planning, governance, and institutional capacity—unfolding in plain sight.

At the same time, several civic efforts are working to address these gaps. One point is often missing from the public narrative: air pollution is not a behavioural anomaly or a technological gap that can be solved through private fixes. It is the cumulative outcome of fragmented urban planning, weak enforcement, and misplaced priorities over decades. Delhi's air quality is poor not just in winter but throughout the year. Seasonal meteorology worsens the crisis, but the sources are structural and continuous. Motorised transport, dominated by private vehicles, accounts for nearly half of particulate pollution.

Construction and road dust contribute roughly another third. Coal-based thermal power plants operating on the city's periphery add significantly to emissions, with many violating sulphur dioxide norms. Household emissions, small industries, and biomass burning further compound the burden. Stubble burning, often portrayed as the primary villain, contributes a variable share—between 4 per cent and 20 per cent depending on wind conditions—and only for a limited four- to six-week window. Yet public discourse disproportionately fixates on it, allowing harder conversations about urban mobility, land use, and industrial regulation to be postponed. This misalignment between causes and responses becomes stark when public funding is examined. India's National Clean Air Programme allocated about ₹19,711 crore over six years for 131 cities—roughly ₹25 crore per city per year. A large portion of this funding remains unspent. Of what is spent, much goes toward short-term measures such as water spraying on roads, which



offers visual relief but little evidence-based impact.

The deeper constraint is institutional capacity. Pollution control boards remain understaffed, underpowered, and financially constrained, with limited enforcement authority. Urban planning, transport, environment, housing, and land-use decisions continue to operate in silos. Without empowered institutions, even well-intentioned policies remain aspirational.

Policy incoherence compounds the problem. Restrictions on construction in ecologically sensitive zones coexist with permissions for large-scale development. Older vehicle bans are inconsistently enforced, even as the policy narrative increasingly centres on electric vehicles.

While EVs are important, they do not address a fundamental truth: replacing one private vehicle with another does not solve congestion, emissions, or exposure. Cities with cleaner air have not merely electrified cars; they have reduced dependence on them. International experience shows that another path is possible. Cities that have successfully tackled air pollution treated it as a governance challenge rather than an environmental add-on. Beijing invested heavily and consistently, relocated polluting industries, enforced emission norms, and built integrated public transport systems. The lesson is not replication, but coherence and follow-through.

A more effective response in India requires clear sequencing of action. In the short term, priorities must include immediate reduction of exposure: strict enforcement of construction-site compliance, penalties for non-compliant vehicles and industries, and demand-side measures such as congestion pricing and

rationalised parking fees.

Revenues should be ring-fenced to strengthen public transport and last-mile connectivity. In the medium to long term, air quality improvement depends on reducing private vehicle dependence. This requires sustained investment in reliable public transport, safe walking and cycling infrastructure, and the creation of low-emission zones around schools, hospitals, and dense activity centres. Industrial and thermal power plants that cannot meet emission standards must be relocated beyond urban peripheries.

At the institutional level, pollution control boards must be adequately staffed, funded, and empowered. City-level planning authorities need legal authority, and state and national institutions must be strengthened to enforce environmental and mobility norms.

A regional unified metropolitan transport authority across all modes can align planning, pricing, and operations. Transparent, real-time air quality data should guide both policy and accountability. Delhi's air pollution crisis is neither inevitable nor insoluble.

It is the outcome of choices—and can be reversed by better ones. Experts such as Sunita Narain, Arunabha Ghosh, Vimlendu Jha, Amit Bhatt, and Jyoti Pande Lavakare have articulated both the problems and solutions for years. Treating clean air as a national priority, strengthening public institutions, and committing to sustained reform can turn today's crisis into an opportunity to build healthier, more resilient cities.

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Health for all: Reclaiming the soul of Indian healthcare



RICHARD
HAY

India's medical institutions, once revered as sanctuaries of healing, are today rapidly degenerating into centres of unchecked commercial exploitation. What was meant to serve humanity has, in many cases, become a profit-driven enterprise, indifferent to human suffering.

The Hippocratic Oath, solemnly taken by every doctor, clearly states: "I will use treatment to help the sick according to my ability and judgment, but never to injure or wrong them." Yet, in today's healthcare ecosystem, this sacred pledge is being brazenly violated. Healing has been replaced by billing, and compassion by calculation. Medical colleges and hospitals increasingly function like corporate entities, where patients are viewed not as human beings in distress but as revenue-generating units. Unnecessary diagnostic tests, inflated bills, denial of ethical care, and coercive treatment practices have become disturbingly common.

Even more alarming is the unholy nexus between hospitals and insurance companies, which often results in inflated claims, denial of genuine treatments, and the ruthless exploitation of helpless patients. The poor and middle class suffer the most, stripped of dignity at their most vulnerable moments.

Equally dangerous is the widespread circulation of spurious, substandard, and unnecessary medicines, prescribed not for healing but for profit. This amounts to nothing less than a silent public health crime. Regulatory bodies such as the National Accreditation Board for Hospitals (NABH), the National Medical Commission, and State Medical Councils appear to have reduced themselves to mere licensing authorities, frequently turning a blind eye to grave ethical violations. Accreditation has become more procedural than principled, more bureaucratic than moral. It is deeply troubling that the Government of India, along with institutions such as the NABH, Central Consumer Protection Department (CCPD), Indian Medical Council, and the Indian Medical Association, has failed to exercise effective moral and regulatory authority.

Instead of protecting patients, the system often shields powerful medical lobbies. Institutions such as the National



Human Rights Commission (NHRC), State Human Rights Commissions (SHRCs), and allied bodies have, in many cases, failed to act decisively. Their silence in the face of blatant injustice amounts to institutional abdication.

The State cannot remain a mute spectator while citizens are reduced to victims within systems meant to protect them. Healthcare is not a commodity; it is a moral obligation and a constitutional responsibility. India urgently needs stringent laws, uncompromising enforcement, and exemplary punishment for those who betray medical ethics. The nation must reclaim the soul of its healthcare system. The time has come to bridge the widening chasm between corporate interests and clinical care.

This demands a fundamental shift in how healthcare is governed, centred on three imperatives: legislative accountability, transparent supervision, and decisive state action. Legislative accountability requires the enactment of a national framework that holds hospitals legally and criminally liable for predatory billing and medically unjustified procedures.

Transparent supervision must transform regulatory bodies from passive licensing offices into active guardians of ethics, while incorporating independent civil society oversight to curb the influence of medical lobbies. Decisive state action presupposes that the State can no longer remain a mute spectator to the unholy practices prevailing in the healthcare sector. We must dismantle systems that prioritise ledger entries over human lives. India must urgently reclaim the soul of its healthcare system by restoring human dignity to the centre of medical practice. The nation expects—and deserves—nothing less.

Professor Richard Hay is a former Member of Parliament

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{ OUR TAKE }

Crossing a red line in Caracas

The Trump regime may have signalled the death of the West's rules-based order by acting against Venezuela

The US intervention in Venezuela is both stunning and alarming for the manner in which the country disregarded international laws and abducted the elected President of a sovereign country to put him on trial in New York on charges of narco-terrorism. The implications of this action will not be limited to the US and Venezuela.

For the Trump administration, the capture of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro is the final proof that the foreign policy that President Donald Trump espoused at the start of his first presidential term is well and truly dead. Trump won the support of the Make America Great Again movement claiming he would end America's foreign wars. Time and again, he insisted that his government was not interested in regime change. But it has been clear to everyone, especially since the start of his second term that Trump wants the world to kowtow to the US, and that he is not above using all weapons at his disposal to ensure this.

Maduro's abduction by US security forces, from the presidential quarters in Caracas, the Venezuelan capital, is unprecedented, even by the US's record of interventions in South and Central American countries. Trump has since said the US will now administer Venezuela, and American firms will manage that country's oil and petroleum resources. He has even dismissed the credentials of Venezuela's opposition, making the US goals resemble the European imperialist projects of the 19th and 20th centuries.

The West-enforced rules-based order that has shaped global power relations since World War II now lies in ruins. The Trump administration's action undermines the US's standing as a responsible world power — the perception was an important aspect of the rules-based order — and sends out the message that might be right in international affairs. Powers such as Russia and China have criticised the US action, but these nations too nurture imperial ambitions — events in Ukraine and the approach to Taiwan are evidence — and Washington's action could set a new precedent. Venezuela is a close ally of China, and how Beijing responds to this event will be closely watched.

Under the rules-based order, national sovereignty and national borders have been red lines to be respected. India's response has been muted — it expressed "deep concern" — but much of the Global South, Brazil, Mexico, South Africa and Chile, among others, has criticised the US action. With the United Nations ineffective and big powers discredited, a reasonable framework or credible platform for dispute resolution is missing. Just as a new year begins, the world is staring at chaos, and the global economy may take a hit if supply from Venezuela, a major petroleum producer, is disrupted for long.

Undermining India, Bangladesh relations

The tension in India-Bangladesh ties has found a new playfield in cricket. A vicious campaign by the Hindu Right-wing against the participation of Bangladesh cricketers in the IPL, has been successful in forcing the hand of the BCCI, which asked Kolkata Knight Riders to terminate the contract with Mustafizur Rahman, a star Bangladesh player. The Bangladesh Cricket Board, in turn, has decided to not travel to India for the T20 World Cup matches, scheduled in February, and has asked for them to be shifted to a "secure and appropriate" venue, claiming India is unsafe for its players. This is unfortunate.

New Delhi should not let cricketing ties with Dhaka go south, for Bangladesh is not Pakistan. India has always trusted bilateral ties to stay above the chaos of Bangladesh politics, considering the deep social and cultural ties between the two countries — one reason why New Delhi has shown restraint in the face of polarising statements from the current regime in Dhaka. The presence of external affairs minister S Jaishankar at Khaleda Zia's funeral even though her tenure as Bangladesh PM marked a low point in ties suggests India's keenness to leave the past behind and build bridges with the new Bangladesh. The campaign against cricketers threatens to undo such efforts.

Framing ties with neighbouring States through the prism of the Hindu-Muslim binary is a fraught project. The violence in Bangladesh, including the attacks on minorities, is rooted in local politics and must be discussed in that framework. Non-State parties must not be allowed to dictate the discourse on a nuanced negotiation, best left to seasoned diplomats and top political leadership can cause lasting damage to India's strategic interests and global image.

The message in the story of Somnath

The history of the shrine in the last 1,000 years is a tale of unbroken faith and civilisational regeneration

Somnath — the word instills a sense of pride in our hearts and minds. It is the eternal proclamation of India's soul. This majestic temple is situated in Prabhas Patan, Gujarat. The *Dwadasha Jyotirlinga Stotram* mentions the 12 Jyotirlings across India. The *stotram* begins with "Sau-rashtri Somanatham cha...", symbolising the civilisational and spiritual importance of Somnath as the first Jyotirling. It is also said, "Somalingam naro drishtha sarvapapayee pramuchyate, labhate phalam manavancittam mritah sanashrayet" (Just as the sight of Somnath Shivaling ensures that a person is freed of sins, achieves their righteous desires and attains heaven after death). Tragically, Somnath, which drew the reverence and prayers of millions, was attacked by foreign invaders, whose agenda was demolition, not devotion.

The year 2026 is significant for the Somnath temple. It has been a thousand years since the first attack on this great shrine. It was in January of 1026 that Mahmud of Ghazni attacked this temple, seeking to destroy a great symbol of faith and civilisation, through a violent and barbaric invasion. Yet, a thousand years later, the temple stands as glorious as ever because of numerous efforts to restore Somnath to its grandeur. One such milestone completes 75 years in 2026. It was during a

ceremony on May 11, 1951, in the presence of the then President of India, Rajendra Prasad, that the restored temple opened its doors to devotees.

The first invasion of Somnath, the cruelty that was unleashed upon the people of the town, and the devastation that was inflicted upon the shrine have been documented in great detail in various historical accounts. When you read them, the heart trembles. Each line carries the weight of grief, cruelty, and a sorrow that refuses to fade with time.

Imagine the impact it had on Bharat and the morale of the people. After all, Somnath had great spiritual significance. It was also on the coast, giving strength to a society with great economic prowess, whose sea traders and seafarers carried tales of its grandeur far and wide. Yet, I am proud to state unequivocally that the story of Somnath is not defined by destruction. It is defined by the unbreakable courage of crores of children of Bharat Mata.

The medieval barbarism that began in 1026 went on to "inspire" others to repeatedly attack Somnath. It was the start of an attempt to enslave our people and culture. But, each time the temple was attacked, we also had great men and women who stood up to defend it and even made the ultimate sacrifice. And every single time, generation after generation, the people of our great civilisation picked themselves up, rebuilt and rejuvenated the temple. It is our privilege to have been nurtured by the same soil that has nurtured greats such as Abhayabai Holkar, who made a noble attempt to ensure devotees can pray at Somnath.

In the 1890s, Swami Vivekananda

visited Somnath and that experience moved him. He expressed his feelings during a lecture in Chennai in 1897, saying, "Some of these old temples of Southern India and those like Somnath of Gujarat will teach you volumes of wisdom, will give you a keener insight into the history of the race than any amount of books. Mark how these temples bear the marks of a hundred attacks and a hundred regenerations,

continually destroyed and continually springing up out of the ruins, rejuvenated and strong as ever! That is the national mind, that is the national life-current. Follow it and it leads to glory. Give it up and you die; death will be the only result, annihilation, the only effect, the moment you step beyond that life current."

The sacred duty of rebuilding the temple after Independence came to the able hands of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel. A visit during Diwali time in 1947 moved him so much that he announced that the temple will be rebuilt there. Finally, on May 1, 1951, a grand temple in Somnath opened its doors to devotees. The great Sardar was not alive to see this historic day, but the fulfilment of his dream stood tall before the nation. The then Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, was not too enthused with this development. He did not want the President as well as ministers to associate with this special event. He said that this event created a bad impression of India. But Prasad stood firm, and the rest is history. No mention of Somnath is complete without recalling the efforts of KM Munshi, who supported Patel very effectively. His works on Somnath, including the book, *Somnath: The Shrine Eternal*, are



Since time immemorial, Somnath has brought together people from different walks of life.

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are destroyed, in whom passion and all afflictions have withered away. Today, Somnath holds the same ability to awaken something profound within the mind and soul.

The sea at Somnath still roars with the same intensity as it did back then. The waves that wash the shores of Somnath tell a story. No matter what, just like the waves, it kept rising again and again. The aggressors of the past are now dust in the wind, their names synonymous with destruction. They are footnotes in the annals of history, while Somnath stands bright, radiating far beyond the horizon, reminding us of the eternal spirit that remained undiminished by the attack of 1026. Somnath is a song of hope that tells us that while hate and fanaticism may have the power to destroy for moment, faith and conviction in the power of goodness have the power to create for eternity. If the Somnath temple could rise again and again, then we can surely restore our great nation to the glory it embodied a thousand years ago before the invasions. With the blessings of Shree Somnath Mahadev, we move forward with a renewed resolve to build a Viksit Bharat, where civilisational wisdom guides us to work for the welfare of the whole world.

Narendra Modi is the Prime Minister of India and is also the chairman of the Shree Somnath Trust



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{ GRAND STRATEGY }

Happymon Jacob

The corrupted software of international relations

If you want to understand why the US attacked Venezuela late last week and captured its president, Nicholas Maduro, and took him to New York to try him under American domestic law, there is no point in consulting a book on international law or the UN charter. They have become passé. Here's what I suggest: Take a look at any standard software licence and the various subscription plans it mentions. In the eyes of Washington, and the current American president, Donald Trump, the so-called rules-based international order is no longer a set of universal laws; it's a tiered subscription model. Here's how the model works.

For countries like India, there is a mandatory basic plan. They must follow every line of the code regarding sanctions, war and peace, trade, and sovereignty, or you face a system crash that can result in 50% tariffs and other economic and political consequences. But for the US, international law is sort of a "premium enterprise account" that is only available to the service provider, because it led the team that wrote it some 81 years ago. Its account comes with the exclusive right to temporarily or permanently cancel the terms of service whenever they become an inconvenience to the service provider. As for Venezuela, it has been put in the blacklisted category. In the service provider's eyes, Caracas isn't a user of the software called the international order; it is malware — a narco-State virus. And a system wipe is justified.

Last Saturday, the US moved from imposing simple firewalls to an active "delete command", launching Operation Absolute Resolve to remove a sovereign head of State with force, giving the excuse of law enforcement.

By launching the operation with no UN Security Council (UNSC) authorisation, the US has effectively signalled to Global South countries that the developer remains free to hack the system at will, as it did on Saturday. And there is no ombudsman to turn to, unfortunately.

By ignoring the UNSC, Washington has directly violated Article 2(4) of the UN Charter, the sacrosanct source code that forbids the use of force against another State. However, in trying to avoid a system error in its narrative, the service provider referred to law enforcement and narco-terrorism to attack Venezuela.

The carefully worded response from the European Union on Saturday read like an automated email from a tech support bot that has no actual power over the server or the service provider. EU foreign policy chief Kajla Kallas tweeted, "The EU has repeatedly said that Mr Maduro lacks legitimacy and has defended a peaceful transition. Under all circumstances, the principles of international law and the UN Charter must be respected. We call for restraint." This was the standard system notification — acknowledging the bug, but unable to do anything to fix it.

To be fair, Brussels has long advocated a "peaceful transition" feature coded into the system, but today it is helplessly watching the US run a delete command on Venezuela. By ignoring the American delete command in Caracas after condemning the Russian hack in Kyiv, the EU may have compromised its own moral source code. People on X.com remind Kallas of the original source code: UN General Assem-

bly Resolution 2625 that reads "Every State has an inalienable right to choose its political, economic, social and cultural systems, without interference in any form by another State."

To be fair, the German foreign minister tweeted that "The UN Charter is not optional" and French foreign minister Jean-Noël Barrot noted that the actions "violate the principle of non-resort to force that underpins international law." However, none of them explicitly named the aggressor or condemned the attack.

When the US ignores the Principle of Sovereign Equality (UN Charter Art. 2.1) to kidnap a head of State and attack a country's capital city and try the former under American domestic law, it ends up corrupting the software of international law. If China were to launch a military action against Taiwan tomorrow, the international community would likely struggle to respond effectively. The Russian attack on Ukraine is starting to resemble Trump's attack on Venezuela, albeit with the notable exception of territorial occupation.

For a country like India, which has been slapped with 50% tariffs for the "crime" of sovereign energy trade with Russia, the message is clear: International law is a tool to discipline you. If you didn't write the code, you're just a bug waiting to be deleted.

India has four basic options. Option one is to keep the legacy licence: Keep following American rules and hope for fringe benefits. The risk is that the OS developer is rewriting the rules in real-time to suit itself, which might harm our interests. The service provider is not trustworthy, we have learned, and may become hostile and could even send malware our way.

The second option is to use a series of custom patches or plugins while maintaining strategic autonomy. This would mean using the US for some of its security needs, Europe for technology and economy, Japan and Korea for Indo-Pacific, Russia for continental geopolitics, and BRICS for geopolitical ends.

The third, radical option is to abandon the software altogether and switch to the software being coded in Moscow and Beijing. It promises a world without dollar-dominance and sanctions, but undoubtedly carries the virus called Chinese hegemony. The danger is that trading a restrictive American licence for a Chinese one might be even more compromising for our systems in the longer run.

A final option for India, as it chairs BRICS this year, is not to choose between American or Chinese software but to support the urgent development of an open source-based international order. We must rally the non-premium Global South world to build a system where the rules are hard-coded, transparent, and apply to the developers as well. Likeminded powers must come together to crowdsource ideas and fund to create such a software. If the US treats the UN Charter as a private user agreement that it can breach at will, it's time for the Global South to build a new system that actually works for all the users.

Happymon Jacob is distinguished visiting professor, School of Humanities & Social Sciences, Shiv Nadar University, and editor, INDIA'S WORLD. The views expressed are personal

{ KEIR STARMER } PRIME MINISTER, THE UK



Keir
Starmer

Under the last government ... it caused utter chaos. Nobody wants to go back to that.

Responding to a query on whether a Labour leadership change was in order, citing frequent changes during the Conservative Party's years in power

{ STRAIGHTFORWARD }

Shashi Shekhar

In 2026, the signs of a deeply divided world

Have you seen the pictures of handcuffed Venezuelan President Nicholas Maduro, seized by American forces?

Isn't it reminiscent of the tragic images of December 2003, in which the handcuffed Iraqi president Saddam Hussein looked shocked and dejected? Maduro is an elected president of a sovereign nation. Are international laws and the United Nations subservient to the whims of US presidents? Hussein was hanged but then US President George W Bush couldn't prove a single charge against him. Will Maduro be the next victim of US falsehood?

Donald Trump's invasion of Venezuela is scary. I say this because, like Trump, Russian President Vladimir Putin also wants to arrest his Ukrainian counterpart, President Volodymyr Zelensky. His wish hasn't been fulfilled yet, but his forces have already annexed a large part of Ukraine. Russian forces are constantly advancing on Ukrainian soil, and Kyiv's situation is now precarious.

On New Year's day, Russian officials claimed 91 Ukrainian drones were directed at Putin's residence. Kyiv denounced the claims, but Moscow is hell bent on its "right" to exact revenge. It may not be too far-fetched to expect a repeat of the drama of Caracas in Kyiv.

Trump's US attacked Venezuela on the pretext that the latter's president shelters drug-lords who are on a par with designated terrorists. Trump conveniently forgets America's close friend Pakistan has not only provided safe haven to terrorists such as Masood Azhar and Osama bin Laden, but has the capacity to create many such terrorists and terror outfits. Putin too claimed Zelensky was a fascist when he attacked Ukraine in 2022. Such absurd justifications are offered before defining global events.

The present global instability is a gift of such lies. The latest Global Peace Index (GPI) report suggests that 78 out of 193 nations today are embroiled in some kind of conflict. This is the first time since World War II when so many nations are fighting each other. There are 17 unfortunate nations that have lost more than 1,000 citizens each in 2025 to conflict. If we include countries with 100 or more fatalities, the number of nations jumps to 40. I am purposefully desisting from mentioned West African nations such as Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad here. They have been in the grip of raging conflict for decades. Today, even supposedly peaceful nations such as Cambodia

and Thailand are at each other's throat. On December 13, Thailand used US F-16s to bomb Cambodia, killing 11 people.

The GPI report also says that 84 nations have raised their defence budget over the last six years. The list includes nuclear-armed nations too. In 2023, their defence budget had reached 11.6% of their GDP. As a result, globally, the expectation for peace has diminished by 0.3%.

The Russia-Ukraine war has entered its fourth year. It hasn't just affected both countries, but has also rattled all of Europe. Denmark is repairing its air-raid shelters of World War II vintage even as it negotiates deals to procure deadly new weapons. Sweden is following the same path. Not a day passes in Europe when a leader or general doesn't express concerns about possible Russian attacks.

European nations have been forced to increase their defence spending ever since Trump imposed bigger funding responsibilities on Europe when it came to the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (Nato). Its effect is visible in the weakening of global welfare schemes due to lack of funds. Similarly, economic growth is sliding. In 2025, the global growth was pegged at 2.3%, the lowest since 2008.

Pakistan has always been a rogue nation, but its recent posturing has forced India to prepare for war. We face another threat from China, which maintains an adversarial posture and has a far deeper pool of resources and military capabilities. Indeed, the first chief of defence staff, General Bipin Rawat, had said we should be prepared to fight a two-front war.

Recent incidents in Bangladesh and the support from Islamabad and Beijing are raising new concerns and adding to the volatility. Bangladesh has witnessed assassinations of prominent student leaders. Every death leads to more chaos and shrill anti-India rhetoric. Who is fomenting trouble in our neighbourhood?

Our world is moving away from peaceful disagreements and border agreements to an era of alienation and conflicts. If 2025 offered a lot, then 2026 poses challenges of war. Will we find solutions to these problems or aggravate them by our actions? The answer will decide the fate of the world sitting on a powder keg.

Shashi Shekhar is editor-in-chief, Hindustan. The views expressed are personal



MONDAY, JANUARY 5, 2026

Puzzling growth

Price deceleration may be signalling a serious demand constraint

EVEN AS INDIA'S headline (real) GDP growth hit a six-quarter high of 8.2% in Q2FY26, with a steady year-on-year acceleration for four quarters in a row, the subdued nominal GDP expansion offered a contrasting picture. To be sure, in the three quarters to Q2FY26, real GDP growth rose from 7.4% to 8.2%. The nominal growth was on a steeper path, albeit downwards—from 10.8% to 8.7%. Such dichotomy has led to a rare convergence of nominal and real GDP, and triggered speculation that the economy may be seriously demand-constrained. The apprehension is that the strong expansion in real output could largely be the result of weak price growth. The incompatibility between several high-frequency indicators and the quarterly GDP estimates is also a cause of concern. In Q2FY26, for instance, manufacturing and services grew around 9%, and private consumption expanded 7.9%. Under normal circumstances, these numbers must be reflective of an economy on a firm footing, with broad-based growth impulses.

