



Conditional ease

The CDSCO guidelines should not regress into a 'pay and pass' scheme

The new guidelines to compound minor drug violations that the Central Drugs Standard Control Organization (CDSCO) has released, operationalise a legal change in the works since 2023. Until recently, many instances of relatively minor or technical non-compliance under the Drugs and Cosmetics Act, 1940, invoked criminal prosecution. The new guidance and standard operating procedures are meant to standardise compounding instead, whereby, at the regulator's discretion, firms can settle certain offences by reporting them and applying to pay a fine, instead of litigating. The legal backdrop is the Jan Vishwas (Amendment of Provisions) Act that was framed as an exercise in "decriminalising and rationalising offences... for ease of living and doing business". In the 1940 Act, Jan Vishwas broadened the scope of Section 32B by adding heads into the group of offences that could be compounded; this now includes making a drug to sell or distribute in breach of the 1940 Act but not covered by its Section 27(a-c) and stocking or exhibiting such a non-spurious or non-adulterated drug, among others. If compounding is granted and paid for, the key benefit is "immunity from prosecution" for that case, subject to conditions. This change is for the better if the regulatory apparatus implements it in good faith. For offences based on record keeping and disclosure, compounding prevents needless criminalisation and lets enforcement focus on diver violations.

The main pitfalls are the guidelines regressing into a 'pay and pass' scheme and the CDSCO's transparency. Firms can seek compounding "before or after" prosecution. If, however, the CDSCO does not publish (even redacted) compounding orders and the underlying case details, the public may lose faith in the legal proceedings and in the regulator. Even if repeat offenders cannot avail of the benefit, there needs to be a publicly auditable trail. The guidance's emphasis on discretion and conditions cannot substitute for public reporting that lets independent actors check whether the same firms are repeat offenders. Similarly, the published process does not create room for consumer groups or whistle-blowers to make representations before immunity is granted. Next, the way the errors that can be compounded are written is broad enough in practice to cover a wide range of behaviours, from lapses in paperwork to more substantive compliance failures. If the compounding fines are also set too low, applied inconsistently or used routinely in place of deterrence, compliance will only falter. Perhaps most of all, the CDSCO also needs to link compounding to corrective and preventive actions, follow-up inspections, and, where relevant, public-facing actions such as issuing alerts or directing firms to recall products. Otherwise, there may not be a durable reduction in risk over time.

Shrill reactions

India's cricket is being held hostage to political compulsions

Caught in a crossfire, India's cricketing ties with its subcontinental neighbours are in a free fall. If border tensions with Pakistan and the scourge of terrorism affected sporting links across the Wagah, turbulence within Bangladesh and extreme reactions to it within India, have turned out to be another stumbling block. The hastily lynching of members of the minority Hindu community in Bangladesh drew rightful condemnation across the Indian landscape, and yet the reflexive sporting churn should have been avoided. In a social media age wherein violence and insults tend to get amplified, the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) responded prematurely in forcing Kolkata Knight Riders (KKR) to release its Bangladeshi left-arm seamer Mustafizur Rahman. That the Indian Premier League (IPL) is only commencing on March 26 and much water would have flowed down by then in the Ganges and the Padma, was lost on the officials. The Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) was quick in its rejoinder. A security threat to its squad was propped up as an excuse and a missive was sent to the International Cricket Council (ICC) to relocate