However, the index of industrial production (IIP) grew just 4.8% in the July-September period, and reported just 0.3% increase in October. Though the index subsequently accelerated to a 25-month high of 6.7% in November, it was driven by festive-season consumption demand that appeared to fade. Manufacturing activity captured by the seasonally adjusted purchasing managers' index was the weakest in nine months in November, and fell further to a two-year low in December. The index decline reflected softer demand conditions and more cautious production strategies by firms. Physical parameters like railway freight, power consumption, and fuel sales aren't keeping pace with the quarterly national income data either.

In FY25, private investments accounted for just a third of gross fixed capital formation (GFCF). For the record, the share of the private sector in new investment projects rose steadily for three quarters in a row through Q3FY26. But that can barely be a solace, given that a sharp, inevitable slowdown in government investments resulted in a 6% fall in the aggregate value of new projects. Gross goods and services tax (GST) collections in the two full months after GST reductions were lower than the average of the April-October period. Corporate revenue growth, outside the banking and financial sector, lagged the Q2 GDP, at 5.3%. Also, real growth in GFCF, which averaged 8.2% in the three quarters to Q2FY26, is wholly inconsistent with the nominal GFCF growth.

The National Statistics Office measures the quarterly sector-wise gross value added (GVA) at constant prices by either estimating the value of output and material inputs and then the GVA, or computes the GVA using physical indicators. For the current-price estimates, the implicit price deflators are estimated using the prices data from the wholesale and consumer price indexes of the respective industry groups. Industry-wise deflators are then superimposed on the GVA at constant prices. It appears that since the GDP deflator is abnormally low, the real GDP growth tends to be stronger than the underlying nominal production value. But what is being felt by the economic actors are the nominal rupees they earn. All this shows the foundation on which India's growth is placed warrants a review. When the external sector is unsupportive and the economy almost fully driven by domestic demand, growth impulses might be weaker than official data suggests. By definition, the economy might be in a Goldilocks moment (barring the elusive full employment), but to take comfort in such terminology may be an unaffordable luxury at this instance.

We can't innovate our way out of the climate crisis

OPTIMISM, 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°C.

Given that backdrop, I was struck by Bill Gates' 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. 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 nonprofit 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 unavoidable and avoid the unmanageable." What makes that so hard is that climate change isn't just one issue, he explains; it has worked its way into every facet of our world. So while an innovative technology might help, say, farmers struggling with a climate that no longer supports the types of crops they've been growing for decades, that same breakthrough is unlikely to do anything for the school superintendent down the road who's wondering what to do about the way heat hurts kids' health and cognition.

That doesn't mean innovation has no role in responding to climate change. But the way we need to innovate isn't just technological, but in how we think. "The climate has been so stable for so long we mostly assume nothing will change," he says. So, what happens when it does?

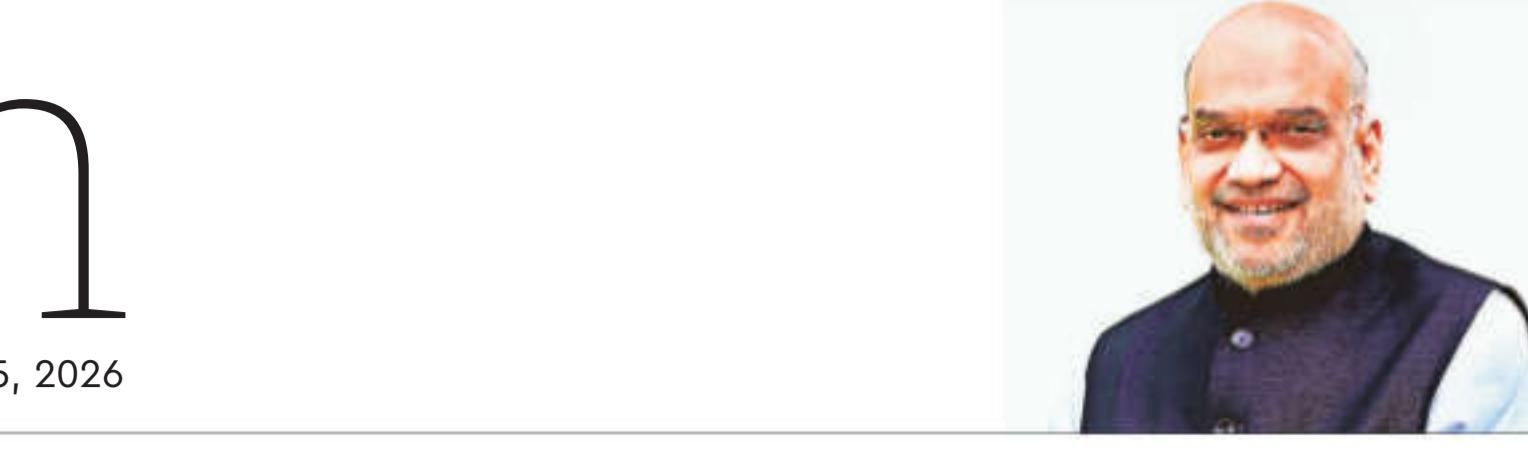
We need to shift from implicit beliefs about the climate to explicit models built on the best science. And we need to feed those models into decisions that we would normally think to have nothing to do with the weather—everything from mortgage underwriting to the grade of asphalt used to pave roads.

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."

That mindset shift is among the most difficult leadership challenges of our time. As we think about our New Year's resolutions, my suggestion for leaders and everyone who wants to be one is just that: Make 2026 the year you get climate literate.

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REMEMBERING SAVITRIBAI PHULE
Union Home Minister Amit Shah
Savitribai Phule gave a new direction to women empowerment by connecting women with the fundamental right to education...[her] inspiring life will always remain a guiding light in nation-building

FROM PLATE TO PLOUGH

FARMER PROSPERITY CAN BE REAL IF INNOVATION IS SCALED WITH COLLABORATION BETWEEN ALL STAKEHOLDERS

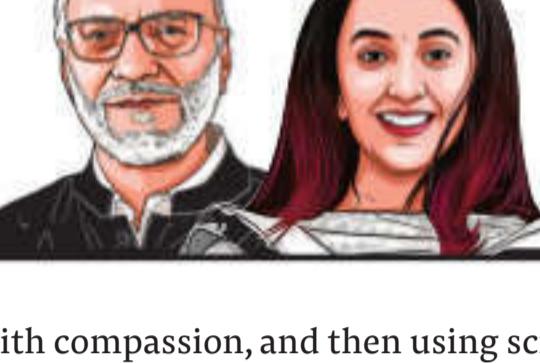
From parched fields to prosperity

VICTOR HUGO ONCE wrote "No power on earth can stop an idea whose time has come." In contemporary India, in the midst of drought in 2015-16, Prime Minister Narendra Modi floated an idea to double farmers' real incomes by 2022-23. He called it his dream as he knew that if peasants prosper, India will prosper. Even Mahatma Gandhi said that India lives in villages. But today, the economic condition in villages is not very good. They are still lagging behind in basic infrastructure. To the best of our knowledge, no independent study has been undertaken about the outcome of PM Modi's idea of doubling farmers' incomes. However, at ICRER, we have researched on this issue and our conclusion is that the achievement was less than 50%.

Almost at the same time, in a drought-stricken district (Beed) in Maharashtra, someone else—Mayank Gandhi—floated an idea of Krishikul under the Global Vikas Trust (GVT) to augment farmers' incomes. He and his team of GVT convinced farmers to shift from traditional crops of soyabean and cotton to fruit crops such as papaya, custard apple, sweet lime, guava, pomegranate, mulberry, bananas, etc. The result has been astounding. As per an independent evaluation study by Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) in 2024, the per acre income of farmers increased by more than 10 times, from ₹38,700 to ₹3.93 lakh within a short transition period. So far, GVT has planted more than 6.7 crore fruit trees (cumulatively) in about 43,000 acres belonging to roughly 30,000 farm families spread across 5,000 villages. Now the issue is—if this can be done in Maharashtra's Beed, why it can't be replicated and scaled up to other districts and states? That's where the role of the state and central governments comes in.

**ASHOK GULATI
ISHITA MANDLA**

Respectively distinguished professor and research fellow, ICRER



One is reminded of how the milk experiment in the Kheda district of Gujarat by Verghese Kurien was scaled up through the National Dairy Development Board (NDDB) by taking loans for Operation Flood from the World Bank. But all this happened as a result of the then-PM Lal Bahadur Shastri spending a night in Kheda talking to farmers till 2 am, and then took a call to set up NDDB with Kurien as its chairman. The rest is history as India ushered in the White Revolution. In 2024-25, India produced roughly 248 million tonnes (MT) of milk, while the second slot went to the US producing about 102 MT. India remains by large the top most producer of milk in the world. And interestingly, it was done largely by small holders with an average herd size of just four cows/buffaloes.

Our submission: Will PM Narendra Modi have the time to spend a night at GVT's Krishikul and talk to farmers independently and then take a call on how to convert this experiment into a nation-wide revolution? Here is a brief summary and some lessons of what Krishikul did to augment farmers' incomes by more than 10 times.

First and foremost was to earn the farmers' trust by listening to their socio-economic problems, analysing them

with compassion, and then using science and advanced farming practices (high-density plantation) for fruit crops. Second, the best quality saplings were procured from diverse nurseries for different fruits. GVT bought saplings on a large scale helped them procure at ₹30/sapling, which was roughly half the retail price. Farmers were supplied these saplings at a subsidised price of ₹15 each. The subsidy was provided through the corporate social responsibility (CSR) funding from various donors, most notably Motilal Oswal Foundation. The Foundation donated ₹25 crores to build Krishikul's basic structure spread across 25 acres. It is used to carry out experiments for different crops and train farmers rigorously on how to handle these new crops. Third, the water table in that area, which had receded to about 400 feet below surface level, was recharged through farm ponds, check dams, and most importantly, by putting in several (about 200) Global River Aquashfts—deep vertical recharge shafts constructed in low-lying riverbeds that channel excess surface water safely into underground aquifers. By filtering silt and debris before percolation, these structures ensure efficient groundwater

Agriculture must move from being production-focussed to controlling the entire value chain, so that Indian produce has access to the best domestic and global markets

recharge without contamination. This helped raised groundwater level from 400 feet to about 50 feet at several places, enabling assured irrigation of these fruit crops. Fourth, banks were also roped in to provide credit to these farmers. Their risk was covered by providing a first-loss default guarantee (FLDG) facility of ₹1 crore. The results of this strategy to implement the idea of augmenting farmers' incomes was unprecedented. Incomes soared 10 times, triggering economic transformation.

But this is still a beginning of the journey and much more needs to be done. One area is to move from being production-focussed to controlling the entire value chain, so that Indian produce has access to the best domestic and global markets

A charitable organisation like the GVT can demonstrate the proof of concept, which they have already done at some scale. Taking it forward to an all-India movement requires the government to step in with large resources, more expertise, and policy changes wherever needed to scale it up under a Centre-state-non-government organisation-business partnership. We hope that the Modi government can undertake it and realise its unfulfilled dream of not just doubling farmers' incomes but augmenting it manyfold.

Views are personal

Resolving India's grid bottlenecks



SHRIRAM SUBRAMANIAN

The author works with InGovern Research Services

FOR OVER A decade, India has pursued one of the world's most ambitious renewable energy transitions, rapidly scaling solar and wind capacity while investing heavily in national transmission corridors to carry green power from resource-rich states like Rajasthan, Gujarat, and Ladakh to major consumption centres. This dual push reflects that the energy transition is equally about generating and evacuating clean power.

As India enters its next phase of renewable scale-up, a structural challenge is emerging at the intersection of infrastructure planning, grid operations, and investor confidence. In Rajasthan, one of India's largest renewable energy hubs, more than 4,000 megawatts (MW) of fully commissioned solar capacity faces near-total curtailment during peak generation hours. These operational plants can produce electricity but are unable to inject power into the grid when generation is the highest.

At the heart of this issue lies General Network Access (GNA), which defines how much power the interstate transmission system commits to evacuate for a power generator. GNA exists in two forms—permanent and temporary. Permanent GNA is granted once designated transmission systems are completed, and such projects enjoy priority access. Until these systems are ready, projects operate under temporary GNA, using spare capacity after permanent commitments are met.

Because transmission infrastructure takes longer to build than renewable plants, temporary GNA was designed as a pragmatic bridge. For several years, this

worked reasonably well—after serving permanent GNA holders, the grid retained operational margin for temporary GNA users. Temporary access was shared proportionately, allowing partial evacuation of 40-50%. Revenues were lower, but projects remained viable and clean power continued to flow.

Rajasthan's current experience marks a sharp departure. The state has roughly 23 gigawatts (GW) of commissioned renewable capacity, yet usable evacuation capacity during peak solar hours is under 19 GW. With priority given to permanent GNA projects, little operational margin remains for temporary GNA generators. Meanwhile, about 4,375 MW of GNA was operational, consuming incremental headroom. The commissioning of the 765 kV Khetri-Narela transmission line—one of India's highest-capacity corridors—was expected to ease this constraint. Instead, incremental usable corridor capacity declared after commissioning was only 500-600 MW, far below what the asset's physical scale and cost might provide.

This raises an important question: Why did a massive capital-intensive new transmission asset result in only such a small increase in declared usable corridor capacity? If the physical corridor is large but operationally declared margin remains low, stakeholders need visibility into the operational constraints explaining this gap.

Because transmission infrastructure takes longer to build than renewable plants, temporary GNA was designed as a pragmatic bridge. For several years, this

Simultaneously, substantial projects previously under temporary GNA were upgraded to permanent GNA according to commitments linked to this line's commissioning. Priority allocation to these projects absorbed not only newly declared capacity but also residual margin that temporary GNA users had relied upon. Several GW of commissioned renewable projects shifted abruptly from partial to near-zero evacuation.

This unpredictable curtailment undermines project bankability, erodes investor confidence, and raises capital costs for future renewable investments. Grid-support equipment installed at these plants remains underutilised. Curtailment at this scale creates wider economic inefficiency, raising questions about planning alignment and operational design—implications that extend beyond individual developers to affect the credibility and pace of India's clean energy transition.

This is not an argument against operational caution. Grid operators maintain system security under complex constraints protecting against cascading failures, often translating into security-driven operating limits that are prudent given India's past grid disturbances. However, when these limits materially cap usable capacity unlocked by new transmission investments, a legitimate policy question arises: Are we extracting full public value from transmission

assets financed by consumers and the wider economy?

High-voltage transmission corridors cost thousands of crores and are financed by consumers and the wider economy. Greater transparency is essential—in how operating margins are calculated, how limits are applied and how incremental capacity is unlocked. This would restore confidence among generators, lenders and system planners.

Transparency helps but won't solve curtailment alone. The system needs quick, practical fixes like special protection schemes (SPS), which can reduce avoidable curtailment by allowing the grid to run safely with more usable capacity. Additionally, where permanent GNA capacity is unused in real time, a clear, rule-based way to temporarily share that spare margin with temporary GNA projects could provide immediate relief.

Over the medium term, high-congestion renewable regions need an interim operating framework that clearly communicates expected evacuation margins, timelines for capacity additions, and sequencing of access operationalisation. If temporary GNA is a bridge, it must have predictable operating cover so project economics aren't exposed to sudden losses.

Over the longer term, the lesson is coordination. Renewable commissioning and transmission readiness must move in closer alignment. Unlocking green power at scale will require not only technical rigour, but also institutional coordination and transparent decision-making, so that when capacity is built, it can actually be used.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Gig workers' woes

Apropos of "When 'fair' is tone-deaf" (FE, January 3), Deepinder Goyal's recent comments point towards the growing gap between the polished promises of quick-commerce platforms and the harsh realities faced by delivery partners—erratic pay, endless hours in traffic, and almost no social security. While the gig economy provides much-needed flexibility and employment to millions,

it should not come at the cost of basic dignity and protection. Platforms must sit down with worker associations, ensure a fair minimum earning per order, provide comprehensive health insurance, and ease unrealistic delivery timelines. With some sensible government guidelines on gig worker rights, we can build a system that rewards innovation without exploiting those who keep it running.

—SM Jeeva, Chennai

Nifty's new high

Nifty's newest record high is an encouraging milestone, but market history urges restraint. Past peaks in 2008, 2018, and even post-pandemic rallies show that sharp gains are often followed by phases of correction or consolidation. Ignoring this pattern can expose small investors to avoidable losses. The focus now should be on fundamentals rather than momentum. Investors would do

well to spread risk, avoid leveraged bets, and align investments with long-term goals. Policymakers and regulators too must stay alert to excess speculation and ensure transparency as participation widens. Records are reassuring, but sustainable growth has always come from patience, sound earnings, and respect for market cycles.

—M Barathi, Bengaluru

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**CONTRAPUNTO**

The best argument against democracy is a five-minute conversation with the average voter

- WINSTON CHURCHILL

Dissecting Caracas

Trump probably wants Venezuelan oil. He may also target Cuba next. But US interference in Lat Am can get messy

Maduro knew that something had to give. For months Trump administration had ramped up pressure against his Venezuelan regime, amassed a huge military force in the Caribbean, and attacked boats coming out of Venezuela. Washington's justification that it was acting against Venezuelan drug trafficking into US – something Trump says Maduro presided over – was a fig leaf. Trump wanted Maduro gone.

Maduro wasn't a benevolent Venezuelan leader. Far from it. In fact, he was the typical South American *caudillo* or strongman who ruthlessly persecuted the political opposition and anyone who stood against him. His elections were a sham – he is widely believed to have lost the last one in 2024. So, many Venezuelans are happy to see him go. But all of that doesn't change the fact that Trump's abduction – there's no other word for it – of Maduro and his wife is, by any reading of global rules, shocking. It's not tenable in international law, nor is it consistent with Trump's earlier denunciation of US military intervention abroad. Plus, America's actions now seem congruent with what Russia is trying to do in Ukraine.

So, what is Trump up to? First, let's be clear that Trump is least interested in democracy in Venezuela. He has dismissed the prospect of Venezuelan opposition leader and 2025 Nobel Peace Prize winner Maria Corina Machado, having any role in the transition in Caracas. Machado had called for immediate installation of Edmundo González Urrutia – who is supposed to have defeated Maduro in the 2024 polls – as interim president. But Trump appears to be inclined to work with Maduro's VP Delcy Rodriguez and run Venezuela through existing elites of that country.

Second, Trump is clearly eyeing Venezuelan oil and has said that US oil companies will fix Venezuela's energy infra and start selling the oil to third countries. That's plain old-world colonialism. Venezuela has the largest proven oil reserve. But it's heavy, sour oil – not the kind that's easily refined. The final piece is US's apparent strategic pivot to western hemisphere. This is Monroe Doctrine redux where US treats the Americas as its own backyard. Secretary of state Rubio has hinted that Cuba could be next, saying "I think they are in a lot of trouble". Message to Russia and China: keep up attacks against Ukraine and Taiwan, lose strategic assets elsewhere. Note that a Chinese envoy was in Caracas just before Maduro was captured. But past US interventions in South America also led to disastrous consequences – think Chile under Pinochet. Trump, of course, won't know anything about it.

Aiming Low

Big Tech must be held accountable when its tools incite sexual harassment of women and minors

Grok's been answering specific prompts by 'undressing' and 'nudifying' women and minors. Actual women and minors. This has understandably drawn outrage and alarm. GOI has also asked X to act against its AI services being used to generate 'obscene' images of women. Grok's daddy, however, has defended it. "A pen doesn't decide what gets written. The person holding it does," Elon Musk says. This is typical Big Tech doublespeak. These companies' crazy high valuations are riding on wide open access to human data and engagement. But when humans get hurt, they deny all accountability.

As AI becomes a pervasive force across human society, its expressions aren't its own. These are products of its programming – how companies design it, train it, deploy it. In the case of xAI in particular, distinct algorithmic interventions have been linked to Grok going extreme again and again. Remember its 'Mechahitler' and 'white genocide' hallucinations. And its 'Spicy Mode' has been vicious to women from the very start. Big names, ordinary women, minors. If Grok's being used to 'undress' a person and then the photo is being reposted and there's no consent, that's a sexual crime. As for punishing whoever's holding 'the pen', that would be X, much more than any single user.

There are two important aspects to fixing such problems. First, it's not just about adjusting the AI filters, but also investing in human moderators and localisation. Compliance with Indian regulations needs more employees in India, a major Big Tech user base. Second, it's about making sure that terrible gender inequality doesn't get baked into the building blocks of tomorrow. AI tools are already showing male bias in recruitment, healthcare, even criminal justice. Big Tech needs to repair the biases. It certainly shouldn't, as X has done, in 'maximally truth-seeking' guise, empower outright sexual harassment. GOI and other govs need to be super vigilant, and stop this.

In love with Skip

One button that promises to save us from snake oils

Bikram Vohra

 My favourite word these days is not love or joy or those other euphemisms for sloshing about in the milk of human kindness. It is Skip, the destroyer of mobile phone ad attacks, awaited with touching anticipation. I wait for it like warriors once waited for the intruder so they could smite him with a righteous sword.

See me waiting for it to appear with transparent intent and then when it appears whack, smack and smash, premature end to this interminable selling spree of some magical mixie blender or a doctor selling snake oil. If not the blender and the oil, then the herbal cures, exercise regimens, or fortune tellers who know how to swing your chakras.

Skip is a friendly option because it shows up pretty soon after the nonsense starts and gets rid of the menace. Not like the x factor. That is a stubborn little sod and lurks in the screen corner, often further concealing itself by turning faint and indistinguishable from the background. Also, it resists your whackamole efforts to get rid of it and is nowhere as pliable as good old Skip.

In fact, ghastly video games invade your screen and go ratatat while you hunt for x. Even when you find it, these reels have seemingly been vaccinated against the x virus and they resist your press, press, press efforts. Now you must suffer the whole sniper attack, silly word game or some new doodah app that will pour sunshine into your drab and dreary life and how dare you live without it.

Do we mobile phone owners have any defence against this charge of the blight brigade that now stuns our senses and destroys our peace of mind like a wrecking ball gone berserk? A visit to YouTube or Insta is a minefield. Every show, episode or live performance, it does not matter, the ad will kick in and now, as if mocking you for being such a frail and feeble enemy, they even have the temerity to put a timer in the corner so you can watch the seconds tick down instead of the ad.

In this battle between us humans and tech, I have heard that x is literally getting mobile and will soon bounce around the screen and you will have to chase the elusive little pain in the neck. By the same token Skip will become hostile and follow x. There goes a good friendship.



Domestic political calculations, not geopolitics, made US prez order Venezuelan ops. India, a major oil buyer, should think strategically, hope crude prices drop & stay low

Trump Took Maduro To Boost His Ratings

Deco Bancillon



Columnist based in Brasilia

By launching a military operation against Venezuela and publicly announcing the capture of Nicolás Maduro, Trump was not attempting to resolve a regional crisis, restore Venezuelan democracy, dismantle drug cartels, or stabilise Latin America. Those outcomes are secondary – and, from a political standpoint, irrelevant to the operation's central purpose.

This war is about power.

More precisely, it is about reputation as a tool of political survival. Trump converted a long-standing promise – to capture Maduro – into a concrete political event. For the American voter, that gesture carries more weight than legal arguments, humanitarian concerns, or diplomatic fallout. It delivers the scarcest asset in contemporary politics: the image of a leader who promises and delivers.

From a crisis management and reputation perspective, this was not a foreign-policy decision. It was a domestic political manoeuvre executed through military means.

Political reputation is built less on institutional coherence than on performance. Trump understands this instinctively. His method prioritises action over process, speed over deliberation, and displays of force over consensus. Within that framework, the key question is never whether an operation is legal under international law or sustainable over time. The question is whether it produces a simple, communicable, and mobilising outcome.

"I promised to capture Maduro. I captured him." That is the message.

This logic is not new. It was laid out with striking clarity in the 1997 political satire *Wag the Dog*. In the film, an unpopular US president, days before an election and mired in a sexual scandal, fabricates a foreign war to divert public attention. The conflict does not need to be won – or even to exist. It only needs to dominate the news cycle, generate emotion, and recast the president as commander-in-chief.

To humanise the invented war, the film's political operatives even create a fictional hero – "Old Shoe" – turning symbols and sentiment into instruments of mass mobilisation. The logic is blunt: once politics becomes narrative, symbols replace facts, and participation replaces scrutiny.

The difference between fiction and the present moment is not the method, but the degree of reality. In 2026, the war is not staged in a studio. But from a reputational standpoint, that distinction matters less than one might think. What matters is the psychological effect: shifting attention away from scandals, declining popularity, and domestic fragility towards an external conflict capable of producing the classic rally 'round the flag effect – the temporary closing of ranks around a leader in times of perceived national confrontation.

That is what makes the war functional. Trump enters 2026 with low approval ratings and a less mobilised electoral base than in previous cycles. Aneconomic rebound is slow, uncertain, and risky – especially amid renewed fears of inflation. War becomes a shortcut: it does not fix structural problems, but it reorganises the agenda and changes the subject.

This episode exposes Trump's governing method with unusual clarity: he does not manage crises – he creates them. Traditional crisis management aims to reduce volatility, preserve institutional credibility, and limit long-term damage. Trump applies the inverse logic. He generates an event large enough to dominate media

cycles, force binary alignments, and impose a narrative of strength.

Wars, when framed as swift and successful, are particularly effective at this. They displace domestic scandals, compress political complexity into simple messages, and recast internal dissent as antipatriotic weakness.

The message to the American electorate is straightforward: "I act. I deliver. I do what I promised." The message to the world is even starker: "I do not need permission."

Whether Venezuela becomes a democracy does not factor into Trump's political calculus. Whether drug trafficking is meaningfully reduced does not either. International backlash, violations of sovereignty, or the appropriation of strategic resources are treated as collateral costs. These costs are diffuse, long-term, and externalised to the international system. The political benefit is immediate, domestic, and measurable in narrative control.

The operation should also be read as defensive. With the entire US Congress up for election and clear signs of increased Democratic mobilisation, war functions as a mechanism of loss containment rather than power expansion.

The most troubling consequence lies not in Venezuela's future, but in the precedent this strategy reinforces.

When military force is instrumentalised as a reputational tool, wars no longer require clear strategic objectives or exit plans. They only need narratives strong enough to last through an electoral cycle.

Trump accepts this risk consciously. He trades institutional predictability for immediate reputational impact. He exchanges international legitimacy for domestic political survival. This is not a miscalculation. It is a choice.

As in *Wag the Dog*, the conflict does not need to solve anything. It only needs to be felt. In an era of post-truth politics, war ceases to be a means to achieve concrete outcomes and becomes a narrative artefact – a device to eclipse scandal, economic anxiety, and declining popularity.

The world should not be mistaken. This was not a war about values, security, or justice. It was a war about reputation, power, and political survival. And it confirms a dangerous lesson: when politics becomes spectacle, reality becomes a secondary detail.

The writer is a crisis management and reputation specialist, and guest professor at Fundação Getúlio Vargas, a think tank in Latin America

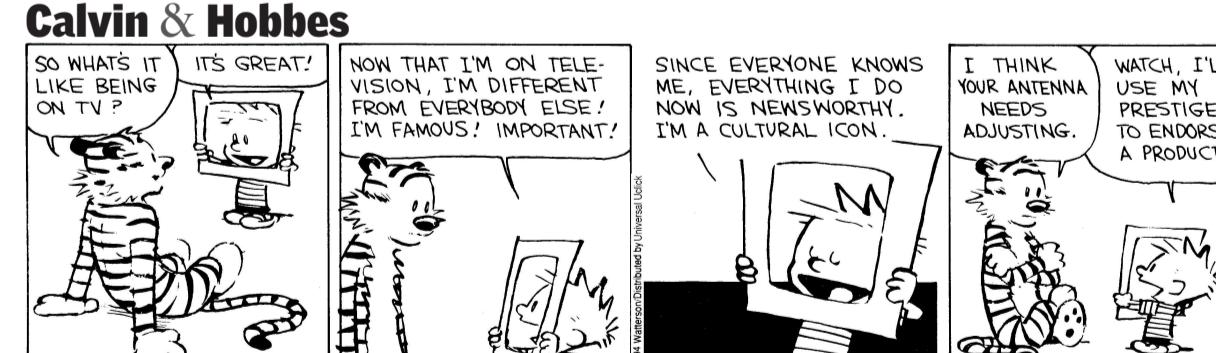
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Calvin & Hobbes

Jug Suraiya

Paradoxes and other mischievous pranks our minds play on us. Write on a piece of paper: 'The statement on the reverse is true'. Turn the paper over and write 'The statement on the other side is false'.

Bingo! You've created a paradox, a practical joke our mind plays on us. The two statements on the two sides of the paper form a logical logjam, an unending contradiction.

Another paradox is based on a syllogism: All men are liars. I'm a man, therefore I'm a liar. So when I say all men are liars, I'm telling a lie. So all men are not liars...and so on ad absurdum.

Thanks to reason, Homo Sapiens, Wise Man, devised the wheel, built the great pyramids, explored the depths of oceans, the farthest reaches of outer

space, and unleashed the power locked within the atom.

But, like the mythical Ouroboros that swallows its own tail to vanish, reason has also created the anti-reason of the paradox, the mental conjuring trick by which reason makes reason disappear.

When mind negates the mind, it can lead to the no-mindness of mysticism, the 'beyonding' which transcends the loopholes of logic.

When the ship of reason founders on the reef of its own limitations, we have to take the paradoxical leap to faith, said Kierkegaard.

In his *Critique of Pure Reason*, Immanuel Kant posed the paradox of the origin of the universe. The universe has a beginning in time, or it has no beginning in time.

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Modi Should Play It Like Smart Traders

Somnath Mukherjee

Stealth fighters creating air superiority, intelligence operatives guiding precise special forces insertion, and finally a near-bloodless snatch of a serving president – US operation to enforce regime change in Venezuela was certainly peak shock n' awe. It was also the defining marker of a new Cold War.

In the old Cold War, superpowers marking territories, both literally and normatively in strategic terms, by undertaking regime changes via active measures was de rigueur. Bay of Pigs, Operation Storm 333 (Russian invasion of Afghanistan), Vietnam were but the higher-profile events in a series of such operations carried out by both sides. The Venezuela operation fundamentally is about US throwing down the gauntlet, warning off the so-called Dragon Bear, its new adversary in the new Cold War.

Moral imperatives aside, and there are certainly troubling questions around these, the Venezuelan situation should be, at the margin, good news for India. Tactically, a US takeover and eventual winding down of sanctions on Venezuela's oil can release \$1bn in dues from San Cristobal and Carabobo-1

was a major importer of Venezuelan oil, importing 3,00,000 to 4,00,000 barrels per day (nearly a third of production). Then, sweeping US sanctions reduced imports to a trickle.

India not only hosts complex refineries but is also a smart trader of crude oil globally. Once sanctions are lifted and Venezuelan oil infra starts getting restored, Indian oil traders will likely pick up their pace of imports. Remember that when oil sanctions on Iran were diluted via the JCPOA deal in 2015, Indian imports picked up rapidly, quickly reaching 700,000 barrels per day by 2018.

Besides benefits to India in the short-term, there are potentially long-term structural benefits too.

● Diversifying the import basket has been an enduring theme for a country that needs to import 90% of its oil needs. Once Venezuelan supplies come on stream, it would offer additional flexibility to Indian refiners and potentially reduce Russian oil imports, the key irritant in Indo-US trade talks today.

● A bigger impact looks likely on long-term oil price handles. As it is, contrary to the worst fears, oil markets have generally seen off significant geopolitical events – Ukraine, Gaza, Libya, Iran – without so much as a shrug of collective shoulders. In short, supply chains have proved themselves to be more resilient than doomsday predictions. Now, with US looking to secure key natural resources and technology supply chains, its control over (even if temporary) the world's largest reserves sends interesting signals to other major oil producers, especially in West Asia.

● In any case, thanks to weak global demand and ample supply, oil prices have trended down over the last 12-18 months. Realisation of a large potential supply pool getting activated should keep oil markets soft. And that is unmitigated good news for India. Soft oil prices keep Current Account Deficit under control – every \$10 decline in prices is a 0.5% reduction in CAD, and leaves monetary policy freer to target important growth and jobs objectives.

● A big variable in US winning the old Cold War was a prolonged period of depressed oil prices, which wrecked Soviet Union's fiscal balance sheets, ultimately rendering it incapable of continuing the fight. Russia continues to be heavily dependent on oil to balance its budgets and ride out the severe Western sanctions on it. A prolonged period of even lower oil prices will nudge, nay shove it towards arriving at a deal with the West.

A normalised Russia bodes best for India. It reduces Russia's dependence on China (super-critical given the former's role as a supplier of a range of strategic technologies) and extinguishes the Russian irritant in India's engagement with the West.

● Geopolitically, a US takeover of Venezuelan oil also dilutes the leverage of China, which has accessed Venezuelan crude through debt-repayment deals. The new Venezuelan govt, currently appearing to be under US oversight, will likely renegotiate those contracts, including debt-repayment terms. Any such renegotiation will open space for India to access the same long-term supply contracts.

In the next few days and months, there will be much handwringing about the moral dimension of regime change via military invasion. It is in India's interests to keep off joining the debate.

Thankfully, we have no status quo strategic equities to protect in Venezuela, while we do have large equities with US. Ignore the noise, avoid joining the crowd, profit from the mispriced opportunities – Venezuela in particular and the new Cold War in general, demand the smart traders' strategy.

The writer is Chief Investment Officer of an asset & wealth management firm

Sacredspace

Oilgarch Trump, Cent Wise, Dollar Foolish

To stem dedollarisation, more deglobalisation

Central banks have been trying to reduce their dependence on the dollar by building up stockpiles of gold. Emerging economies driving global trade are increasingly turning to settlements in local currencies. With countries like US sanctions-hit Venezuela—it has the biggest, yet largely untapped, proven oil reserves in the world—selling their oil in renminbi, euros and roubles, slump on the petrodollar has been palpable. Which is where the US invasion on Saturday is reckoned to come handy to get Venezuelan oil trade back in dollars.

The irony is that no serious alternative to the dollar is likely to emerge because of imbalance in world trade. So long as the US buys and China sells stuff on credit, the two biggest economies have compelling reasons to ensure the dollar's preeminence. Then there is the question of size. No economy has an appetite for debt to rival the US. Dollar will

continue to be the world's problem. But an 'intervention' to push up dollar trade should warm the cockles of Republican hearts in a tough political year ahead.

Venezuela has nearly choked its 50-yr-old oil infrastructure, and US companies can revive it with some serious investments. But the US record of political oversight is patchy. Events like these tend to isolate the US in the international arena, with repercussions on instruments like the dollar that drive globalisation. Suspicion over US actions will feed dedollarisation. Yet, the process is, at best, limited.

Entrepreneur Trump risks neither investor nor creditor revolt by wading into Venezuela's reserves of crude. US refiners stand to gain by processing it for diesel and industrial petroproducts. Market reaction should be muted, especially the oil market that's grappling with oversupply. The Trump regime was very publicly building up towards some form of intervention in Venezuela. The risk-off sentiment could reverse with the prospect of a smooth political transition in the country. But the bigger effect of an attack on a sovereign nation is further fissures in a deglobalising world.

Beijing, Moscow Say, 'Thank You, America!'

The US takeover of Venezuela signals the return of Cold War-style spheres of influence. That is great news for Russia's Ukraine campaign and China's approach to Asia and the Indo-Pacific, especially vis-à-vis Taiwan's sovereign status outside China. This now means renewed insecurity for the world. For Moscow, this is finally a way to remind the US of the similar situation it confronts in Ukraine — Trump's claims of Nicolás Maduro being essentially a drug cartel lord echoes Kremlin's claims of 'Zelenskyy as a 'Nazis sympathiser', with Putin's military campaign aimed to 'denazify' Ukraine. Moscow has called for an emergency UNSC meeting to expose the 'double standards' of other G7 countries. It's hard to argue silence on

US 'actions' in Venezuela if Russia's actions in Ukraine are to be condemned. What gives Putin a firmer grip on the Ukraine talks is the destabilising impact for Europe. Is Trump's talk of US military takeover of Greenland really braggadocio?

The situation is a bit more complex for Beijing. Trump's actions hand it a propaganda win as bulwark and defender of the rules-based international order while the US plays 'rogue state'. It's also been handed a carte blanche for 'actions' on Taiwan and the Philippines — even as a neon 'Do not trespass' sign in the Atlantic has been lit for China, and a warning given to Latin American countries not to get too cozy with Beijing. China, remember, is Venezuela's largest buyer of oil, and has growing trade and investment interests across the continent.

With the idea of sovereignty once again attacked, New Delhi must ensure BRICS does not get caught in US-China-Russia 'accommodations'. It should condemn the latest US invasion to firm up its credentials as 'voice of the global south'.



THINK ABOUT IT

So, you don't like criticism from outsiders, but then...

Our Roaring Internal Affairs, Only Our Biz?

Last week, a journalist asked BJP spokesperson Gaurav Bhatia what he made of Zohran Mamdani sending jailed activist Umar Khalid a sympathetic handwritten note, and of voices of the international community having questioned the fairness of Khalid's investigation and legal process. Bhatia's response was intriguing, interesting even. 'Each Indian citizen has complete faith in India's judiciary... Who is an outsider to question our democracy and judiciary? And that too in support of someone who wants to break India into pieces? This is not right.' Never mind the first bit. Who knows, maybe every Indian citizen, Khalid included, does have full faith in India's judiciary. But Bhatia's roasting objection against criticism from outsiders about India's democracy and judiciary — or, indeed, any other aspect, like our lack of civic sense or breathtaking pollution — seems a tad oversensitive, bordering woke.

'None of your business' has been an old chestnut in many societies, but perhaps a chest-thumping nut in our land. So, what happens if Bangladeshis tell outsiders, Indians included, to take a hike for criticising their treatment of minorities? Every country keeping their internal affairs off limits for outsiders would make for an infernal affair, no? And you wouldn't want us to take potshots only at our own leaders? What's the fun — and safety — in that?

With Trump's capture of Venezuela, Indian geopolitics — and oil companies — will need to pivot

Venezuela, Vidi, Vici?

Oil's Well Only If It Ends Well



Hari Seshasayee

Whole Lotta Map-Making



Indrani Bagchi

Panama City: On New Year's Eve, Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro had stated unequivocally in an interview that 'the American people should know that here they have a friend — a friendly, peaceful nation — and a friendly government, too. And our motto is very clear: Not war, yes peace.' Donald Trump, on his part, claimed to have spoken directly to Maduro just last week.

Yet, in the early hours of January 3, the US conducted Operation Absolute Resolve, attacking military bases, airports and warehouses across Venezuela. Maduro was captured within minutes and is now being tried by US courts. There are two immediate outcomes of the US operation:

① Change, but not yet. Although this looks a lot like regime change, it is not — at least, not yet. For 18 years, Venezuela has been governed by United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV), led by Hugo Chávez until his death in 2013, followed by leadership under Maduro. Despite the latter's ouster, PSUV's de facto leader Delsy Rodríguez continues to govern.

Washington's goal is not necessarily to restore democracy in Venezuela. It is more concerned with exercising power and controlling Venezuela's vast oil resources, as Trump made abundantly clear in a January 3 press conference on the subject. Venezuela has not yet seen a transfer of power, and any such transition would also need the tacit approval of the country's armed forces.

Venezuela is currently experiencing a delicate balancing act between the ruling PSUV administration, a divided opposition and Washington's diktats. The next few months could see the old regime prevailing, institutional collapse, or a new, legitimately elected leader who brings about some stability.

② Nostalgic muscle-flexing. The attack on Venezuela is a reminder of the US' intention to project its military power. As many countries, and even senators within the US, have admitted, the military operation violates international law. Yet, few people would object in this case, given that Maduro was a dictator with little regard for democratic norms, who co-opted organs of the state to accumulate power and used political repression to achieve his goals.

This rather aggressive foreign policy strategy outlined in the White House's latest National Security Strategy looks to reshape the world order based on US interests. Whether Washington pursues similar strategies elsewhere is anybody's guess.

Although we may be tempted to compare the US attack on Venezuela with Washington's previous foreign military interventions in oil-rich countries like Iraq, it would be unwise to do so. Even as Venezuela holds the largest oil reserves in the world, today it produces a fraction of its potential. According to US Energy Information Administration, the country produces less crude oil and petroleum than India currently does.

Venezuela's oil production has been faltering since the late-90s, dropping from a high of 3.4 mn barrels per day (bpd) in 1997 — when it was the fifth-largest oil producer in

the world — to around 8 lakh bpd in recent years. If anything, the US attack could enliven global oil markets, which may rejoice at the prospect of increased Venezuelan oil production.

US oil major Chevron already accounts for 25% of Venezuela's oil production. If the Trump regime succeeds in securing more access to Venezuela's oil, more US companies like ExxonMobil and ConocoPhillips may eventually restart production in Venezuela.

So, what does this mean for In-



Latin America's latest tinpot dictator, Don Donaldio

dia? Even as India is not a political ally of Maduro, the India-Venezuela oil trade flourished under PSUV. Between 2012 to 2019 — when US sanctions on Venezuela came into effect — an average of 10% of India's total oil imports came from Venezuela. More importantly, the Latin American country remained a profitable trading partner for India due to its extra heavy oil, which trades at a lower cost and can be refined by India's private oil companies like Reliance Industries and Nayara Energy for a steep profit.

In the 21st century, India has imported 207 mn tons of oil from Venezuela. In addition, Indian oil companies like ONGC Videsh (OVL), Indian Oil, and Oil India, have invested \$2.18 bn in Venezuela's oil fields. Several questions remain, and will determine India's future engagement:

► What will a post-Maduro Venezuela look like?

► Will Indian companies have to stand in line behind US/ western oil majors for a piece of Venezuela's oil?

Despite the cheer in Washington and celebrations amongst the Venezuelan diaspora, Venezuela's future remains uncertain. Maduro may be out, but Venezuela's woes are far from over. For a country that has seen the largest migration outside of wartime, with 20% of the population leaving the country, the humanitarian and socio-political crisis continues without an end in sight. Whether Trump adds to it or provides relief will be watched closely over the weeks and months.

The writer is cofounder, Consilium Group

Map-making is back. As the US moves to take over 'running' Venezuela by removing Nicolás Maduro, an 'action' that carries more than a whiff of Osama bin Laden and Manuel Noriega, we're watching in real time Donald Trump's national security strategy at work. The man wants US hemispheric hegemony. He might just get it.

Europe and Britain have endorsed US actions. The invasion gives US effective control over a country

ned cheering brigades, Pakistan and Trump did expose India's vulnerabilities that left New Delhi stunned, outraged and depressed. It's now stuck with a trade deal gathering dust at Trump's desk. For everyone who thinks the deal is tied to Russian oil, think again. It's actually tied to an India-Pakistan peace deal that Trump wants to midwife. Modi and Trump speak occasionally. But the PM won't meet, and the president wants a peace deal as price for that signature.

Fundamentally, the US no longer sees India as necessary for its China strategy. In an earlier world, India would have been inside a global group like Pax Silica purely on its promise. Trump keeps India out because it has little capability to demonstrate. As the new US ambassador to India Sergio Gor prepares to touch down on January 10, the US is showing greater interest in Bangladesh than in its bigger neighbour. So, it will be India's responsibility to keep the US relationship moving.

The Japanese use a term, 'gaiatsu', or 'external pressure'. Trump's gaiatsu against India may yet become its making. In a normal year, Indians are trade-averse, its private sector risk-averse and GDI in slow motion. The second half of 2025 felt like India was on steroids. The longer Trump's gaiatsu, the further it could push India to get its act together.

India is slowly taking back control of its neighbourhood. Sri Lanka and the Maldives are more open to India than before. With Khaleda Zia's death and Sheikh Hasina's flight, it has the opportunity to work on a cleaner slate in Bangladesh with a new set of actors. Post its 'nepo-baby' revolt, Nepal appears to be moving in a more positive direction. Pakistan should feel Indian pressure to reform. With ongoing elections in Myanmar, India needs to regain influence lost to China. An India-Japan partnership would be profitable for all concerned, particularly in critical minerals.

So, the ongoing map-making in India's extended neighbourhood provides an opportunity. New Delhi can take advantage of the redrawing of West Asia-Africa geopolitics. Israel's recognition of Somaliland is a game-changer. Given that this region is vital for its interests, New Delhi should play a larger role here. Not only has Somaliland been an democracy, but it's also the only African country where the rupee was once legal tender.

The UAE is building Berbera port on the Gulf of Aden in Somaliland. An Indian presence there would be huge in the geopolitically sensitive Horn of Africa, sitting as it does next to China-controlled Djibouti. It ties in with a growing convergence between India, Israel, the UAE and Ethiopia. India can also counter the growing presence of Turkey and China, which, along with Saudi Arabia, are now firmly in bed with Pakistan.

The global order remains a work in progress, as the latest invasion by the US shows. India must move its pieces accordingly on the geopolitical chessboard.

The writer is CEO, Ananta Centre



Celebrate Everything

OSHO

If you are sad, celebrate because you are sad. Just give it a try and you will be surprised. Start dancing because sadness is so beautiful, such a silent flower of being. Dance, enjoy, and suddenly you will feel the sadness disappearing, a distance has been created. By and by, you will forget sadness and you will be celebrating. You have transformed energy.

This is what alchemy is: transforming baser metal into higher gold. Did you know that a piece of coal and the greatest diamond in the world are just the same? In fact, coal pressed by the earth for millions of years becomes a diamond. It is just a difference of pressure; they are both carbon, both constituted of the same elements. The baser can be changed into the higher. Nothing is lacking in the baser. Only rearrangement and recomposition are needed.

Angry? Have a beautiful dance. In the beginning your dance will be angry. But it will become softer; when suddenly you will have forgotten anger. The energy has changed into dancing. Once you know the key, your life will never be the same. You can unlock any door. And this is the master key: celebrate everything.

Abridged from *The Alchemy of Yoga* / OSHO Times International / www.oshocom



MELODY FOR MONDAY

Faala

Flipperachi

'Faala' — pronounced 'Faashla', with 'a' representing the Arabic letter 'saad' — is a radiant anthem that grabs you right from the beginning with that hypnotic shehnai riff by Lokesh Anand that coils around the song till the end. 'Faala' is Bahraini Arabic slang for 'party time', and Bahraini rapper Flipperachi a.k.a. Hussam Mohammed Aseem hits the motherlode of Khaledi hip-hop cool with this monster track.

Recorded and released in 2024, the song, of course, exploded globally when it

became the sonic boom in Aditya Dhar's 2025 hit film, Dhurandhar. It plays in the scene where Akshay Kumar as Rehan Dakait sway-walks through a Balochi wedding celebration. The song is the celebration.

Swag levels spike when Flipperachi mutters-sings, 'Ya akhi doos, doos and khoshs faashla! Ya akhi tfooz tfooz wallah khoshs raqsa'

'C'mon bro, keep it going, keep it going, I'm in the zone/ C'mon bro, you're winning, you're winning, I swear that's a killer dance'.

Flipperachi has crafted a piece that's technically brilliant and emotionally irresistible, balancing tradition and modernity, blending hip-hop bravado with Arabic hardcore. Play 'Faala' on a loop, and its sheer vibes will push you into the zone.

Chat Room

No Escape From Authoritarianism

Apropos the news report 'US Takes Maduro into Captivity after Bombing Venezuela' (Jan 4). The detention of Maduro signals a volatile shift in geopolitics, blurring the lines between judicial accountability and blatant regime change. While Maduro's leadership was despotic, a foreign power 'running' a sovereign nation evokes dark historical echoes of colonialism. President Trump's focus on oil companies suggests economic extraction rather than democratic restoration as the primary motive. True, sovereignty cannot be gifted by a foreign military; it must be reclaimed by the people. If the goal is profit over justice, Venezuela risks trading one form of authoritarianism for another of corporate occupation. Vijayakumar HK, Raichur (Karnataka)

After Caracas, Taipei Far Behind?



Anushka Saxena

With the US now destroying the notion of sovereignty by invading Venezuela, China could well be 'like-minded' and decide to 'run' Taiwan. Since August 2022, when then-US House speaker Nancy Pelosi visited Taipei and angered Beijing, the world has become all too familiar with China's large-scale military drills and live fire exercises around Taiwan. And yet, with each iteration — April 2023 and Joint Sword-2024A and B (May and October 2024, respectively) drills, Strait Thunder-2025A in April 2025, and the latest Justice Mission (JM) 2025 exercise earlier this week — China is gradually lowering the bar for what constitutes grounds for launch of such drills.

Consequently, the new normal being set by CPC and PLA is that of rapid retaliation and unchecked escalation. JM, in particular, adds a dangerous precedent: zero-warning mobilisation. Conducted on December 29-30, JM saw combined efforts from PLA's air, navy, ground and rocket forces to simulate a blockade of Taiwan. A defining feature of this operation was the radical compression of the warning cycle. In a departure from standard international practice — and even previous PLA precedents — Eastern Theatre Command commenced

high-intensity manoeuvres less than an hour after official announcement. Clearly, the strategic intent behind this shift appears to be the validation of 'faid accompli' capability.

In terms of operational signalling and tactics behind JM, there is a marked shift away from the veneer of scheduled training, or reactive posturing to open announcement of a tactic, involving total isolation of the island through a multi-domain quarantine strategy. The graphics released show a much tighter encirclement chain. This means that if a blockade is to be achieved in the future, PLA may well be able to quarantine the 4 key Taiwanese ports: Taipei, Taitung, Keelung and Kaohsiung.

The 3-sided nature of JM is also more comprehensive than previous exercises' two-sided or siloed directional focus. A highlight amid the participating systems was the debut of Type 075 amphibious assault ship. The vessel demonstrates that PLA intends to bypass the heavily fortified western beaches of Taiwan, and strike directly at the island's 'rear.'

Remarks by Japanese PM Sanae Takahashi on a 'Taiwan contingency' were read in Beijing as signalling Tokyo's willingness to intervene militarily in a cross-Taiwan Strait conflict. Her suggestion that Japan's self-defence forces could be deployed to protect national or allied



A lot of strait talking

effectively encircling the defenders in a 360-degree grasp.

Further, the thematic focus explicit in announcements preceding JM has been to curtail 'external interference' on the Taiwan issue. Since Lai Ching-te assumed the presidency of Taiwan in May 2024, Beijing has chided and derided him for his interactions with other countries, and his emphasis on maintaining the island's diplomatic standing. Naturally, developments of the past few months may have created the kineticism necessary for PLA to undertake the latest exercises.

The primary catalyst may have been Washington's approval of a substantial arms package to Taiwan. Valued at about \$1.1 bn, this package entails one of the largest single tranches of defensive assistance in recent history. Criticality lies in the sheer volume and nature of the systems to be sold. They likely include asymmetric denial capabilities intended to harden Taiwan's defences against blockade tactics PLA was refining.

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Trump's gamble

US action in Venezuela violates international law

US President Donald Trump has fired his first salvo in the new year, sending shock waves across the world. The audacious capture of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro is a brazen violation of international law, so too is Trump's declaration that Washington will run the Latin American country till a transition takes place. It's a dangerous gamble that can have repercussions beyond the Americas. Few will grieve Maduro's fall — his rule hollowed out Venezuela's economy, crushed dissent and forced millions into exile. Allegations of electoral fraud and drug trafficking have plagued him for years. However, the US seems more concerned with gaining control over Venezuela's rich oil reserves than ensuring justice for the victims of authoritarianism or protecting American sovereignty.

The US ploy of blending a military raid, an extraterritorial arrest and a pledge to administer another nation has laid bare its historical preoccupation with regime change. The geopolitical fallout is already visible. Even US allies which opposed Maduro have sounded a cautionary note. Russia and China are seizing the moment to depict America's "rules-based order" as selective, even predatory. The Venezuelan episode has provided China plenty of ammunition to blunt US criticism of its own territorial ambitions.

Talk of "boots on the ground" has revived memories of Iraq and Afghanistan — wars launched with confidence but concluded in exhaustion or humiliation. Trump's claim that the occupation would finance itself through oil revenue only confirms a resource-driven intervention, while offering little clarity on governance, security or a credible transfer of power to leaders accepted by Venezuelans themselves. India is among the countries which have expressed concern over the developments, reflecting deep anxiety over what happens next. Trump might realise sooner than later that he has bitten off more than he can chew. The US must remember that a corrupt, autocratic ruler can be removed overnight, but it takes sincere efforts to ensure long-term peace and stability.

Hills have limits

Himachal needs tourism cap, green taxes

HIMACHAL Pradesh's hill stations are once again packed to capacity. From Shimla and Manali to Dalhousie and Dharamsala, bumper tourist footfall during the winter season has brought welcome revenue — and familiar chaos. Traffic jams stretching for kilometres, water shortages, unregulated construction and mounting waste are no longer occasional irritants; they are structural warnings. Himachal is struggling with the absence of planning. Tourism contributes significantly to the state's economy, yet infrastructure growth has lagged dangerously behind demand. Roads designed decades ago buckle under today's traffic volumes. Parking is ad hoc, public transport inadequate and emergency services stretched thin during peak seasons.

The result is a paradox: visitors arrive seeking serenity and leave frustrated, while locals bear the ecological and social costs. The environmental consequences are even more worrying. Unchecked construction on fragile slopes has destabilised terrain, increasing landslide risks. Forests are cleared, water sources diverted and sewerage overwhelmed, turning once-pristine towns into ecological stress zones. Climate change has only sharpened these vulnerabilities. Reckless urbanisation has become a recipe for disaster. This is evident in the devastating floods that the state has been increasingly facing over the past few decades.

What Himachal lacks is not policy intent but political will. Carrying-capacity studies exist but are rarely enforced. Building regulations are bent, tourist inflows unmanaged and short-term commercial gains prioritised over long-term sustainability. Other mountain regions globally have shown that tourism cap, green taxes, strict zoning and decentralised tourism hubs can ease pressure without harming livelihoods. Himachal has little choice but to embrace sustainable tourism as a necessity, not a mere slogan. Managing popularity is as important as marketing it. If the hills are to remain liveable for residents and lovable for visitors, governance must rise to the altitude of this challenge.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, TUESDAY, JANUARY 5, 1926

Sir Fazl-i-Hussain's appointment

THERE is no need to go into hysterics or to make an exhibition of impotent rage over the appointment of Sir Fazl-i-Hussain as a member of the Punjab Executive Council in succession to Sir Sundar Singh Majithia. But both Sir Malcolm Hailey, who must have had a hand in this appointment, and the Government of India, on whose recommendation the appointment has been made, must be told in the plainest terms what the non-Muslim section of the people of this province think of it. They can scarcely be unaware that this section literally heaved a sigh of relief when Fazl-i-Hussain was removed from the Punjab Government and appointed a member of the Viceroy's Executive Council. They did not even mind this promotion, which they considered singularly ill-deserved, because they hoped that it meant the removal, to however small an extent, of what they considered the most disintegrating influence in the public life of this province. The relief, however, proved short-lived. For Sir Fazl-i-Hussain came back after three months and was straightway appointed to his old post, although at the time he had not even a seat in the Legislative Council. And now he has been given what in a sense is an even better and more secure job, a job which practically makes him independent at once of the caprices of constituents and of the vote of the council. For five years, he is as *pucca* in his place in the government as the Governor himself, and can snap his fingers at all his opponents of whatever community or school of thought.

In Venezuela, an invasion for oil

India should find its voice to condemn Trump's illegal takeover of a sovereign nation



NIRUPAMA SUBRAMANIAN
INDEPENDENT JOURNALIST

On January 3, US President Donald Trump invaded Venezuela and took the President of the Latin American country, Nicolas Maduro, and his wife captive, transporting them back to the United States. They are to be put on trial in a New York court on the charges, as alleged by Trump, of "narco-terrorism".

The indictment filed by the Manhattan district attorney alleges that Maduro "sits atop a corrupt, illegitimate government that, for decades, has leveraged power to protect and promote illegal activity, including drug trafficking." Maduro, his wife and son, who is a member of the Venezuelan parliament, and some other government officials are accused of "lining their pockets" from the activities of "narco-terrorists who operate with impunity on Venezuelan soil and who help produce, protect and transport tons of cocaine to the US".

Maduro may or may not be the drug boss that Trump alleges he is. But what is relevant is that the indictment does not make the case that Maduro was planning a military attack on the US. The only ground in international law under which a country can invade another is self-defence. Invading another country to carry out regime change, whatever the failings of that country's government or leader, is a violation of the international charter.

Trump's real motives have been evident ever since he began blockading Venezuela, impounding its oil tankers — alleging that they were carrying drugs, weapons and "stolen" oil — and blowing up Venezuelan fishing boats.

And as if to make it clearer, this



FLAWED: Maduro's indictment doesn't make the case that he was planning a military attack on the US. REUTERS

is what Trump said at his press conference after the invasion: "We're going to have our very large US oil companies, the biggest anywhere in the world, go in, spend billions of dollars, fix the badly broken infrastructure, oil infrastructure [in Venezuela] and start making money for the country."

Venezuela has the world's largest oil reserves, and China, defying the sanctions on Venezuelan oil, has been its largest buyer. Venezuela has been paying off massive debts incurred from Chinese loans with its oil. And Trump has just announced "US Raj" in Venezuela. His Clive and Hastings are US Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Secretary of War Pete Hegseth, who will "run" Venezuela during the transition to "self-rule" under a ruler who Trump finds more agreeable.

Trump's predecessors were no shrinking wallflowers themselves when it came to invasions, or "interventions" as they liked to call them. The difference is that they still swore by the "rules-based international order" and the sanctity of the international charter as contained in the UN. So George W Bush got the UN Security Council to sign off on the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, and Obama for Libya. And they found "coalitions of the will-

ing" to back them in these military expeditions.

Trump, of course, has made it clear that he does not believe in the international charter: The UN Security Council is to meet on Monday (January 5). Russia and China are the two permanent UNSC members that have condemned the invasion, while

France, like other European countries, has been more circumspect, calling for "a peaceful, democratic transition". The UK, too, has made a wishy-washy statement.

A resolution against the aggression will no doubt be attempted, pushed by Colombia and Panama, the two Latin American countries among the 10 non-permanent members. But as with the Russian veto on its invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, so will it be with the US in January 2026.

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Kremlin at the irony — the would-be architect of peace between Russia and Ukraine, a self-nominated and vocal aspirant to the Nobel Peace Prize, who also counts Putin as a friend, has carried out his own invasion of a neighbour, and gone several steps further by taking over the country.

The November 2025 US National Security Strategy foretold this moment: "We want to ensure that the Western Hemisphere remains reasonably stable and well-governed enough to prevent and discourage mass migration to the United States; we want a Hemisphere whose governments cooperate with us against narco-terrorists, cartels and other transnational criminal organisations; we want a Hemisphere that remains free of hostile foreign incursion or ownership of key assets, and that supports critical supply chains; and we want to ensure our continued access to key strategic locations. In other words, we will assert and enforce a 'Trump Corollary' to the Monroe Doctrine."

This new crisis after a year of Trump's shenanigans is yet another reiteration that the US under its current leadership cannot be trusted on any count.

The world cannot get rid of Trump in the manner that he removed Maduro, nor should it

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

I'm an anti-imperialist. I'm opposed to having the eagle put its talons on any other land. —Mark Twain

How Gideon cut the Gordian knot

MADHURI SHARMA

I found myself pacing up and down the room, a knot of nerves tightening in my chest. I was about to teach my first regular class in Pennsylvania (US), and the weight of the moment felt heavy. My students were mostly equine studies and paramedic majors. I was worried they would have little interest in the complexities of criminal justice. Being the first person appointed to popularise this subject at the college, the pressure to make a lasting impression was immense.

Though my days as a student debater had given me confidence, breaking the ice with this group felt like an uphill task. Seeking inspiration, I called up my father. His advice was characteristic: "Look, for a debater like you, even a Gordian knot surrenders."

The phrase piqued my curiosity. I turned to my phone to look it up, but as I searched, a different name leaped out from history: Gideon.

Suddenly, the world around me faded. I saw a man in a blue uniform, hunched behind the steel bars of a cramped cell. Having only a thin blanket, he was possessed by an urgent mission. His fingers moved with frantic desperation as he wrote on a scrap of paper with a stubby pencil.

I had never met him, yet I felt an inexplicable pull towards his never-say-die spirit. In the silence of my room, I entered into an imaginary conversation with him.

"I am Clarence Earl Gideon, Madam," he seemed to whisper. "Convicted of a felony I never committed and sentenced to five years. They denied me a lawyer because my crime wasn't a 'capital offence'. I had no money for counsel, so I defended myself. But what chance does a man like me have against the State? The judge chose to believe a witness who merely saw me near the scene of the crime. And now, I rot."

His voice grew thick with the ache of lost humanity: "You lose your name here; you become a number. I find myself jealous of street dogs because they can bark at will. I can't even see the stars through this concrete. I am no longer Gideon; I am just a body to be counted."

Then, his expression shifted to a flicker of defiance. "But then, I hit upon an idea. I picked up this pencil. I took this piece of toilet paper and wrote a soulful prayer — a cry for justice sent straight to the Supreme Court." The court heard his plea. The judges ruled that a fair trial was impossible without counsel. They ordered a new trial, and Gideon walked out a free man.

The story hit me like a thunderbolt. The law wasn't just a dry statute; it was the shield of the innocent. My nervousness evaporated. The 'Gordian knot' of my anxiety had been cut by Gideon — his determined pursuit of justice and truth.

I stood tall, ready to tell my students the story of a man, a pencil and a piece of toilet paper that transformed the criminal justice delivery system. The moment I finished my lecture, the spell-bound audience greeted me with a standing ovation.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Need for responsible journalism

Refer to 'Free speech and media control' (*The Great Game*); the Indian media is grappling with a complex and challenging reality. On the one hand, the press faces pressure from state and Central governments; on the other, it is increasingly influenced by corporate interests. The rise of online platforms has fuelled unverified content, blurring fact and fiction. Rather than stifling genuine journalism, governments should regulate fake news and promote responsible reporting. India needs independent, accountable journalism, with the media reclaiming its watchdog role and governments respecting its autonomy.

BIR DEVINDER SINGH BEDI, SANGRUR

Press freedom under threat

Refer to 'Free speech and media control' (*The Great Game*); the registration of FIRs against 10 social media journalists amounts to a direct attack on the fourth pillar of democracy. Raising questions over the use of a government helicopter cannot, by itself, constitute a crime. While the manner of questioning may be debated; holding those in power accountable has always been the role of the media and the opposition. Instead of criminal action, the government should issue a white paper to clarify facts. Transparency, not intimidation, strengthens democracy.

AVINASH GOYAL, CHANDIGARH

UN Charter flouted

US military aggression against Venezuela has flouted international law and violated the principles of the UN Charter. On the one hand, Trump claims to broker peace among warring nations; on the other, his unilateral midnight airstrikes on a sovereign country reveal a troubling double standard and reflect an expansionist policy driven by geopolitical and economic interests. President Trump's return has already triggered tariff wars. Besides, continued military aggression against nations that do not align with his agenda threatens global peace. Such actions risk deepening divisions in the world order, with the US positioning itself as a self-appointed 'super cop'.

ANIL VINAYAK, AMRITSAR

Disregard for public safety

Refer to 'Indore tragedy'; the entry of sewage into the drinking water network represents a

grave violation of fundamental civil engineering norms. Sewer pipelines are always designed and laid below water supply lines so that, even in the event of leakage, gravity prevents water contamination. The incident points to gross negligence, a callous disregard for public safety and a craving for monetary gain, overriding engineering discipline. Such lapses undermine confidence in existing infrastructure and demand strict accountability, forensic scrutiny of records and urgent corrective action to prevent further loss of life.

RS NARULA, PATIALA

Misleading advertisement

Refer to a real-estate advertisement in *The Tribune* inviting applications for 'farm lots/eco-tourism projects' near Chandigarh/Mohali; the ad appears *prima facie* non-compliant with statutory requirements. It does not disclose the mandatory RERA registration number, contrary to Section 11(2) of the Real Estate (Regulation and Development) Act, 2016. It also omits Change of Land Use (CLU) and planning approval details, though marketing farm or eco-tourism plots in Punjab requires prior CLU and competent authority approval. Claims such as 'approved eco-tourism project', 'excellent return on investment' and preferential offers for defence personnel are made without citing any approving authority, raising concerns of potentially misleading representation. These statutory disclosures protect the public and merit review by the advertiser and due diligence by the publisher.

SAKSHI GOEL, BY MAIL

Recover challan dues promptly

Every day we witness countless traffic violations, yet lakhs of challans remain unpaid for years due to lax enforcement. Drivers break rules fearlessly because there is no immediate penalty or deterrent. When I recently tried to sell my car, I discovered years of unpaid challans worth Rs 26,000, despite never being stopped or formally penalised earlier. This is not an isolated case; it is widespread. I urge authorities to enforce immediate fine recovery, link challans directly to vehicle services and impose strict penalties. Only strict accountability can make our roads safer.

ASHOK SAWHNEY, BY MAIL

Letters to the Editor, typed in double space, should not exceed the 200-word limit.

These should be cogently written and can be sent by e-mail to: Letters@tribunemail.com

1026 to 2026: The endurance of Somnath



NARENDRA MODI
PM & CHAIRMAN, THE SHREE SOMNATH TRUST

SOMNATH...hearing this word instils a sense of pride in our hearts and minds. It is the eternal proclamation of India's soul. This majestic temple is situated on the western coast at Prabhas Patan in Gujarat. The *Dwadasha Jyotirling Stotram* mentions the 12 Jyotirlingas across India. The Stotram begins with "Saurashtra Somnath Ch", symbolising the civilisational and spiritual importance of Somnath as the first Jyotirling. It is also said:

"Somalingam naro drishtha sarvapapah pramuchyate."

"Labhate phalam manovanchitam mritah swarga samashrayat."

It means: Just the sight of Somnath Shivling ensures that a person is freed of sins, achieves their righteous desires and attains heaven after death.

Tragically, this very Somnath, that drew the reverence and prayers of millions, was attacked by foreign invaders, whose agenda was demolition, not devotion. The year 2026 is significant for the Somnath Temple. It has been 1,000 years since the first attack on this great shrine. It was in January of 1026 that Mahmud of

Ghazni attacked it, seeking to destroy a great symbol of faith and civilisation, through a violent and barbaric invasion.

Yet, 1,000 years later, the temple stands as glorious because of numerous efforts to restore Somnath to its grandeur. One such milestone will complete 75 years in 2026. It was during a ceremony on May 11, 1951, in the presence of the then President, Rajendra Prasad, that the restored temple opened its doors to devotees.

The first invasion of Somnath in 1026, the cruelty that was unleashed upon the people of the town and the devastation inflicted upon the shrine have been documented in detail in various historical accounts. When you read them, the heart trembles. Each line carries the weight of grief, cruelty and a sorrow that refuses to fade with time. Imagine the impact it had on Bharat and the morale of the people. After all, Somnath had great spiritual significance. It was also on the coast, giving strength to a society with economic prowess, whose traders and seafarers carried tales of its grandeur far and wide.

Yet, I am proud to state unequivocally that the story of Somnath, 1,000 years after the first attack, is not defined by destruction. It is defined by the unbreakable courage of crores of children of Bharat Mata. The medieval barbarism that began in 1026 went on to 'inspire' others to repeatedly attack Somnath. It was the start of an attempt to enslave our people and culture. But, each time the temple was attacked, we also had great men and women who



PRIDE: The story of Somnath is defined by the unbreakable courage of generations. PTI

stood up to defend it and even made the ultimate sacrifice. And every single time, generation after generation, the people of our civilisation picked themselves up, rebuilt and rejuvenated the temple. It is our privilege to have been nurtured by the same soil that has nurtured greats like Ahilyabai Holkar, who made a noble attempt to ensure devotees can pray at Somnath.

In the 1890s, Swami Vivekananda visited Somnath and that experience moved him. He expressed his feelings during a lecture in Chennai in 1897 when he said, "Some of these old temples of southern India and those like Somnath of Gujarat will teach you volumes of wisdom, will give you a keener insight into the history of the race than any amount of books. Mark how these temples bear the marks of a hundred attacks and a hundred regenerations, continually destroyed and continually springing up

out of the ruins, rejuvenated and strong as ever! That is the national mind, that is the national life current. Follow it and it leads to glory. Give it up and you die; death will be the only result, annihilation, the only effect, the moment you step beyond that life current."

The sacred duty of rebuilding the Somnath Temple after Independence came to Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel. A visit during Diwali time in 1947 moved him so much that he announced that the temple would be rebuilt there. Finally, on May 11, 1951, a grand temple in Somnath opened its doors to devotees and Rajendra Prasad was present there. The great Sardar Sahib was not alive to see this historic day, but the fulfilment of his dream stood tall before the nation. The then PM, Jawaharlal Nehru, was not too enthused with this development. He did not want the President and ministers to associate with this special

event. He said this event created a bad impression of India. But Rajendra Prasad stood firm and the rest is history. No mention of Somnath is complete without recalling the efforts of KM Munshi, who supported Patel effectively. His works on Somnath, including the book, 'Somanatha: The Shrine Eternal', are extremely informative and educational.

Indeed, as the title of Munshi ji's book conveys, we are a civilisation that carries a sense of conviction about the eternity of spirit and of ideas. We believe that that which is eternal is indestructible, as outlined in the famous Gita verse "Nainam chhindanti shastrani...". There

can be no better example of our civilisation's indomitable spirit than Somnath, which stands gloriously, overcoming odds and struggles.

It is this same spirit that is visible in our nation, one of the brightest spots of global growth, having overcome centuries of invasions and colonial loot. It is our value systems and the determination of our people that have made India the centre of global attention today.

The world is seeing India with hope and optimism. They want to invest in our innovative youngsters. Our art, culture, music and several festivals are going global. Yoga and ayurveda are making a worldwide impact, boosting healthy living. Solutions to some of the most pressing global challenges are coming from India.

Since time immemorial, Somnath has brought together people from different walks of life. Centuries ago, Kalikali Sarvagna Hemchandracharya, a

respected Jain monk, came to Somnath. It is said that after praying there, he recited a verse, "Bharbejaankurjanana ragadyah kshayamu-pagta yasya". It means: Salutations to That One in whom the seeds of worldly becoming are destroyed, in whom passion and all afflictions have withered away. Today, Somnath holds the same ability to awaken something profound within the mind and soul. The sea at Somnath still roars with the same intensity as it did back then. The waves that wash the shores tell a story. No matter what, just like the waves, it has kept rising again and again.

The aggressors of the past are now dust in the wind, their names synonymous with destruction. They are footnotes in the annals of history, while Somnath stands bright, radiating far beyond the horizon, reminding us of the eternal spirit that remained undiminished by the attack of 1026. Somnath is a song of hope that tells us that while hate and fanaticism may have the power to destroy for a moment, faith and conviction in the power of goodness have the power to create for eternity.

If the Somnath Temple, which has faced continuous attacks since 1026, could rise again and again, then we can surely restore our great nation to the glory it embodied 1,000 years ago before the invasions. With the blessings of Shree Somnath Mahadev, we move forward with a renewed resolve to build a Viksas Bharat, where civilisational wisdom guides us to work for the welfare of the whole world. Jai Somnath!

The MAGA turn: Global fallout and India's dilemma



KC SINGH
FORMER AMBASSADOR TO IRAN AND UAE

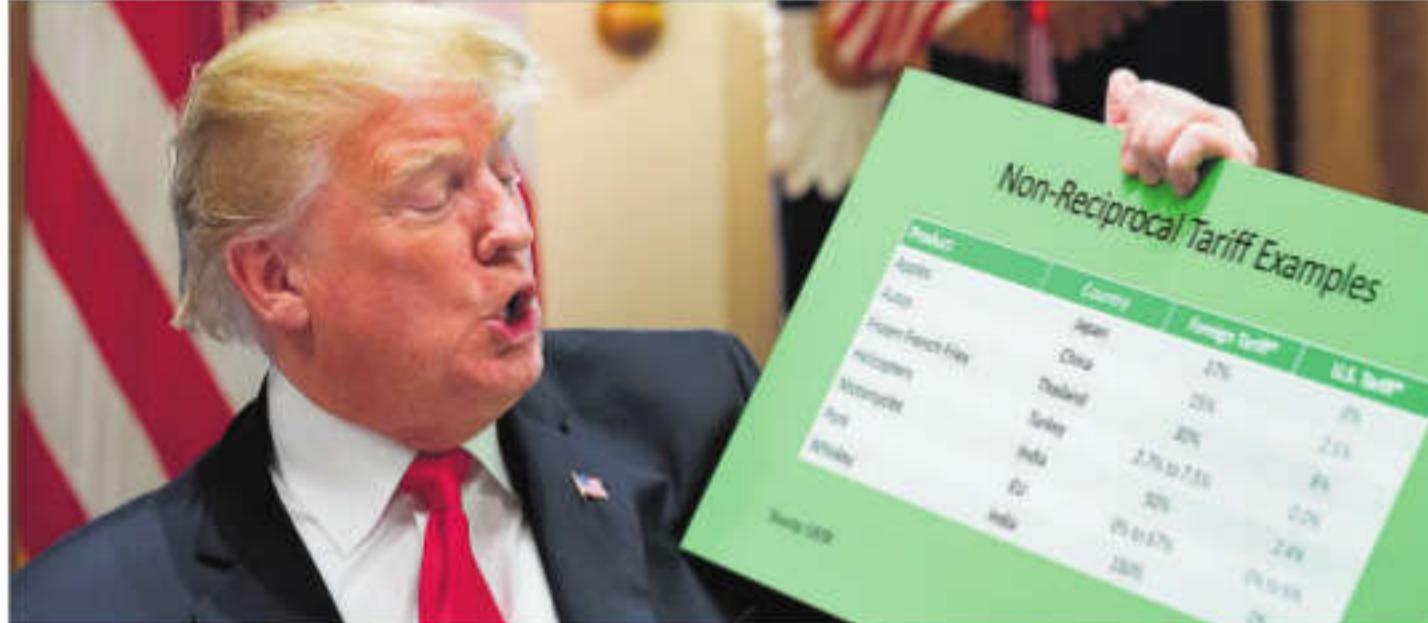
US President Donald Trump completes one year in office on January 20. The *Economist* magazine says he has "turned domestic and international politics on its head". During the campaign, he looked past Project 2025, produced by the conservative Heritage Foundation. However, in office his barrage of executive orders began implementing Project 2025. This included mass, forceful deportation of suspected aliens without hearing, domestic military involvement (now halted by the Supreme Court), dismantling of the bureaucracy, outsourced to Elon Musk, whose Department of Government Efficiency failed drastically.

The external policy changes began with the April "Liberation Day" arbitrary tariffs on imports. Then emerged a closer alignment with Israel, a pro-Russia tilt in handling the Ukraine war, an escalated trade standoff with China and a transitory compromise.

European NATO allies played along, preferring non-confrontation while examining self-reliance, to manage the US pullback from defence commitments. The National Security Strategy (NSS) of December 4-5 confirmed major US policy mutations.

The new foreign policy priorities list the "Western Hemisphere" on the top. It refers to the Americas — North and South — resurrecting the 19th century's Monroe Doctrine, which barred European rivals from interfering in Latin-American affairs. Next comes Asia, with focus on the Indo-Pacific. Unlike the past NSS documents, China is not named as a threat, though it colours the Asian strategy. On December 8, the US allowed the sale to China of Nvidia's advanced H200 chips.

India figures as a subtext, expected to help ensure Indo-Pacific security. Then follows Europe. Under the subtitle "Promoting European Greatness", the NSS document argues that the European challenge exceeds economic stagnation and low military spending. The "real and more stark" prospect is of "civilisational erasure" due to migration policies. Europe's loss of self-confidence is attributed to the regulatory check on the "growing influence of patriotic parties". This refers to the far-right's ascendancy in major European nations. The theory is MAGA-



FRACTURED: Trump's worldview is reshaping global power. REUTERS

inspired, with the US administration desiring a "new Western order", dominated by governments led by white Christian nationalists.

In the UK, the Nigel Farage-led Reform UK is polling 30 per cent support; while in France, Marine Le Pen's National Rally is at 33.4 per cent and Germany's AfD is scaling 26 per cent. Europeans saw this support-signalling as regrettable interference in their internal affairs. German Foreign Minister Johann Wadephul retorted that they did not "need to get advice from any other country or party". German intelligence sees AfD as an extremist group.

In this disrupted post-1945 global order, where does India fit? Normally, domestic and foreign policies of countries are inter-related. The Trump administration demonstrates that by aligning its foreign poli-

icy with its MAGA supremacism. The BJP managed to largely insulate domestic policies from foreign policy, except in South Asia. While adopting nationalist-majoritarian policies at home, with boundaries between religion and politics removed, its foreign policy continued the old secular line, at least superficially. The US

State Department's reports on human rights practices in India berated the constriction of religious, individual and press freedoms. The 2024 report listed the Citizenship Amendment Act and anti-conversion laws as raising concerns. It, however, ignored the BJP's non-liberal political trajectory weakening democracy. India-US relations were considered more crucial to the global American strategy.

The BJP would welcome the NSS document now, recommending non-interference in

the internal affairs of other nations. The US bureaucracy handling those issues stands disbanded. But domestically, the rising xenophobia in the US is impacting the Indian diaspora, especially their religious practices. *The New York Times* wrote about the troubles of Sikh truck drivers in the US after two August accidents. Sikhs in the trucking business, many on asylum-related visas, number 1,50,000, probably a quarter of the Sikh diaspora. Federal authorities have asked states like California to review their driving licence policy.

Canada and Australia have capped student visas, raised fees, heightened scrutiny of forms, etc. The transition to work visas may also be tightened. In New Zealand, a Sikh religious procession was last month disrupted by a far-right Christian group.

The rising xenophobia in Christian Anglophone and western nations raises concerns. The BJP surely realises that Hindu groups in India targeting Christians, particularly this year, can provoke retaliation against the Hindu diaspora. Occasional lynchings of Muslims did not impact India's relations with the Islamic world because the Modi government had successfully engaged the principal Gulf-ruining families. Pakistan only had Turkey and an isolated Iran to join the condemnation. A divided Organisa-

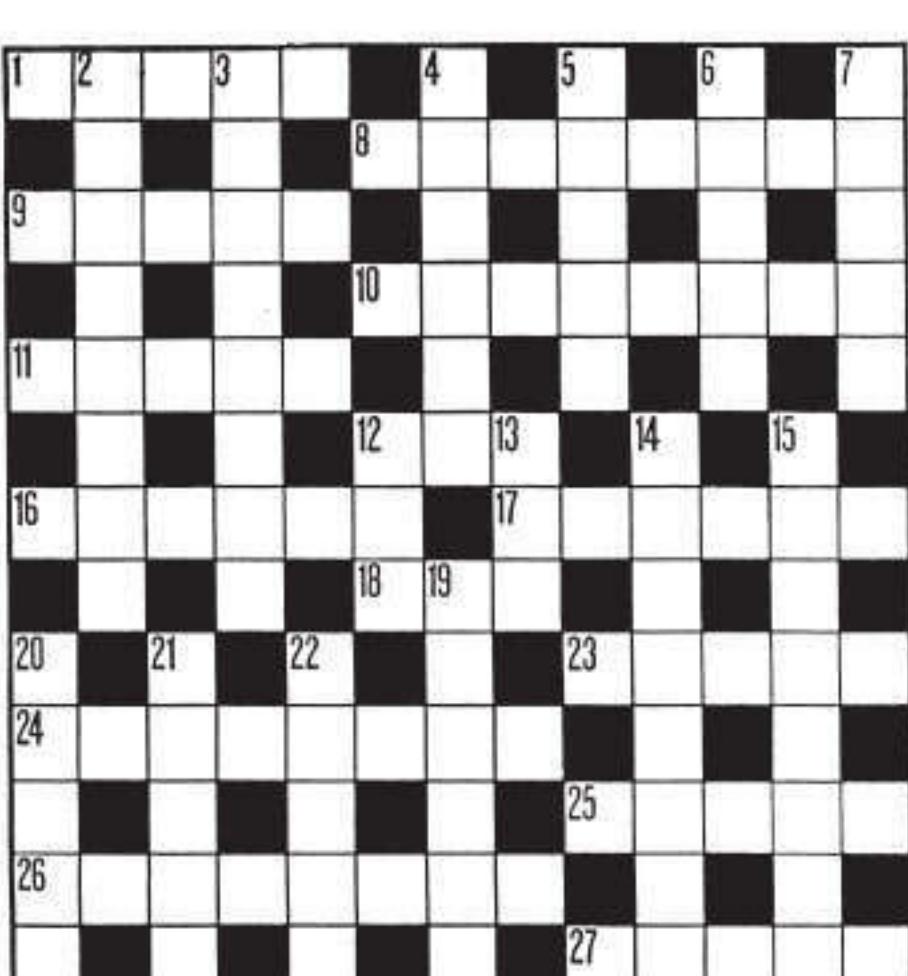
tion of Islamic Conference (OIC) lacked the thrust to target India. But Pakistan stands diplomatically revived after wooing Trump and engaging Saudi Arabia and the UAE. It is now better positioned for India-baiting.

Plus, Bangladesh may elect next month a right-wing government, probably under Islamist Jamaat-e-Islami's influence. Pakistan and its ISI would celebrate that. Simultaneously, Assam and West Bengal face elections. Communal polarisation helps the BJP electorally, especially by branding Bangladeshi illegal migration. Can India blame the western xenophobia while succumbing to it internally?

Punjab may suffer if deportations from the US mount. Narrowing opportunities abroad will block the Punjabi youth's escape route. Thus, Punjab must develop economic opportunities. Green Revolution 2.0 is overdue. The agricultural and dairy sectors need production and supply chain modernisation. If over two lakh Sikhs could salvage the Italian dairy industry and parmesan cheese production, why not the same in Punjab? Similarly pioneering work exists in turning rice stubble into biofuel and organic fertiliser. The chemical fertiliser lobby suppresses such new approaches.

Punjab needs a pro-innovation leadership. Delhi requires non-partisan statesmanship.

QUICK CROSSWORD



ACROSS

- 1 Form a judgment of (5)
- 8 Begin to do (3,5)
- 9 Concise and significant (5)
- 10 Fulfil (4,4)
- 11 Insinuate (5)
- 12 Defective (3)
- 16 Agree (6)
- 17 Temporarily deferred (2,4)
- 18 Loud continued noise (3)
- 23 Regretful (5)
- 24 Almost (3,5)
- 25 To counterfeit (5)
- 26 And so on (2,6)
- 27 Express clearly (5)

Saturday's Solution

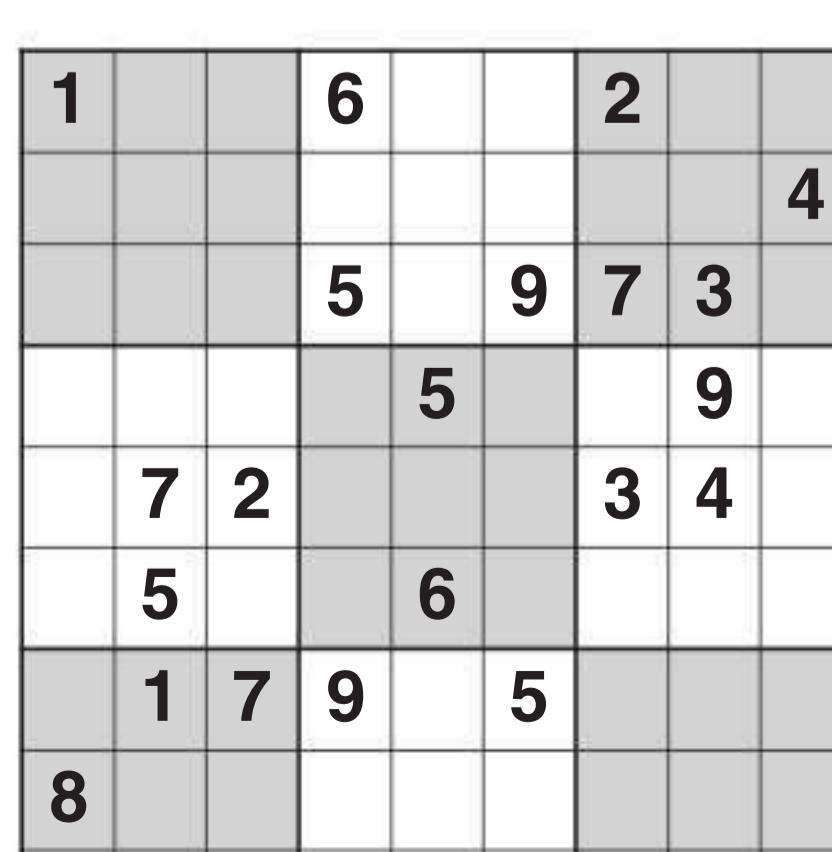
Across: 1 Out of touch, 6 Alms, 10 Riled, 11 Tinderbox, 12 Comprise, 13 Trash, 15 Audible, 17 Diocese, 19 Garland, 21 Possess, 22 About, 24 Stoppage, 27 Essential, 28 Often, 29 Hate, 30 Prima facie.

Down: 1 Ogre, 2 Tall order, 3 Fed up, 4 Outline, 5 Contend, 7 Libya, 8 Sixth sense, 9 Dextrous, 14 Bangladesh, 16 Boasting, 18 Energetic, 20 Dossier, 21 Problem, 23 Onset, 25 Proof, 26 Ante.

DOWN

- 2 Somewhat excessive (1,3,4)
- 3 Share equally (2,6)
- 4 Western US state (6)
- 5 Burdened (5)
- 6 Chocolate-based drink (5)
- 7 Consider attentively (5)
- 12 Bottom of the sea (3)
- 13 Put on (3)
- 14 Decisive gunfight (5-3)
- 15 Satisfactory (3,5)
- 19 One after the other (2,4)
- 20 Subordinate to (5)
- 21 Pile (5)
- 22 Set of rooms (5)

SU DO KU



SATURDAY'S SOLUTION

CITY	SUNSET	MONDAY	17:36 HRS
	SUNRISE	TUESDAY	07:19 HRS
Chandigarh	14	08	
New Delhi	18	08	
Amritsar	12	07	
Bathinda	18	04	
Jalandhar	15	06	
Ludhiana	14	09	
Bhiwani	15	04	
Hisar	15	06	
Sirsra	18	07	
Dharamsala	16	04	
Manali	14	0	
Shimla	15	03	
Srinagar	08	-02	
Jammu	15	10	
Leh	01	-09	
Dehradun	19	07	
Mussoorie	16	04	

CALENDAR

JANUARY 5, 2026, MONDAY

- Shaka Samvat 1947
- Posh Shaka 15
- Posh Parvishtha 22
- Hijri 1447
- Krishna Paksha Tithi 2, up to 9:57 pm
- Vishwakarma Yoga up to 10:47 pm
- Pushya Nakshatra up to 1:25 pm
- Moon in Cancer sign
- Gandmoola start 1:25 pm



Raiding Venezuela

Trump's military strikes against Venezuela, a bid to save US hegemony

The latest US strikes in Venezuela have once again come wrapped in the rhetoric of moral necessity. President Donald Trump has sought to justify it as part of the global war against "narcotics terrorism". After a brief and surgical military operation, the US forces brought Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro and his wife to New York to face trial. Claiming that Venezuela under Maduro has been a tragedy of repression, institutional decay and economic freefall, the Trump Administration is now bent upon a project of regime change "to fulfil the wishes of the local population". The military operation comes on the heels of years of US sanctions, constituting a form of warfare unto themselves. A former UN special rapporteur, Alfred de Zayas, has calculated that 100,000 Venezuelans have already perished as a direct result of coercive economic measures.

Leaders around the world have responded with a mix of condemnation and support. Neighbouring Latin American countries condemned the actions, as did Venezuela's long-term allies, Russia and China. China said it was "deeply shocked and strongly condemns" the use of force against a sovereign country and its president. Russia has demanded immediate release of the kidnapped Venezuelan President and his wife. The reactions from Europe are cautious. While the UK has distanced itself from the US action, Germany has taken time to evaluate its response, and Norway has dubbed it as a violation of international law. Expectedly, US ally Israel has congratulated Trump for his "decisive action" even as enemy Iran has denounced it and threatened repercussions. An Indian External Affairs Ministry statement said: "Recent developments in Venezuela are a matter of deep concern. We are closely monitoring the evolving situation." The UN Secretary General has expressed concern and called for de-escalation.

Stripped of his moral posturing, Trump's military action in Venezuela echoes a familiar script. A great power identifies a crisis, interprets it through the prism of its own strategic anxieties, and then proceeds as though its own intervention is both inevitable and redemptive. The rationalisations vary, from counterterrorism and humanitarian rescue to narcotics interdiction, but the underlying impulse remains constant: total control. We have seen this for decades in American policy. From Vietnam to Iraq to Afghanistan to Syria, the US has repeatedly invaded other countries and tried to reshape their polity. The outcomes, unfortunately, have been unanticipated. Trump has shown that this new wave of American imperialism is as predatory as it was in the past. Observers view it as Donald Trump's desperate bid to maintain US hegemony in the changing world order.

PLI approvals

India's slaggering manufacturing sector needs a timely boost

The Indian government's recent Production Link Approval (PLI) for 22 new proposals under the third tranche of the Electronics Components Manufacturing Scheme (ECMS) has been welcomed by the industry as a major leap forward in enhancing India's manufacturing capabilities. The move is timely as the country's manufacturing activity slowed to its weakest pace in two years in December, reflecting softer demand conditions and more cautious production strategies by firms. The seasonally adjusted HSBC India Manufacturing Purchasing Managers' Index (PMI) fell to 55 in December from 56.6 in November. While remaining firmly in expansion territory above the neutral 50 mark, the reading signalled the slowest improvement in the sector's health in two years. Analysts feel that despite that even with growth momentum easing, India's manufacturing industry wrapped up 2025 in good shape. A sharp rise in new business intakes could keep companies busy as the final quarter of the fiscal year unfolds.

The subdued inflationary pressures may continue to support demand resulting in weaker export performance, with the share of companies reporting higher international sales falling to about half of the 2025 average. Anecdotal evidence also suggested a narrowing of export destinations, largely limited to Asia, Europe and West Asia. But there are relatively lower cost pressures in India compared with other manufacturing hubs. This could help firms use competitive pricing to attract new overseas business in the coming year. On the domestic front, employment growth slowed to its weakest pace in the current 22-month phase of job creation. Purchasing activity also expanded at the slowest rate in two years, in line with the softer growth in output. Outstanding business volumes rose only marginally, with the relevant index hovering close to the neutral 50 mark, indicating a limited buildup of backlog.

The approval of projects worth 418.63 billion rupees (\$4.64 billion) from a host of companies to boost domestic manufacturing of electronic components under the PLI scheme, will provide a boost to the manufacturing sector. Small firms around the country as well as established heavyweights like Tata Electronics Pvt Ltd and Samsung's display assembly facility in Noida will receive ECMS incentives. This should enable the industry to set up an "integrated" research and development setup for electronics design. Looking ahead, manufacturers remain optimistic about higher output in 2026, though overall sentiment weakened to a near three-and-a-half-year low. While advertising, new product launches and supportive demand trends were cited as positives, concerns around competitive pressures weighed on confidence. Manufacturing needs a timely boost.

Send your letters to the Editor, Lokmat Times City Office, Opposite Rajiv Gandhi Bhavan, Sharapur Road, Nashik. E-mail: cdnashik.lokmattimes@gmail.com

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Somnath Swabhiman Parv - A 1000 Years of Unbroken Faith


Narendra Modi

Somnath...hearing this word instils a sense of pride in our hearts and minds. It is the eternal proclamation of India's soul. This majestic Temple is situated on the Western coast of India in Gujarat, at a place called Prabhavati. The Dwadasa Jyotirling Stotram mentions the 12 Jyotirlingas across India. The Stotram begins with "सोमनाथं च...", symbolising the civilisational and spiritual importance of Somnath as the first Jyotirlinga.

It is also said:
 सोमनाथं च दृष्ट्वा सर्वपापेः प्रमुच्यते।
 लमते फलं नामान्तरं शूतं स्वयं सामाश्रयेत्।

It means: Just the sight of Somnath Shiviling ensures that a person is freed of sins, achieves their righteous desires and attains heaven after death.

Tragically, this very Somnath, which drew the reverence and prayers of millions, was attacked by foreign invaders, whose agenda was demolition, not devotion.

The year 2026 is significant for the Somnath Temple. It has been 1,000 years since the first attack on this great shrine. It was in January of 1026 that Mahmud of Ghazni attacked this Temple, seeking to destroy a great symbol of faith and civilisation, through a violent and barbaric invasion.

Yet, one thousand years later, the Temple stands as glorious as ever because of numerous efforts to restore Somnath to its grandeur. One such milestone completes 75 years in 2026. It was during a ceremony on May 11th 1951, in the presence of the then President of India, Dr. Rajendra Prasad, that the restored Temple opened its doors to devotees.

The first invasion of Somnath a thousand years ago in 1026, the cruelty that was unleashed upon the people of the town and the devastation that was inflicted upon the shrine have been documented in great detail in various historical accounts. When you read them, the heart trembles. Each line carries the weight of grief, cruelty and a sorrow that refuses to fade with time.

Imagine the impact it had on Bharat and the morale of the people. After all, Somnath had great spiritual significance. It was also on the coast, giving



strength to a society with great economic prowess, whose sea traders and seafarers carried tales of its grandeur far and wide.

Yet, I am proud to state unequivocally that the story of Somnath, a thousand years after the first attack, is not defined by destruction. It is defined by the unbreakable courage of crores of children of Bharat Mata.

The medieval barbarism that began a thousand years ago in 1026 went on to 'inspire' others to repeatedly attack Somnath. It was the start of an attempt to enslave our people and culture. But, each time the Temple was attacked, we also had great men and women who stood up to defend it and even made the ultimate sacrifice. And every single time, generation after generation, the people of our great civilisation picked themselves up, rebuilt and rejuvenated the Temple. It is our privilege to have been nurtured by the same soil that has nurtured greats like Ahilyabai Holkar, who made a noble attempt to ensure devotees can pray at Somnath.

In the 1890s, Swami Vivekananda visited Somnath and that experience moved him. He expressed his feelings during a lecture in Chennai in 1897 when he said, "Some of these old temples of Southern India and those like Somnath of Gujarat will teach you volumes of wisdom, will give you a keener insight into the history of the race than any amount of books. Mark how these temples bear the marks of a hundred attacks and a hundred regenerations, continually destroyed and continually springing up out of the ruins, rejuvenated and strong as ever! That is the national mind, that is the national life-current. Follow it and it leads to glory. Give it up and you die; death will be the

only result, annihilation, the only effect, the moment you step beyond that life current."

The sacred duty of rebuilding the Somnath Temple after independence came to the able hands of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel. A visit during Diwali time in 1947 moved him so much that he announced that the Temple will be rebuilt there. Finally, on May 11th 1951, a grand Temple in Somnath opened its doors to devotees and Dr. Rajendra Prasad was present there. The great Sardar Sahib was not alive to see this historic day, but the fulfilment of his dream stood tall before the nation.

The then Prime Minister, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, was not too enthused with this development. He did not want the Honourable President as well as Ministers to associate with this special event. He said that this event created a bad impression of India. But Dr. Rajendra Prasad stood firm and the rest is history. No mention of Somnath is complete without recalling the efforts of KM Munshi, who supported Sardar Patel very effectively. His works on Somnath, including the book, 'Somanatha: The Shrine Eternal', are extremely informative and educative.

Indeed, as the title of Munshi Ji's book conveys, we are a civilisation that carries a sense of conviction about the eternity of spirit and of ideas. We firmly believe that that which is eternal is indestructible, as outlined in the famous Gita verse "नै चिदंति शक्ताणि...". There can be no better example of our civilisation's indomitable spirit than Somnath, which stands gloriously, overcoming odds and struggles.

It is this same spirit that is visible in our nation, one of the brightest spots of global growth, having overcome cen-

turies of invasions and colonial loot. It is our value systems and the determination of our people that have made India the centre of global attention today. The world is seeing India with hope and optimism. They want to invest in our innovative youngsters. Our art, culture, music and several festivals are going global. Yoga and Ayurveda are making a worldwide impact, boosting healthy living. Solutions to some of the most pressing global challenges are coming from India.

Since time immemorial, Somnath has brought together people from different walks of life. Centuries ago, Kalikal Sarvagna Hemachandra Ray, a respected Jain monk, came to Somnath. It is said that after praying there, he recited a verse, "सर्वज्ञाङ्कुरज्ञाना यामाः अप्यपूर्णा यत्या". It means - Salutations to That One in whom the seeds of worldly becoming are destroyed, in whom passion and all afflictions have withered away." Today, Somnath holds the same ability to awaken something profound within the mind and soul.

A thousand years after the first attack in 1026, the sea at Somnath still roars with the same intensity as it did back then. The waves that wash the shores of Somnath tell a story. No matter what, just like the waves, it kept rising again and again.

The aggressors of the past are now dust in the wind, their names synonymous with destruction. They are footnotes in the annals of history, while Somnath stands bright, radiating far beyond the horizon, reminding us of the eternal spirit that remained undiminished by the attack of 1026. Somnath is a song of hope that tells us that while hate and fanaticism may have the power to destroy for a moment, faith and conviction in the power of goodness have the power to create for eternity.

If the Somnath Temple, which was attacked a thousand years ago and faced continuous attacks thereon, could rise again and again, then we can surely restore our great nation to the glory it embodied a thousand years ago before the invasions. With the blessings of Shree Somnath Mahadev, we move forward with a renewed resolve to build a Vikas Bharat, where civilisational wisdom guides us to work for the welfare of the whole world.

Jai Somnath!

The author is the Prime Minister of India and is also the Chairman of the Shree Somnath Trust

Why has the fire of rebellion erupted in Iran?

Will the plan to uproot Khamenei succeed? Will the Shah regain authority?


Dr Vijay Darda

For years, embers of discontent have been simmering beneath the surface among people seeking greater freedom in the Islamic Republic of Iran. But how did this fire suddenly flare up? Is inflation and unemployment alone at the root of this popular uprising? Or is there a larger plan to overthrow the Khamenei government, which has trampled human rights and women's freedom under military boots?

The manner in which protests are unfolding — arson, attacks on police stations, and attempts by demonstrators to storm military bases — shows just how intense this uprising is. Thousands of people have been arrested, and several protesters have been killed in police firing. What began in the city of Mashhad has now spread across Iran. This is the first time since the 2009 presidential election that public anger has posed a direct threat to the regime.

Meanwhile, listen carefully to the slogans being raised by the protesters. They are not only demanding the dismissal of the government, but also criticising foreign policy and even calling for the death of Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who keeps issuing repeated warnings to the United States.

In this context, consider the statement of US President Donald Trump as well. Trump says: "Iran is failing at every level despite the terrible deal made with them by the Obama Administration. The great Iranian people have been repressed for many years. They are hungry for food & for freedom. Along with human rights, the wealth of Iran is being looted. TIME FOR CHANGE!"



When a regime employs harsh measures against its citizens, it creates openings for external actors to exploit the instability for strategic advantage. Iran's current situation may exemplify this dynamic.

■ ■ ■

Mohammad Reza Pahlavi — whose family had ruled earlier — back in power. The Shah handed over a substantial share of Iranian oil to American companies. These are not mere hearsay; in 2013, the CIA officially acknowledged its role in the 1953 coup.

It must also be mentioned here that Iran made significant progress during the Shah's era. He pushed the country ahead along the path of modernisation and granted more freedom to women.

Iran, at that time, resembled a European society in many respects. However, this closeness to the United States was unacceptable to hardliners and to powers such as the Soviet Union.

In 1979, the Islamic Revolution took place in Iran. Not only did the Pahlavi rule come to an end, but a group of Iranian students also seized the US Embassy on November 4, 1979, holding 52 Americans hostage for 444 days. This became a matter of grave humiliation for the superpower United States. Ayatollah Khomeini, who came to power, sounded the bugle against America. The bitterness that entered US-Iran relations has continued since then. The current supreme leader

Khamenei, is following the same path as Khomeini.

Iran has come very close to developing a nuclear bomb, and Western powers may do anything to prevent this. Several Iranian nuclear scientists have been assassinated by Israel. Just last year, the United States targeted three alleged Iranian nuclear sites. Despite this, the current regime remains adamant about pursuing the bomb. As a result, the great powers increasingly see a permanent solution in eliminating Khamenei's rule itself.

It should be remembered that exploiting internal dissent within a nation as a diplomatic weapon is an age-old practice. It is quite possible that such factors are also at work behind the current popular uprising. There is no doubt that several powers including the United States, Britain, Israel, and Russia have their own agendas in Iran.

At present, the entire world is waiting to see whether Khamenei plays on the front foot or goes into defence in retreat. Whether the stumps stay intact is to be seen!

Before I conclude

I am deeply pained by the deaths of over a dozen people due to contaminated water in Indore, a city that wears the crown of being the cleanest in the country. What pains me even more is how the system could be so negligent that polluted water reached people's homes through taps. And the shameful language used by the responsible leadership afterward is even more distressing. Does human life have no value?

The author is the chairman, Editorial Board of Lokmat Media and former member of Rajya Sabha. vijaydarda@lokmat.com



Scan QR code to read Dr Vijay Darda's previous articles



THE GOAN EVERYDAY

Happiness is good health and a bad memory.

Ingrid Bergman

Silence over US action exposes cowardice on global issues

Over the weekend, the US announced that, via a special operation, it had captured Venezuelan president Nicholas Maduro and that it would now control the Venezuelan oil industry. The unilateral action that came after months of military interventions, including the interception of oil tankers and other vessels moving to and from the South American country, is largely aimed, by President Trump's own admission, to control the country's vast oil reserves that the preeminent superpower, for some reason, believes rightfully belong to them.

The action, which is seen as being in blatant disregard for international law, has been roundly condemned by several countries around the world, if not for the violations, but more so because the US sees itself as being above any law. However, sadly, India isn't among the countries that have condemned or said anything about the invasion so far. The silence is deeply disappointing. India is one of the foremost countries to have been advocating for a rules-based world order to which all countries, irrespective of military might, subject themselves.

Even more than that, India has a long history of speaking up against unilateral US-led military interventions, including speaking up against the war in Iraq, even going back as far as speaking up against the French occupation of Algeria, in favour of decolonisation of Africa. All this at a time when India was militarily and economically a far weaker country than it currently is.

If anything, the current reluctance to speak up betrays a lack of courage on the international stage and a cowardly fear that speaking up may invite the wrath of the world's dominant superpower. More than that, one needs to realise that not speaking up would mean legitimising such unilateral action, and silence often means consent. India needs to realise that if today the USA can unilaterally grab another country's assets, it can do the same for any other country, large or small, either through military intervention or through coercion.

In failing to speak up for a fellow third world country, India, which once championed the non-aligned movement and was a leading global voice against excesses by the former colonial powers, being a former colony itself, and later the USA-led NATO, has betrayed a long legacy of speaking up against global bullying, disrespect for international institutions and law and contempt for the very law they seek to impose upon others.

It is imperative that India speaks up, irrespective of the costs that might come with speaking up against this blatant unilateralism of the US -- all for the sake of the control of the oil reserves no less -- not even the pretence of a major human rights violation or excuse in the name of the liberation of an oppressed people.

At the international level, India remains woefully short of speaking up and making its stance known -- a stance that betrays the cowardice of the present setup, irrespective of how they are positioned at reviving India's image in the international world.

Real bravado comes not when punching down on weaker foes but from being willing to punch up, irrespective of the consequences that it may entail. And the present dispensation has been found wanting.

OPEN SPACE >>

Stricter measures needed to tackle waste dumping

I refer to the news article on waste dumping at Navelim bypass, where administrative bodies took action and inspected the area. Let's wait and watch how effective this turns out to be. Waste dumping is a national issue linked to our citizens' poor civic sense. Despite awareness and public shaming, nothing has changed. We can't keep blaming waste management authorities alone. In my vaddo of 16 houses, only 5 adhere to giving dry waste to the collection agent who comes every week. Measures have to be stricter: monitor and penalize citizens who dump. Since the main culprit is the availability of plastic bags, which are conveniently used to pack the waste to be dumped, shops giving banned plastic bags, and citizens spotted with banned bags in public should also be heavily penalized. Government offices and institutions should monitor and penalize those dirtying premises. Introduce jail sentences for repeat offenders. It's time we take responsibility and keep our surroundings clean.

ALWIN FERNANDES, Benaulim

Beyond the screen

'Phirse Kitaab' is a collaborative reading movement, reinforcing books as key tools for learning, reflection, and social connections across Goa



The writer is a resident of Margao who strongly desires to bring about some socially relevant changes with his musings

PACHU MENON

The perceived lack of readers is a common contemporary concern among bibliophiles and educators alike. India celebrates the National Reading Day on June 19 annually, honouring Puthuvayil Narayana Panicker, the Father of India's Library Movement.

The National Reading Day theme for 2025 was "Reading, Connecting People Across Generations in Society."

The theme emphasized the role of reading in fostering intergenerational connections and promoting a love of reading across different age groups.

National Reading Day is a crucial advocacy tool and catalyst for numerous local events, successfully keeping the conversation about the importance of reading alive.

Kerala, where the drive began, is cited for its high literacy rates, a testament to the long-term impact of the library movement that the day honours.

Tea-stalls virtually turning into hot-spots for spirited political debates is a common enough feature of Kerala's rural landscape.

The availability of local newspapers at these joints has long been a deep-rooted and significant part of the state's culture. Tea-stalls historically served as vital social and information hubs where patrons would gather not only for just tea and snacks, but also to read or listen to the news being read aloud.

This daily 'ritual' underscores how deeply embedded reading and awareness of current events are in the everyday life and social fabric of Kerala.

Print readership in Kerala is undoubtedly the highest among all states in India. Reading newspapers is an ingrained habit for most Malayalees.

Even then, newspaper reading in Kerala has seen a gradual decline, especially among younger demographics due to digital media.

With this as the context, 'Malayala Manorama', the daily from arguably the biggest media house in Kerala, made it a mission to bring back the habit of reading among school children last year.

A blog by Uma Abraham, assistant manager marketing, Malayala Manorama, gives a broad insight into this initiative.

The campaign was announced on June 19, 2023 - incidentally the National Reading Day - encouraging students to read the newspaper every day and participate in the quiz.

It did this through "Read & Win," one of the biggest quiz competitions in India for students in grades nine to twelve, and the questions were found only in the newspaper. A whopping cash prize fur-

THE INBOX >>

No 4 economy in world but poor quality of life

14 people died in Indore when sewage leaked into a water supply line. This can happen anywhere in India, but it is something that can be easily prevented. Timely maintenance of infrastructure is the key, separation of water lines and sewer lines is one basic step. Question is, how many cities have been doing regular preventive maintenance and carrying out checks of their underground sewerage and water distribution systems?

Normally, it is the poor who are victims of this apathy as they don't have any water filtering system at home and rely entirely on water made available by the municipal corporation. It is a shame that even after 70 years of independence our governments are unable to provide clean drinking water and clean air.

What use is it that we are the number 4 economy in the world in terms of gross GDP when we have such a poor quality of life?

REKHA SARIN, Benaulim

Trump has openly violated Venezuela's sovereignty

Washington's aggression over Caracas is a daredevil episode of violation of national sovereignty. By taking captive the Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro and his wife, Trump has gone against his visions of non-intervention in other countries' affairs. The charges against the deposed president include

narco-terrorism, cocaine importation and conspiracy to possess destructive weapons against the US. However, it appears that Trump struck Venezuela and ousted its President because of the country's massive oil reserves, which total over 303 billion barrels, making them the world's largest proven reserves.

Such actions constitute open violations of international law, reducing it to an ornamental concept invoked selectively and discarded conveniently. They also accelerate the erosion of whatever moral authority the US once claimed.

Simultaneously, Trump has issued an

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

unwarranted threat to Iran, if its security forces attack protesters. The US has

shown little regard for the sovereignty of countries that refuse to align with its strategic preferences.

From Latin America to the Middle East, interventions have been carried out under the pretext to save democracy, human rights, global security—while reliably taking on control over resources and the engineering of regime change.

GREGORY FERNANDES, Mumbai

Taxes remain most potent weapon for centralization

The Central government's rule since 2014 is defined by one overriding core principle: Centralize powers as much as you can, as fast as you can, as debilitatingly as you can, and neutralise powers of state/ federal units as much, as fast and as deeply as you can i.e. reduce the latter to being mere bystanders in a supposedly democratic regime. Taxes remain the most potent weapon to achieve this deadly centralization in a homogeneous nation like India! The non-BJP ruled states are thus handicapped, forever pleading with the Centre to devolve their rightful share of taxes and other monies from the central pool. The game is simple; do what I say, praise what I do or accept fiscal beggarmen. So this is a unitary form of government or dictatorial one. Modi's operandi ensures we have the perfect "My way or the highway" sarkar.

VINAY DWIVEDI, Benaulim



ther motivated student participation.

Along with increasing the subscription base of the 'Malayala Manorama' daily among students in Kerala, this was an opportunity to meaningfully engage with the student community on a regular basis and create an offering that made newspaper reading a necessity for them.

Besides having achieved impressive results and accomplishing its goals in record time, the campaign motivated schools to introduce an hour dedicated to reading the newspaper.

Hence, when a motley crowd of young girls, and all of them novices at that, decided to do something about reviving the habit of reading in Goa, their efforts attracted wide attention.

The 'Phirse Kitaab' initiative in Goa, organized by GIO (Girls Islamic Organization) Goa, was a state-wide campaign from December 7 to 27, 2025, aimed at reviving the culture of reading and deep-thinking lost in the digital age.

The GIO is a socio-educational organization of young women working towards the reconstruction of society on moral and ethical foundations through education and community engagement.

The initiative featured activities like community libraries, screen-free reading retreats, author-meet-and-greets, readathons, and a literature festival, promoting critical thinking, intellectual discipline, and community engagements through books.

"Phirse Kitaab" served as a movement to encourage people to read more, think more deeply, and build stronger foundations for their communities by returning to the power of books.

What began as a 20-day campaign slowly grew into a journey of reflection, learning, and change. Each interaction, session, and conversation added meaning, turning an idea into lived experiences.

The campaign aimed to revive reading habits and encourage meaningful engagement with books among children, youth and adults. Brought alive through shared efforts and belief, the campaign became a reminder of why reading matters and how collective action can create lasting impact.

The overall aim was to build a generation that leads with knowledge, curiosity, and wisdom, highlighting the power of reading to improve critical

The cost factor too has played a major role in the waning popularity of reading books. Despite the challenges though, the emergence of more affordable formats like e-books and the accessibility of public library systems help mitigate the cost barrier.

The habit of reading cannot however remain dormant for long. The inherent need for reading will eventually resurface and demand attention after a period of inactivity.

In recent years there has been a noticeable push for campaigns aimed at reviving reading culture.

The most successful campaigns are nevertheless built on a solid understanding of the targeted audience's specific barriers and motivations, with clear, consistent messaging and a commitment to ongoing evaluation and improvement.

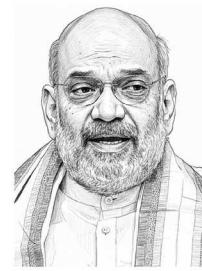
For 'GIO Goa', the true importance of the 'Phirse Kitaab' initiative lies not just in tangible outcomes, but in the intangible legacies of a journey that continues to inspire and strengthen core values long after the initial effort is complete.

OPEN SPACE >>

Stricter measures needed to tackle waste dumping

I refer to the news article on waste dumping at Navelim bypass, where administrative bodies took action and inspected the area. Let's wait and watch how effective this turns out to be. Waste dumping is a national issue linked to our citizens' poor civic sense. Despite awareness and public shaming, nothing has changed. We can't keep blaming waste management authorities alone. In my vaddo of 16 houses, only 5 adhere to giving dry waste to the collection agent who comes every week. Measures have to be stricter: monitor and penalize citizens who dump. Since the main culprit is the availability of plastic bags, which are conveniently used to pack the waste to be dumped, shops giving banned plastic bags, and citizens spotted with banned bags in public should also be heavily penalized. Government offices and institutions should monitor and penalize those dirtying premises. Introduce jail sentences for repeat offenders. It's time we take responsibility and keep our surroundings clean.

ALWIN FERNANDES, Benaulim



“ DMK government is synonymous with corruption. A DMK leader's name has come up in cash-for-jobs scam, that of another leader in money laundering

AMIT SHAH
Union Home Minister



The Donald Trump administration is relying on economic pressure, naval enforcement and oil sanctions to shape developments in Venezuela. None of the money from the oil gets to the people

MARCO RUBIO
US Secretary of State



Now I have decided to sit at home. I will tell my two sons to live a content life. After me, developmental politics will be carried forward by (Shiv Sena) Niles and (state minister) Nitesh

”

NARAYAN RANE
BJP Lok Sabha MP

Indore tragedy, a national shame

It is a macabre irony that Indore, long hailed as India's cleanest city and a role model for urban sanitation, is in the grip of a serious public health emergency following an outbreak of waterborne bacterial disease that has left at least ten people dead. The sewage-contaminated drinking water was the culprit for the diarrhoea outbreak. Leakage in the main drinking water supply pipeline has exposed thousands of residents in the Bhagirathpura area to a public health hazard. The crisis has exposed serious lapses in water supply monitoring and civic accountability. The first signs of trouble emerged last month when residents noticed an unusual foul smell, bitter taste and visible discolouration in the municipal drinking water supplied to the locality. Despite repeated complaints to civic authorities, no immediate corrective action was taken. Soon after consuming the contaminated water, large numbers of people began experiencing vomiting, diarrhoea, dehydration and high fever, triggering panic and a rush to nearby hospitals. This is clearly the outcome of administrative negligence, and the Madhya Pradesh government should not shy away from taking strict action against officials at all levels. The sorry state of affairs has compelled the National Human Rights Commission and the State High Court to intervene. The troubling truth is that the authorities tasked with protecting the health of citizens swung into action only after lives were lost. The Indore deaths have sparked an uproar and put the BJP government on the defensive. The 'double-engine' governments in Delhi and MP have woefully failed on this front.

The malaise of water contamination, however, is not confined to Indore; it's a nationwide phenomenon. The disease outbreaks due to water-borne bacteria have been reported from several cities, including Bengaluru, Chennai, Delhi, Kochi and Bhopal, in the past two years. They are a grim reminder that a piped supply is not an assurance against contamination. Formation of inquiry committees, announcement of compensation and suspension of junior officials have become all-too-familiar exercises in damage control. Water supply in a large number of cities continues to rely on pipelines laid in colonial times or in the immediate years after Independence. Indore's water supply network, for instance, is 120 years old. Despite lofty claims about urban infrastructure development, water contamination still remains a major public health concern in India. The World Health Organization (WHO) highlights that ingestion of unsafe water can lead to diseases such as bacterial gastroenteritis, cholera, typhoid, and dysentery, which are significant contributors to illness and death in vulnerable populations. The Supreme Court has repeatedly asserted that the right to a healthy environment is part of the fundamental right to life under Article 21. The Indore tragedy illustrates how municipal inertia stymies attempts to modernise infrastructure even in India's cleanest city. Cleanliness rankings, smart city labels, and governance slogans cannot mask systemic neglect.

It illustrates how municipal inertia stymies attempts to modernise infrastructure even in India's cleanest city

US action reflects a revived Monroe Doctrine, driven by geopolitics, energy security & regional power competition — not oil alone



BRIG ADVITYA MADAN (retd)

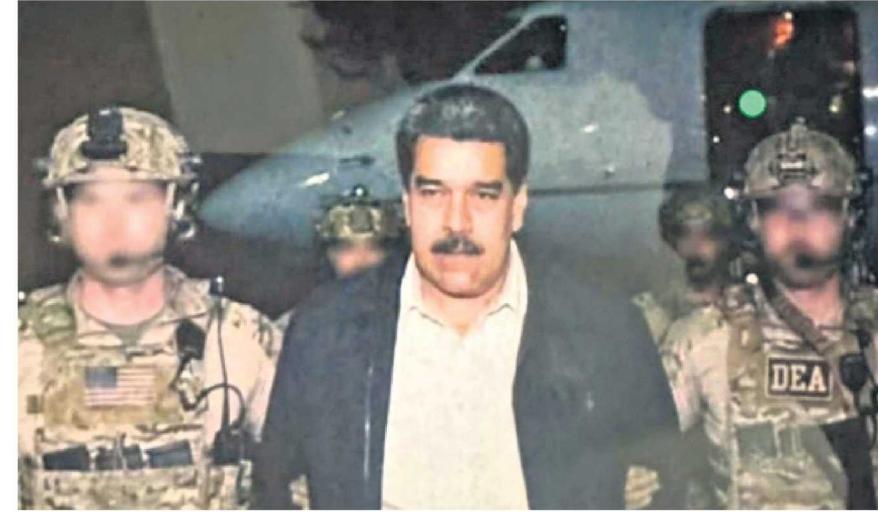
What unfolded in Venezuela on 3 January 2025 — if early reports are even partially accurate — marks a moment of profound geopolitical consequence. According to widely circulating accounts, a covert, CIA-led operation, reportedly backed by elite US forces, struck two major Venezuelan military installations — Fuerte Tiuna and La Carlota — and resulted in the custody of a sitting Venezuelan President.

The striking aspect of the episode is not merely its audacity, but the apparent absence of resistance. Either Venezuela's air defences were neutralised through a meticulously planned cyber and electronic operation, or the episode involved deep internal complicity. In either case, the message is unmistakable: when a great power decides to act decisively in its perceived sphere of influence, norms and niceties take a back seat.

Monroe Doctrine

The more important question, however, is not how the operation was conducted, but why the United States chose to execute such a bold move. To understand that, one must step back and examine the broader contours of US strategic thinking — and its historical roots.

A few days ago, I wrote about the evolving US National Security Strategy. One paragraph in particular merits renewed attention today: the explicit reference to the Monroe Doctrine. First articulated in 1823 by President James Monroe, the doctrine declared that the Western Hemisphere was closed to further European colonisation, while the United States, in turn, would refrain from interference in European affairs. At the time, the US was neither



WHAT IS PLAYING OUT BEFORE OUR EYES IS NOT THE MUCH-VAUNTED 'RULES-BASED INTERNATIONAL ORDER,' BUT SOMETHING FAR OLDER AND CRUDER: MIGHT DETERMINES OUTCOMES

the economic nor military colossus it is today, and much of Latin America had just emerged from colonial rule. The doctrine was aspirational then. Two centuries later, it is actionable.

What we are witnessing now is the Monroe Doctrine in its modern, muscular incarnation. The most pronounced focus of America's contemporary strategic posture is the Western Hemisphere, particularly Latin America. In official documents, the US identifies three primary threats emanating from the region: illegal migration, drug trafficking, and transnational organised crime. This framing dovetails neatly with President Donald Trump's domestic political narrative and helps explain his statement on 19 December 2025, when he openly said he did not rule out the possibility of war with Venezuela.

Behind US Actions

From this vantage point, the rationale behind Washington's actions becomes clearer. US interest in Venezuela is driven by a complex mix of geopolitics, energy security, and regional power competition — not oil alone, but oil first among equals. Venezuela possesses the largest proven oil reserves in the world, conferring enormous long-term strategic value. Crucially, it sits squarely in America's geopolitical backyard, at a time when both China and Russia have been expanding their footprint in Latin America. Russia's sale of advanced air defence systems to Caracas is a case in point.

Energy considerations loom equally large. Control — or at least decisive influence — over Venezuelan oil would allow the United States to stabilise supply and prices across the Western Hemisphere. This matters not just for markets but for domestic politics. US Gulf Coast refineries are structurally designed to process heavy crude, precisely the kind Venezuela produces, rather than the light shale oil of which the US already has an abundance. From

a purely industrial standpoint, Venezuelan oil fits a critical gap in the American energy ecosystem.

Then there is the great-power rivalry dimension. Washington is keen to prevent China, Russia, and Iran from entrenching themselves in Venezuela and gaining privileged access to its resources. In this sense, US behaviour mirrors what China is doing in its own neighbourhood — whether in the South China Sea or around Taiwan. Spheres of influence may be unfashionable in diplomatic rhetoric, but they are alive and well in practice.

Mass migration from Venezuela over the past few years adds another layer of urgency. Millions fleeing economic collapse and political instability have strained neighbouring states and, indirectly, the US itself. For Washington, stabilising — or reshaping — Venezuela is, therefore, seen as both a security imperative and a domestic political necessity.

Recent statements by senior US leaders reinforce this interpretation. Vice President JD Vance's remark that Venezuela must return its "stolen oil," coupled with allegations of drug trafficking against its leadership, frames the issue as one of justice and restitution. Trump's more blunt assertion — made shortly after the operation — that the US would "control Venezuela and its oil resources" strips away any remaining ambiguity. This is power politics, plainly stated.

One must also factor in America's own economic stresses. With mounting debt, persistent inflationary pressures, and strategic competition on multiple fronts, the US has strong incentives to secure tangible economic assets. Venezuelan oil, in this context, is not just a geopolitical prize but an economic lever.

Lessons for India

For India, the lessons are stark and uncomfortable. When the chips are down, no country — and certainly no multi-

lateral institution — will ride to your rescue. Neither the UN Security Council nor the UN General Assembly has the will or capacity to restrain a determined great power acting in its perceived national interest. The only credible insurance policy is self-strengthening.

India must, therefore, invest far more seriously in its own security and economic resilience. Defence spending of 4-5% of the GDP should not be seen as extravagant, but as prudent insurance in an increasingly anarchic world. Military capability must be matched by economic strength, technological self-reliance, and political unity on matters of national security.

In truth, Venezuela should have seen this coming. In September 2025, the US launched Operation Southern Spear, targeting drug boats allegedly linked to Venezuela. Eleven people were killed in the initial strike, followed by a series of maritime attacks between September and December that reportedly resulted in over a hundred deaths. These were not isolated incidents, but signals that escalation was underway. Today it is Venezuela. Tomorrow, it could be Iran or Cuba. China has already made clear that it considers its moves on Taiwan inevitable. Russia showed the world its hand in Crimea in 2014 and again in Ukraine.

To summarise, what is playing out before our eyes is not the much-vaunted "rules-based international order," but something far older and cruder: the rule of the jungle. Might, not moralising, determines outcomes.

For India, the imperative is clear. We must remain politically united on national security, focus relentlessly on strengthening our armed forces and economy, and abandon any comforting illusions about the world works. In the emerging global order, survival — and influence — will belong to those who are prepared.

(The author is a retired Army officer)

Letters to the Editor

Editor

Huge blot

It refers to "Contaminated water killed 10". It is a huge blot on India's cleanest city that 10 people died, and hundreds fell ill due to contaminated tap water. It is tragic that corporates and IMC are blaming each other now. Authorities must ban the use of tap water in affected areas and supply only tested, safe drinking water. An immediate technical inspection of drinking and sewage pipelines is essential to find out leakages. Continuous chlorination, regular lab testing and phased replacement of old pipelines are critical to fix the issue. All those who are guilty should be punished for playing with the lives of people.

BAL GOVIND, Noida

Rail accidents

This refers to the fire accident in the Tatanagar-Ernakulam express train in Andhra Pradesh, where 2 coaches were fully gutted by fire. One passenger died, and others had a miraculous escape. It's disturbing to see the visuals of the fire accident. It's yet another case of a train mishap. Before that, another rail accident occurred in Bihar, where a cement-laden goods train derailed. We are seeing more rail accidents, but no concrete measures have been taken by the Railways to prevent such incidents. The safety of commuters is paramount. The Railways must ensure passengers' safety as a priority.

S SANKARANARAYANAN, Chennai

Fulfil promises

Thanks to Harish Rao, BRS deputy floor leader, for raising the issue pertaining to pensionary dues payable to retirees. Harish Rao has rightly said that the incumbent government is acting only when it is pushed. Another DA instalment was promised in December 2025, but no orders have been issued in this regard so far. Hopefully, the government would focus their attention on the long standing demands of employees and pensioners and fulfil the promises made to the people of Telangana.

DINANATH SHENOLIKAR, Hyderabad

Write to us at letters@telanganatoday.com

Limitless energy

The renewed buzz around fusion energy reflects a broader global search for credible, long-term solutions to climate change and energy security. High-profile investments and corporate tie-ups, such as TAE Technologies' recent merger, have reinforced the narrative that fusion may be moving from laboratory science toward commercial reality. Fusion's appeal is undeniable: it promises virtually limitless, carbon-free energy without the safety and waste concerns associated with fission. Yet history urges caution. For decades, fusion has been framed as the energy source of the future, and a sober assessment shows that the distance between experimental success and reliable grid-scale power remains substantial. At the heart of the challenge lies the physics of creating and sustaining a fusion plasma. In theory, heating hydrogen to extreme temperatures allows atomic nuclei to merge and release enormous energy. In reality, a power-producing reactor would need to generate 20 to 60 times more energy than it consumes to maintain this plasma—an amplification no existing system has achieved. Magnetic confinement approaches, including tokamaks such as ITER and alternative designs pursued by private firms, have made incremental progress but not yet crossed the break-even threshold. China's rapid advances in this domain highlight the strategic dimensions of fusion research.

AMARJEET KUMAR, Hazaribagh

India in the hotspot

BBC

Why an Indian school named after a UK city suburb

The hopeful, smiling faces in this school photo mean so much to Bhasker Solanki. They are the culmination of a story that began when an earthquake destroyed hundreds of villages 25 years ago. Solanki's response to that disaster created opportunities for a generation of children, and a bond with his old school in the UK.

The Washington Post

Transport Canada warns Air India on drinking rules

An Air India pilot was arrested at Vancouver International Airport last week as he was preparing for a flight, with Canada's transportation agency warning the airline that it faced loss of its flight authorizations if it did not comply with rules about alcohol consumption.

The Straits Times

India unveils Buddha gems after century abroad

Sacred ancient gems linked to Buddha were unveiled on Jan 3 in India for the first time since their colonial-era removal. The Piprahwa gems, a collection of more than 300 precious stones and ornaments believed to have been buried with relics of a stupa in northern India, were displayed at an exhibition in New Delhi.

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DINANATH SHENOLIKAR, Hyderabad

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

— Ramnath Goenka

POWER TRUMPS PRINCIPLE IN U.S. VENEZUELA ACTION, RATTLES GLOBAL ORDER

THE US military strike on Venezuela and the capture of President Nicolás Maduro have sent shockwaves worldwide, reigniting doubts about the credibility of the so-called rules-based international order. In this instance, power, not any principle, appears to be the decisive factor. Regardless of Maduro's governance failures, the US operation clearly violates Article 2(4) of the UN Charter, which forbids the use of force against another state's sovereignty. In legal terms, it is an act of aggression.

There was no authorisation from the UN Security Council, and the claim of self-defence is unconvincing. No evidence has been presented to suggest that Venezuela posed an imminent threat to the US. Characterising Maduro as the head of a "narco-terrorist" network, which is central to Washington's narrative, does not in itself establish a lawful basis for the use of force or justify a regime-change operation under international law.

Unsurprisingly, the operation is being read through the prism of America's long and uneasy history of intervention in Latin America. The most immediate parallel is Panama in 1989, when US forces captured President Manuel Noriega, also indicted on drug-trafficking charges, and oversaw the installation of a new government. That precedent hangs heavily over Venezuela, reinforcing perceptions that this was less an exceptional response than a familiar assertion of power. Donald Trump's own words strengthened that impression. Speaking about Maduro's capture and suggesting that the US would "run" Venezuela during a transition, Trump framed the episode not as a limited security operation but as a decisive act of control.

Washington has sought to justify its actions by portraying Venezuela as a cartel state posing a direct threat to US security. This narrative exaggerates the danger and stretches the concept of self-defence. Looming over Trump's arguments are Venezuela's oil reserves, the world's largest, a factor that continues to fuel scepticism about Washington's true motives.

Many Venezuelans may not mourn the removal of a leader who presided over economic collapse and political repression. But the manner of his removal cannot be condoned. Toppling a foreign government by force sits uneasily with Trump's earlier promise to end regime-change interventions after the costly failures of Iraq and Afghanistan. If the US now asserts the right to seize leaders and govern other nations at will, the international order it once upheld is not merely under strain. It is being deliberately dismantled.

ANTONY RAJU VERDICT: TOO LITTLE, TOO LATE

FORMER Kerala minister Antony Raju, a member of the ruling LDF, now stands disqualified as a legislator and faces the prospect of being banned from contesting elections for years. This follows his conviction for tampering with evidence in a 35-year-old narcotics case in which he was on the legal team defending the accused. He was sentenced to three years in jail, which means he is disqualified as an MLA under Section 8(3) of the Representation of the People Act. This is a moral blow that the CPI(M)-led LDF, reeling under the impact of the shocking setback in the recent local body elections, will have to contend with as it prepares for the assembly elections due in a couple of months.

The case dates back to 1990 when an Australian citizen, Andrew Salvatore Cervelli, was arrested for smuggling a narcotic substance hidden in his underwear. The piece of clothing, naturally, became material evidence. After being convicted, Cervelli approached the Kerala High Court, which in 1991 acquitted him after finding that the underwear produced as evidence was too small to fit him. A probe revealed that the clothing had been cut and re-stitched to make it smaller. It was also revealed that Raju, a lawyer for the accused, had taken the underwear from the court's custody with the connivance of a court clerk and returned it. Subsequently, Raju and the clerk were booked and charged.

The case, while underlining the deterioration of ethical standards and principles in political life, also exposes abuse of the judicial process. The verdict has come 31 long years after the evidence tampering case was registered and 19 years after the charges were filed. During the time he was dodging justice, Raju became a legislator twice and also served as a minister, handling the important transport portfolio in the second Pinarayi Vijayan government, before being replaced mid-term as part of an internal alliance deal. Raju's conviction establishes the disturbing fact that a man caught smuggling contraband has escaped punishment because some people were able to efficiently meddle with evidence on his behalf. The long arm of the law has caught up with Raju at last, but the long delay diminishes both the scale and scope of his punishment. The case emphasises the need for urgent intervention to fix the cracks in the criminal justice system.

QUICK TAKE

CUDDLES AND CLOUT

THE new year opens on a panda note, reminding the world how Beijing wields soft power. France will receive a pair of the furballs in 2027 on a decade-long loan sealed during Emmanuel Macron's China visit. Japan, meanwhile, prepares to bid farewell to twins Xiao Xiao and Lei Lei, their return hastened amid tensions sparked by Sanae Takaiwa's Taiwan remarks. Japan's loss looks like France's gain. Pandas have long lubricated China's ties; from Chiang Kai-shek's 1941 gift to America and Mao's Cold War offerings to post-1972 normalisation with Japan. Chinese panda loans are costly and strategic, often shadowing trade and ties. Pandas, after all, sit on both sides of Chinese diplomacy—soft-power ambassadors one day, soft casualties the next.

CYCLONE Ditwah has brought Sri Lanka's disaster preparedness under serious scrutiny and resulted in blistering attacks on the administration for a weak disaster response, including delayed warnings and relief distribution. More than two decades after the 2004 tsunami, there still are serious gaps to be addressed.

The scale of the disaster was unprecedented and unpredictable. However, there were resources to issue early warnings in local languages and evacuate people early to minimise the impact. But even till date there are people claiming to have not received any relief.

Since its creation in 2005, the country's Disaster Management Centre (DMC) has evolved and currently possesses a robust multi-hazard National Early Warning System for Sri Lanka. The DMC is the primary agency responsible for coordinated response and the National Disaster Relief Services Centre for the actual distribution of relief goods. In 2023, the DMC made an important policy shift by adopting the National Disaster Management Plan 2023-30, moving away from a response-based approach towards a proactive and integrated risk management strategy.

This year dawned with the appointment of a 25-member presidential task force (PTF) for rebuilding Sri Lanka, mandated to undertake strategic decisions, resolve cross-ministerial issues, and guide major funding and reconstruction choices in key rebuilding activities. The tasks include establishing digital data systems and decision support mechanisms, and improving communication and stakeholder engagement. The PTF, which has an enormous responsibility, should learn from the unforgettable post-tsunami lessons as well as current realities.

There was the 2005 Post-Tsunami Operational Management Structure—a temporary mechanism established to coordinate relief distribution and reconstruction efforts in the coastal areas of north and east Sri Lanka.

In March 2005, a concept note developed by LIRNEasia, a Colombo-based research institute, famously called for designing an all-hazard public warning system in the tsunami's aftermath. It stated: "Prompt action to create an effective national early warning system is the best memorial we can build to the 40,000 valuable lives that were swept away for the lack of a few minutes of warning and a little awareness," and added, "Public warning is a system, not a technology."

Much water had flowed since then. But

The 2004 tsunami forced Sri Lanka to set up disaster preparedness mechanisms. But Cyclone Ditwah exposed that much more needs to be done, especially on transparency of aid flows

THE PEOPLE MUST KNOW WHO'S GETTING DISASTER AID & WHY

DILRUJKSHI HANUNNETTI

Award-winning journalist and lawyer; founder and director of the Colombo-based Center for Investigative Reporting



SOURAV ROY

21 years later, Sri Lanka is back to the drawing boards to create systems and processes for post-disaster rebuilding.

When the tsunami struck, Sri Lanka was unprepared. From disaster communications and relief distribution to aid flow management, it called for new policies and mechanisms. This is no longer the case, with a comprehensive disaster management strategy and mechanisms in place.

Fast forward to 2026, the foremost reality is Sri Lanka's shaky economic situation. Following the 2022 economic crisis, the country is under a restructuring programme scripted by the IMF and has no room to navigate. It is in this backdrop that opposition leader Sajith Premadasa has urged the IMF to relax the stringent conditions of the ongoing extended fund facility to enable the government to prioritise urgent relief, recovery and livelihood

restoration. Premadasa also urged the government to withdraw the current budget and present a fresh disaster-focused plan. Meanwhile, plans are afoot to apply for relief from the UN's new loss and damage fund, designed to help climate-vulnerable developing nations deal with severe and unavoidable climate change impacts.

The Global Climate Risk Index has consistently ranked Sri Lanka among the top 10 countries most vulnerable to extreme weather events. In 2021, the Index for Risk Mapping ranked the island 'high' for catastrophe risk. This too is an unavoidable reality.

The World Bank estimated the total damage caused by Cyclone Ditwah at \$4.1 billion—4 percent of Sri Lanka's 2024 national income. All 25 districts were impacted, while the central regions suffered more than 1,200 landslides. The

How is the world ruled and led to war? Diplomats lie to journalists and believe these lies when they see them in print

Karl Kraus

devastation rendered almost 70 percent of the rail network unusable, necessitating an extensive reconstruction.

A comprehensive disaster management mechanism would include transparent tracking of aid flows in conformity with global standards. This is essential to prevent undue influence on humanitarian operations, be they political, economic or military. Integrity of the process is considered as vital as efficiency.

Transparent aid flow management with room for participatory decision making, transparent procurement and community participation are key aspects of recognised disaster management mechanisms. Sri Lanka must strengthen its surge capacity, ensuring it can rapidly expand resources and operations when faced with an emergency.

Disasters open the floodgates to corruption and not just aid, procurement processes should be transparent and accountable too. The International Aid Transparency Initiative is a case in point, which made aid information available to people in a timely, comparable and accessible manner. Sri Lankans still recall a financial and political scandal in 2005 when funds intended for tsunami relief were purportedly diverted to a private bank account to benefit one district. Popularly called 'Helping Hamabandota', former president Mahinda Rajapaksa's home district, it turned into a case study of aid-related corruption.

It is mandatory to avoid any repeats and to retain public trust. A comprehensive and accessible system will be invaluable for Sri Lanka and must be prioritised.

At present, Sri Lanka relies on multiple tools to monitor humanitarian aid. Examples include International Organization for Migration's Displacement Tracking Matrix, Relief Web's interface for tracking population movement, and UN's Financial Tracking Service. They specialise in supply chain management to track physical distribution of goods, while systems like Core Humanitarian Standard focus on needs, resource allocations and transparent delivery, especially post disaster.

Aid flow information must be publicly available not only for transparency, but as a practice that benefits the public. Ensuring transparency, offering real-time information on transactions and their movement—overall commitments, disbursements, target sectors and the criteria for prioritisation are necessary. People look for equitable treatment—not the kind offered via viral videos of victim families ceremonially receiving death certificates.

(Views are personal)
(dilrukshi@cir.lk)

ALI, WHO UNITES THE BELIEVERS

RENUKA NARAYANAN

FAITHLINE

INCE Iran is in the news and since Hazrat Ali's birthday, or Wiladat-e-Maula Ali, fell on January 2 this year in India, I thought it would be interesting to talk about him this week.

Who was Hazrat Ali? Ali ibn Abu Talib was born around 600 CE in Mecca.

Some say he was born inside the Kaaba, the holiest site of Islam, and that he was the only such person in history. He was the cousin and son-in-law of Prophet Muhammad. He is revered as the first Imam by Shia Muslims and as the fourth Rashidun Caliph by Sunni Muslims. Khulafa-e-Rashideen or Rashidun means the 'Rightly Guided Successors' or 'Rightly Guided Caliphs', referring to the first four caliphs who led the Muslim community in Arabia after Prophet Muhammad's death. They were Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman and Ali.

Of the four, only the first, Abu Bakr, died a natural death. The others were assassinated, including Hazrat Ali in 661 CE. As the son of the Prophet's uncle, Abu Talib, he grew up under the Prophet's care after a famine. He later married the Prophet's daughter, Fatima, and became his son-in-law. After her death, he had eight other wives in all and several slave women who bore him children. He was a close follower of the Prophet and renowned as a great warrior in the cause of Islam.

Shia Muslims consider Ali to be the only legitimate immediate successor to the Prophet of Islam, hence their rift with Sunnis. Iran is almost ninety-five percent a Shia country.

Many in India would have heard the song 'Man kunto maula fa-haza Ali un maula'. It is traced back to an incident in a Hadith. The Hadiths were originally oral traditions, later recorded as sayings or actions of the Prophet. They were written around 200 years after his passing. This Hadith goes that after his final pilgrimage in March 632 CE, the Prophet stopped at Ghadir Khumm, an oasis, also referred to as the Pond of Khumm, and gathered a large crowd of Muslims. He then made the declaration, "Man kunto maula fa-haza Ali un maula," meaning 'Whoever accepts me as a master, Ali is his master too.' The word 'maula' or 'maulaw' is Arabic and is used with masculine names. It means 'master' or 'guardian'.

These words took on another dimension in India in the 13th century. They were woven into a famous qawwali, a form of Sufi devotional music, by the Delhi poet, Amir Khusro. He was a fol-

lower of the Sufi saint Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya and is often credited as the 'father of qawwali'. He introduced a fusion of Persian, Arabic, Turkish, and Indian musical traditions known as Khusrawi mausiqi, or Khusro-made music. Khusro's song is considered the first ever qawwali, and it's classified as a mangat, a song sung chiefly in praise of Hazrat Ali and other Islamic holy figures. I have heard the song begin with the widely used phrase for Hazrat Ali, 'Shah-e-Mardan, Sher-e-Yazdan, Qawwat-e-Parvardigar', meaning 'King of the brave, the lion of God, the strength of the Creator'. This song is sung in both Shia and Sunni gatherings.



What started as a rift of succession between the Sunni and Shia sects of Islam got woven into a melodious tradition of devotional music in India through Sufi syncretism. Thirteenth-century poet Amir Khusro's qawwali in Hazrat Ali's honour today gets hummed in gatherings of both sects

Was Amir Khusro Sunni or Shia? We know he was born in 1253 in Patiyali, Kasganj district in modern-day Uttar Pradesh, in what was then the Delhi Sultanate, as the son of Amir Saifud-Din Mahmud, a man of Turkic extraction, and Bibi Daulat Naz, a converted Indian lady. Amir Khusro's father was reportedly a Sunni. Khusro's mursid, or guru, Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya, was also a Sunni Sufi saint of the Chisti order. He

followed mainstream Sunni Islam while practising the mystical Sufi tradition.

I once heard two 20th-century stalwarts of Hindustani music, both Sunni, spontaneously break into this song. They were Ustad Bismillah Khan, the shehnai vidwan, and dhrupad maestro Ustad Fahimuddin Dagar, of the famous Dagar lineage of musicians.

I mentioned that Hazrat Ali was known as a great fighter. His sword, Zulfiqar, is legendary. It had a split blade, and West Asian weapons are apparently commonly inscribed with a quote invoking Zulfiqar. Zulfiqar was frequently depicted on Ottoman flags, especially those used by the Janissaries, the elite soldiers. A ceremonial version is on display at the Topkapi Palace in Istanbul.

An interesting story I heard concerns Zulfiqar and the Mughal princess Zebunissa. She was Aurangzeb's eldest child, who wrote poetry under the pen-name 'Makhfi', meaning 'the concealed one'. Though she was his favourite child for years, she fell calamitously from her father's good graces. She was imprisoned for twenty years in grim Salimgarh Fort next to the Red Fort for supposedly helping at the Topkapi Palace in Istanbul.

But this story was before that. Zebunissa was allowed to interact with foreign poets from behind a curtain. An Iranian, Nasir Ali, perhaps emboldened by the fact that Zebunissa's mother was also Iranian, spoke more familiarly than was acceptable to a Mughal princess. In a cold voice, Zebunissa said in Persian, "Nasir Ali, ba naam e Ali deeda-e-panah. Varna ba Zulfiqar-e-Ali sarbareeda mat." Meaning, "Nasir Ali by the name of Ali (in your name), you're seeing a paragon. Or else, your head would have been taken off by Zulfiqar, the sword of Ali." As royal rebuffs go, you can feel the freeze even after three centuries.

I would like to conclude with a saying attributed to Hazrat Ali. It goes, "When you are destitute, trade with Allah through charity". This could apply to anyone, don't you think, as a way of being? To 'trade' with God by giving?

(Views are personal)
(shebabaa09@gmail.com)

MAIL BAG

WRITE TO: letters@newindianexpress.com

Quiet reform

Ref: *Celebrating a sage for the ages* (Jan 4). The author's tribute deftly rescues Sree Narayana Guru from regional reverence into national relevance. By foregrounding his ethical clarity over ritual and unity over identity, the piece reminds us that social reform is not an event but a practice. In an India noisy with difference, the quiet radicalism feels urgently contemporary. **K Chidanand Kumar, Bengaluru**

Family time

Ref: *Time for resolution on rest* (Jan 4). Rest is one of the most essential needs of the human body; it keeps the mind fresh and enjoyable. Work pressure should not prevent us from taking time away, and well-spent time with family must be valued. **Adnan V K, Kozhikode**

Venezuela's sovereignty

Ref: *US snatches Maduro* (Jan 4). The incident poses a serious question: what if Russia and China did the same to the Ukrainian and Thai presidents? Even if Maduro is convicted of drug cartelisation charges, countries must respect others' sovereignty and freedom. **Muhammed Ajmal, Kozhikode**

Colonial echoes

True sovereignty cannot be gifted by a foreign military; it must be reclaimed by the people. While Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro's leadership was fraught, a foreign power "running" a sovereign nation evokes dark historical echoes of colonialism. US President Donald Trump's focus on oil infrastructure suggests that economic extraction, rather than democratic restoration, is the move's primary motive. **Vijaykumar H K, Raichur**

Cricket scapegoat

Ref: *KKR drop Bangladesh player* (Jan 4). One would wholly agree with Shashi Tharoor that cricket should not be made to "bear the burden for attacks on minorities". A cricketer should not be made the scapegoat. Steps like this will only widen the ill-timed differences between India and Bangladesh. **N Rama Rao, email**

Aravalli's future

Ref: *Aravallis, a new turn in ecology battle* (Jan 4). It's alarming how aggressively real-estate interests push to erase ecological safeguards, aided by officials who prioritise profit over truth. By distorting facts, they try to drown out the voices defending our last remaining natural barriers. **Komala Brunschwig, email**

Indore water contamination tragedy exposes urban decay

The mishap in Indore's Bhagirathpura, which killed 11 persons and made 1,400 residents sick, was not a black swan event, something that nobody could have foreseen. There were complaints and warnings about contaminated drinking water; a report by the Comptroller and Auditor General of India (CAG) even flagged the problem. However, due to the magnitude of systemic apathy, no warnings were heeded, and few complaints were attended to.

Leakage complaints were not new; sometimes it took six months to attend to them. Evidently, the chalta-hai attitude is the defining feature of the local administration. And this is in the Madhya Pradesh city that is officially described as the cleanest in

India. It raises questions about the metrics used to assess cleanliness. Or is it that the so-called cleanliness is just the veneer, hiding the rot that afflicts our urban habitats?

The rot was also systemic, manifesting in the callous manner in which the urgent matter of drinking water was addressed. In July 2022, a tender was issued to replace and lay pipeline work in Bhagirathpura, but no concrete action was taken. A new file was prepared in November 2024, but again, the work didn't start for a very long time. And when did it finally start? Well, when the reports of fatalities began pouring in, it resulted in public outcry and media glare.

When questions were being raised about administrative inepti-

tude, the ruling party in Madhya Pradesh responded with deplorable obtuseness. Senior state Minister and Bharatiya Janata Party leader Kailash Vijayvargiya used objectionable language to parry tough questions by reporters; he called their queries "useless."

But the state government had to accept the "evidence of contamination due to leakage"; typically, it has ordered inquiries and suspensions. Sadly, the people of India are familiar with the fate of inquiries, which was usually intended to divert attention from gross incompetence and not to penalize the guilty.

It has been reported that the contamination was because of a breach in the main drinking water line near a public toilet beside the Bhagirath-

pura police outpost. One need not be a scientist to predict the possibility of the mixing of sewage with drinking water in such a situation, but few, certainly no official, was bothered about that possibility. It may be stressed here that the CAG had cited the absence of leak-detection mechanisms and inadequate metering and monitoring.

The CAG had reportedly cited independent testing where 10 of 54 samples were found with turbidity and faecal coliform, implying almost 9 lakh residents (3.62 lakh in Bhopal, 5.33 lakh in Indore) were getting contaminated water. There were, as per the Public Health Department, 5.45 lakh water-borne disease cases.

In short, the contaminated wa-

ter tragedy was waiting to happen. It exposes a troubling disconnect between symbolic governance and substantive outcomes. Awards for cleanliness, grand urban branding exercises, and public relations triumphs cannot veil rickety urban infrastructure; safe drinking water is part of that. It is also a most basic responsibility of the state.

Preventing such disasters in the future will require more than inquiries and suspensions. It will demand sustained investment in infrastructure, robust monitoring mechanisms, respect for audit findings, and a governing ethos that treats citizens' lives as more important than bureaucratic processes. Until that shift occurs, Bhagirathpura will remain a warning.



LETTERS

Blatant misuse of authority

The viral video from Ghaziabad, allegedly showing a police officer using a mobile-like device to verify citizens' nationality, raises serious concern about the misuse of authority. There is no technology in the world that can determine a person's citizenship through a machine. Such actions create fear, especially among the poor and vulnerable, and undermine public trust in institutions. The police's duty is to protect citizens, not intimidate them with imaginary tools. This incident highlights a dangerous trend of spreading fear and suspicion, particularly targeting marginalised communities. The government must conduct a transparent inquiry, take strict action against those responsible, and reassure citizens that their rights will be protected.

Q.A. Qasmi, J jogeshwari, Mumbai

US takeover of Venezuela sets dangerous precedent

The capture of Venezuela's Nicolas Maduro and his wife Cilia Flores by the US special forces with or without 'inside help', was a naked violation of international law, the UN charter, the Nuremberg Principles and all legal frameworks. At the time of the capture, Maduro was a sitting President of a sovereign country. One is not quite sure if the extraordinary military operation in Caracas qualifies Trump for the Nobel Prize for Peace!

What was on display in Venezuela was a demonstration of 'Dorothy Doctrine' modelled after 'Monroe Doctrine' and a part of a larger plan to reestablish American dominance in the Western Hemisphere. Behind the naked military aggression was the principle that 'might is right' when exercised by an imperial power. A dangerous precedent was globally set that a powerful country can use force against a less powerful or weak and vulnerable country on some pretext or other without consequence despite the profession of a rule-based global order.

The ostensible reason for the US action was drug trafficking. But the real reason was Venezuela's large oil and mineral reserves. Trump's claim of right over Venezuela's oil and his grin at the prospect of 'fixing oil infrastructure' and making a lot of money were dead giveaways.

Invoking a so-called "divine right", Donald Trump claimed the US would "run" Venezuela during a transition. But Venezuela's problems must be resolved by its own people. A US-installed puppet regime would lack legitimacy and could worsen instability and trigger a humanitarian crisis.

G. David Milton, Maruthancode (TN)

The USA is violating all international norms as if the world is its fiefdom. In case it is affected due to a certain activity of the long serving Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro, it should raise the issue in UNO instead of taking unilateral actions. Every one knows that the USA has its eyes on the vast oil reserves of Venezuela and the drug trafficking allegation against Maduro is only a ruse. That Maduro refuses to toe the US line rather vehemently, is well known and that is why Trump wants a regime change in Venezuela so that a puppet government could be installed there. And that would entail USA to reap the benefit of dollar exchange value through oil exports from Venezuela. USA has no business to attack a sovereign country just like that. If USA thinks it is the Super Power right now, it will vanish the moment the Dollar crashes at international level. The white elephant, that is UNO, instead of being a mute spectator to the going on, should take cognisance of the US' aggression and oversee the follow up action, instead of leaving further proceedings to the aggressor, as claimed by Trump.

Govardhana Myneedu, Vijayawada

TTD's e-token system baffling

The TTD experiment of e-token system has baffled all because those who have designed the system have little practical knowledge of the functioning of traditional existing system. During my visits in the past, I have noticed lot of variance between each of my experience each time. There is a need for brain storming session with the staff who are involved presently in the queue and Darshan management on day to day basis. Their experience coupled with the administrative skills of higher echelon of TTD should identify the basic requirements of Darshan seeking pilgrim. Such step by step understanding of the existing procedures helps us to evolve a new system which would be safe and fast at the same time. Involving technological experts at that stage helps us to design an effective and efficient procedure for Pilgrim Darshan Procedure. Trial and error system for certain period of time is essential to achieve better system in due course of time. Thus, selection of devoted staff requires thorough overhaul for achieving long lasting results at this famous pilgrim centre aided by modern technological tools.

M.V.Nagavender Rao, Anandnagar, Hyderabad

thehansreader@gmail.com



BENGALURU ONLINE

20 arrested in Ballari group clash

BALLARI: The violent clash that erupted in Ballari on January 1 over the installation of banners, involving supporters of Bharath Reddy and mining baron G. Jarnardhana Reddy, has taken a serious turn with major developments in the investigation. The incident, which claimed the life of Congress worker Rajashekhar, has triggered sharp political exchanges between the Congress and the BJP, while police action has intensified.

According to police sources, a total of 20 accused have been arrested so far in connection with the violence. Among them are 10 Congress workers and 10 BJP workers, indicating that the clash involved activists from both sides. The arrests were made by the Brucepet police following a detailed probe into the sequence of events that unfolded during the confrontation. The arrested BJP workers have been identified as B. Ravi, Ravibabu, Pothappa, Bajappa, G. Srinivasa, Shadashari, Rangaswamy, Guruprasad, P. Srinivasa Reddy, Lakshana and Thimmappa.

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

WILL MOVIE THEATERS DISAPPEAR?!

RAVULAPATI
SEETARAMARAO

When I was a child, people would come trekking from villages to towns in long lines to watch films like "Lavakusha" — afterward they would feel their lives had been blessed. Even now, those who have experienced those days recall those stories like legends.

For the common person back then, a simple unreserved ground ticket was enough to see a movie. Today, people watch in multiplexes by procuring tickets in-blank, and they spend far more — buying expensive popcorn and snacks there, and paying many times over what they would have paid at home. Movies of that era mixed the nine emotions with small, easily understood moral messages that the public could put into practice. Producers did make films to earn money, but they weren't driven by a blind

desire to extract every last rupee the way some are today — the producers, directors and actors then didn't behave solely for profit. Along with entertainment, those films imparted lasting memories and taught audiences how to tell right from wrong. Family dramas, the heroic adventures of folk leaders, villains who showed cruelty only to meet their just end at the hands of the hero, mythological tales — these films were made in a way that people would keep calendars featuring actors who acted as Krishna and Rama on their household altars.

Even if one or two "class" films are made with the producers' ambitions, they often rely on government help and awards to break even or take a small loss! There's no need to spell out today's film-making practices, audience quirks, the needless fuss fans create, the rowdy incidents or the law-and-order problems. Even



for a celebrated film, when a viewer struggles to sit through a two-and-a-half-hour movie, it's inevitable to ask whether films are gradually becoming distant from the average person — and who is responsible for this situation? Ordinary single-screen theaters are dying with the arrival of multiplexes. In some towns the cinema halls have been turned into function halls. Watching films at home on an OTT service feels just like TV. Who will bring those viewers back into cinema halls to watch films again? Filmmakers and studio heads in our country are content simply by look-

ing at box-office numbers. In their obsession with making pan-India blockbusters, they've abandoned the idea that ordinary films can still be made entertainingly. Actors and directors can become billionaires after one or two hits, can't they? In the delusion that films are just a source of money, they have long forgotten the average viewer.

Our cinema has reached a point where we must protect it, just like we protect our language! A film meant for entertainment should not leave audiences financially ruined. For producers, directors and actors to change In-

dian cinema into something like unreachable grapes is a petty betrayal! Those who rob ordinary people—who spend their leisure and hard-earned money by the basketful—of their only available source of amusement, no matter how celebrated or praised as artistic geniuses, are worthy of condemnation and must face strong censure. Even in Western countries, books fell out of favour for a time and were neglected under the shadow of television. But now they are once again regaining the popularity, readers and knowledge they had lost.

Netflix-Warner's deal is shaking Hollywood to the core, even raising questions about the future of films. People are now debating whether the Hollywood system that used to craft real, substantive movies is coming apart. Once this deal goes through, the kind of films audiences want could disappear into

the sands of time. Independently-minded, artistically-driven films will struggle to stay afloat. Average moviegoers are already noticing and feeling disappointed by the changing situation. Companies like Paramount are strongly opposing the deal. Will theaters — once the go-to place for movie fans — become unavailable? Even U.S. President Donald Trump has warned that this deal could be dangerous for movie audiences. Courts and experts are looking at legal options and considering how to resolve the issue amicably and acceptably. Here too, it's only natural that intellectuals, social activists and policymakers — concerned about the interests of filmgoers — are coming together in hopes of keeping cinema accessible to the public.

(The writer is a retired IPS officer, who has served as an Additional DGP of Andhra Pradesh)



DECCAN Chronicle

5 JANUARY 2026

Trump's US back in role of a global policeman

Casting to the winds the rules-based international order, blatantly breaching a nation's sovereignty and running a covert operation in Venezuela to capture its leader and haul him as a captive to New York, US President Donald Trump has not just resumed his country's old role as global policeman. He has dared the world to question the United States as he displays his total contempt for conventions even as he trumpets that he did so to "surround ourselves with good neighbours".

Having offered no logical reason for his actions in Venezuela, including killing around 40 people and kidnapping Nicolas Maduro and his wife Cilia Flores, except to say unconvincingly that the Venezuelan with a dubious record of having snatched the last presidential polls was a cartel leader who had flooded the US with drugs, Trump spoke of Cuba and Colombia in the same chilling tone of a President who had tasted the spoils of predatory action across territory without any resistance.

The irony is there for all to note as Trump was the one who had declared that, far from starting a war, he was going to stop wars. Of course, that did not stop him from peppering Iran's nuclear processing facilities with bunker-busting cluster bombs nor from blockading petroleum ships around the Caribbean and strafing boats if they were suspected of running recreational drugs into the US.

Given the US's record in history of having destabilised Latin American countries like Guatemala, Nicaragua, Cuba and Chile, it should surprise no one if Trump pushes his armada already stationed in the Caribbean to mock the international order more as he has done in Caracas.

With Trump conceding that he would be running Venezuela for a while though an acting President has been sworn in, Venezuelan vast oil resources — it pumps out about one million barrels a day or one per cent of global production — will be open for exploitation by American companies.

The world's voices opposing Trump's actions have been sheepishly weak except China and Russia which have spoken up about the need to respect boundaries while most others have merely mouthed the pedantic line about addressing issues through dialogue and ensuring peace and stability in the region.

With wars still being fought in Ukraine and the Sudan and peace just about prevailing in Gaza in what the Indian Prime Minister has described as "not the era of war", there is a danger of Trump's Venezuela "trip" sending out quite the wrong signal. For instance, China, which may like to take over Taiwan one day, may feel emboldened to do it soon. And who can oppose it if other superpowers see no need to respect international law and convention?

With what face would this multipolar world, in which Trump acts as if he is the sole arbiter of global affairs and preeminent seeker of peace wherever he wishes it should prevail, have the moral right to question the extraterritorial ambitions of any other country like Russia? Trump has simply demonstrated that military might comes with a licence to conquer, much as Vladimir Putin did before him.

In searching for a rationale for such action, a dip into the new National Security Strategy might be revealing as the US stresses on its right to dominate Latin America and "enforce the Monroe Doctrine to restore American pre-eminence in the Western Hemisphere". Drugs like fentanyl are a huge problem for Americans. But is that reason enough for a President to bypass Congress that alone has the power to approve an act of war?

How Indore slipped up

The Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) of India is not exactly the agency to monitor health threats and the quality of drinking water supplied to the people but reports of a CAG reference years ago about the possibility of an outbreak of water-borne diseases in Indore and Bhopal in Madhya Pradesh have come as a chilling reminder in the backdrop of the deaths of 10 people after consuming contaminated water in Indore last week. That it happened in a city that has been adjudged the cleanest in India in consecutive years must be taken as a lesson by the authorities in all the towns and cities of the country.

The CAG report of 2019 had noted finding of harmful bacteria in water samples collected in Indore and Bhopal and pointed to "lack of monitoring of filter plants at operational level as well as distribution level". The report also noted that the authorities concerned had assured the CAG that they will take remedial action.

The Madhya Pradesh government has admitted to the possibility of leakage of sewage from a police outpost established in the area into the pipeline. An official report said a toilet was built in the police outpost sans septic tank, resulting in sewage gathering at a nearby ditch, under which the pipeline to supply drinking water to the city from Narmada ran.

The civic authority in Indore had been implementing several visionary projects in areas such as waste management and sanitation for years. It involved the people in the process...

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Pradeep S. Mehta

Flight cancellations, capacity shortages and abnormally high surge in airfares have once again brought India's aviation sector under scrutiny, with IndiGo at the centre of the debate. Having scrapped nearly a quarter of its 17,000-plus domestic flights in the first week of December, the situation has triggered renewed calls for competition law action against IndiGo. However, framing this episode as a competition law issue is conceptually flawed. What transpired was not an abuse of dominance under the Competition Act 2002, but a failure of regulatory compliance and, more fundamentally, a breakdown in competition policy implementation. Treating every market disruption as an antitrust problem risks diluting competition law and obscuring deeper institutional shortcomings.

The immediate trigger was IndiGo's non-compliance with the DGCA's revised Flight Duty Time Limitation (FDTL) norms, introduced nearly two years ago to align Indian aviation safety standards with global benchmarks and address persistent pilot fatigue. These rules, which increased weekly rest from 36 to 48 hours and reduced permissible night landings from six to two, were backed by a phased implementation timeline with clear deadlines in June and November. While some carriers, including Air India, indicated compliance, IndiGo admitted it could not fully implement the norms reflecting its ability, by virtue of scale and market position, to

operate relatively independently of competitors. IndiGo apparently had a shortage of pilots and was therefore making the existing pilots work overtime.

The more serious question, however, is how the regulator allowed this situation to escalate. The transition was foreseeable, yet enforcement remained weak until disruptions became alarming. This concern was echoed by the Delhi high court, where a bench comprising Justices Devendra Kumar Upadhyaya and Tushar Rao Gedela questioned the regulator's role, noting that the authorities appeared to let the situation precipitate. Beyond operational chaos, such regulatory lapses impose real economic costs disrupting travel, business activity and consumer confidence.

Much public outrage focused on "opportunistic" or "surge" pricing. Yet, such pricing is not inherently anti-competitive. Competition law does not prohibit firms from responding to demand-supply imbalances by adjusting prices, even sharply. Opportunistic pricing becomes problematic only when it is enabled or sustained by exclusionary conduct or market foreclosure. In this case, the price hike was a market response to a regulatory-induced supply disruption. Treating surge pricing, by itself, as evidence of abuse would stretch the scope of Section 4 of the Competition Act.

Indeed, Section 4 targets conduct that is exploitative or exclusionary such as denial of market access, imposition

of unfair conditions, or price manipulation decoupled from market fundamentals. IndiGo's conduct does not fall within this framework. There is no evidence that it used its dominance to foreclose competitors or to impose unfair pricing unrelated to supply constraints.

Equally important is the labour dimension of the crisis. One argument advanced is that IndiGo could have hired foreign pilots to cope with the shortage of pilots, like the now-defunct Jet Airways and Kingfisher. The Indian labour market has structural rigidities. Pilots in India typically operate under notice periods ranging from six to twelve months, an unusually long duration that significantly hampers workforce mobility and timely capacity adjustments. Such restrictions are not conducive to a competitive environment and merit reassessment. However, these are labour and sectoral policy issues, not competition law violations, though there is currently some talk globally on labour conditions and competition law. Currently, the responsibility for addressing such constraints lies primarily with DGCA.

That said, the episode raises serious competition policy concerns. Competition policy operates at a broader level, focusing on how regulatory design, enforcement consistency and institutional coordination affect competitive outcomes. Here, the failure lies in delayed enforcement and regulatory retreat. The FDTL norms were foreseeable and announced well in advance.

IndiGo's claim that the disruption was "unforeseeable" is difficult to accept.

Instead, as the disruptions worsened, IndiGo was granted a one-time exemption, which was then followed by a broader postponement of the norms until February 2026. Rolling back safety-focused regulations in response to market instability weakens regulatory credibility and creates clear moral hazard, especially in an industry where fatigue can have serious, even fatal consequences. It also sends a troubling signal that size can soften accountability, a message that ultimately harms both competition and safety.

This is where competition policy, rather than competition law, must intervene. Competition policy works upstream: it shapes the structure of the market, not punishing firms after the effect. If a single airline's compliance failure can disrupt the entire sector, it points to deeper policy weaknesses: high entry and expansion barriers, rigid labour rules and limited avenues for new or smaller players to scale up quickly. By easing regulatory and technical barriers, encouraging broader participation and making the market less dependent on a few large incumbents, competition policy can improve resilience without diluting safety standards.

Pradeep S. Mehta is the secretary-general of CUTS International, a leading public policy research group



Venezuela and the return of strategic enforcement

Syed Ata Hasnain

Venezuela is not a core concern for much of the international strategic community, nor does it naturally command attention among most readers in India. It is distant, both geographically and psychologically. Yet distance has rarely insulated regions from the logic of great-power politics. History shows that superpowers, both current or former, are acutely sensitive to alien ideologies taking root in their immediate neighbourhood — particularly when such regimes resist accommodation and become magnets for activity perceived as hostile to their interests. That logic has shaped Washington's responses across the Western Hemisphere for decades, and it frames the Venezuelan situation.

Neighbourhood sensitivities and strategic memory: Since the late 1990s, Venezuela's political trajectory has increasingly unsettled the United States. Under Hugo Chávez, and later Nicolás Maduro, the country adopted a sharply leftist orientation and an overtly anti-American posture, nationalising foreign-linked assets and projecting ideological resistance to US influence.

Over time, concerns extended beyond ideology. Weakening institutions, growing links to narcotics trafficking, and the erosion of internal controls added a security dimension to an already strained relationship.

More consequentially, Venezuela's leadership sought survival through external alignment. Deepening engagement with Russia, China, Iran and Cuba transformed the country from an isolated adversary into a strategically useful platform for extra-regional powers. This externalisation of regime survival altered the strategic picture and increasingly led Washington to treat Venezuela as part of its broader "rogue state" framework.

Geography sharpened this perception. Venezuela sits uncomfortably close to the US mainland. For American policymakers, instability in the Caribbean basin carries implications for migration, organised crime and illicit arms flows. Beyond these immediate concerns lies a longer-standing sensitivity to the possibility of hostile military or intelligence infrastructure emerging in the near neighbourhood — an anxiety deeply embedded in US strategic culture.

From restraint to strategic enforcement: For many years, the US responded through restraint. Economic sanctions, diplomatic isolation and regional pressure were favoured. This approach rested on the assumption that the internal contradictions within Venezuela — economic mismanagement, institutional decay as well as social fragmentation — would limit its ability to generate sustained strategic consequences.

Recent developments suggest that this calculation has shifted. Differences in approach between successive US administrations reflected varying assessments of how long such restraint could be sustained. What is now emerging resembles a move towards strategic enforcement: selective, calibrated action designed to reassess limits rather than engineer wholesale transformation. Reports point to a high degree of operational sophistication, including intelligence penetration and disruption of command-and-control structures. Leadership continuity indicates disruption rather than collapse, yet the message conveyed is unmistakable. Washington is signalling that deep and hostile external alignments by states in its strategic neighbourhood are no longer acceptable. It remains unclear whether, or to what extent, the US intends to leverage Venezuela's oil wealth to its advantage.

Energy considerations nonetheless form part of this equation, though in a measured way. Venezuela's oil reserves do not offer dominance, but they do offer optionality. Greater predictability in Western

This complicates Washington's moral posture when opposing Russian actions in Ukraine or criticising Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea, and adds further complexity to its position on Taiwan

Hemisphere energy flows would marginally reduce US exposure to disruption elsewhere, particularly in the Persian Gulf. Such flexibility does not determine strategy, but it does shape risk. It lowers the economic threshold at which pressure in other theatres becomes politically manageable.

Rules, precedent and power: The most debated thing about the Venezuela operation will inevitably be the rules-based international order. The concept remains central to Western diplomacy, yet its application has always been uneven. Where core interests of major powers are involved, rules tend to bend. The American actions in Afghanistan, Iraq and sustained pressure on Iran sit uneasily alongside universalist interpretations of international norms. Venezuela now appears to fall within this category of strategic exception.

This complicates Washington's moral posture when opposing Russian actions in Ukraine or criticising Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea, and adds further complexity to its position on Taiwan. Moscow's objections to Nato's influence in its near abroad rest on arguments structurally similar to those advanced by the US in the Western Hemisphere. The comparison doesn't legitimise Russian aggression, but it exposes the conditional nature of rule enforcement. International coexistence is increasingly shaped by power, not by neutral application of rules.

Risks beyond Latin America: The implications of the military action in Venezuela extend beyond the region. For Russia, the episode adds pressure to an already constrained global position, further narrowing the space to use energy and distraction as strategic tools. For China, it reinforces the message that American restraint is situational.

Yet strategic enforcement carries risks. Should Venezuela slide into prolonged instability, resistance or fragmentation authority, the outcome would be counterproductive. Entanglement would drain political capital, stretch resources and constrain US capacity to manage concurrent challenges in the Middle East and the Indo-Pacific. A drawn-out Venezuelan crisis would weaken, not strengthen, American leverage elsewhere.

For this reason, Venezuela represents more than a regional episode. It is a test case. It will indicate whether economic pressure, political engineering and limited force can still reshape outcomes in strategically sensitive states, or whether such efforts now generate diminishing returns. The majority belief in academic circles favours the latter.

India's perspective: For India, Venezuela presents no immediate strategic imperative, but it does offer lessons. Our engagement with Venezuela has historically been pragmatic and energy-focused, devoid of ideological alignment. As Venezuela's crisis deepened and sanctions intensified, Indian involvement declined quietly, without unnecessary noise. India's interests lie in stable energy markets and predictable state behaviour. It remains sceptical of selective enforcement while recognising the realities of power politics. Cautious neutrality, emphasis on humanitarian considerations, and avoidance of bloc entanglement remain the most consistent course.

Venezuela's significance lies less in the immediacy of events than in what they reveal about how power is exercised today. Years of restraint created ambiguity. That ambiguity is now narrowing. Strategic enforcement has returned as a tool of statecraft. Whether this approach restores stability or deepens friction will depend on execution and endurance. Sustained engagement will reshape expectations. The US intervention in Venezuela is a reminder that rules endure only when limits are understood — and when major powers are willing to enforce them fairly.

The writer, a retired lieutenant-general, is a former GOC of the Srinagar-based 15 ("Chinar") Corps

LETTERS

TN EMPLOYEES HAPPY

It is to be appreciated that Chief Minister M.K. Stalin has fulfilled another election promise of his party by implementing the Tamil Nadu Pension Scheme (TAPS) which is broadly in line with the old Pension scheme demanded by the state government employees. By conceding the 20 year-old demand of government employees, Stalin has won the hearts of all state government employees. While the DMK government has implemented various welfare measures for women, students and sportspersons, the recent announcement of a Pongal gift of Rs 3,000 in cash to all the rice card holders along with a bag containing of Rice, sugar, dhoti, saree etc by the TN government has landed the beneficiaries in happiness. The students may be happy to learn that they would be receiving laptops for free from next week, as it would be very useful in their studies.

Tharcius S. Fernando, Chennai

CAPTAINCY RESET

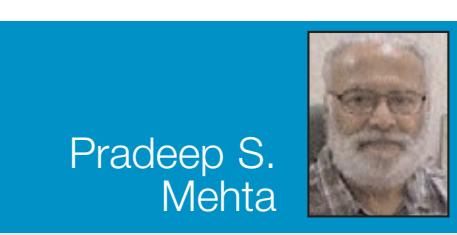
Shubman Gill's return as ODI captain represents stability — but it also hints that the search for India's next long-term leader is still unfinished. Mohammed Siraj's recall reinforces the attack, yet Tilak Varma's exit shows how quickly promising options can slip through the cracks. Naming Shreyas Iyer subject to fitness feels like dejà vu: India still leans on players who are recovering rather than fully ready. Hardik Pandya's non-selection — because he can't yet deliver ten overs — underlines how strategy remains tied to injury clocks more than tactical clarity. Backing Rishabh Pant over Ishan Kishan is brave, but it raises the stakes on his consistency. Overall, this squad is sensible without being imaginative — cautious tinkering when bolder experimentation might have accelerated the 2027 vision.

Gopalaswamy J, Chennai

USA IN VENEZUELA

The capture of Venezuela's Nicolas Maduro and his wife Cilia Flores by the US special forces was a naked violation of international law, the UN charter, the Nuremberg Principles and all legal frameworks. At the time of the capture, Maduro was a sitting President of a sovereign country. One is not quite sure if the extraordinary military operation in Caracas qualifies Trump for the Nobel Prize for Peace.

G. David Milton, Maruthancode



The IndiGo mess and the misplaced narrative over competition law

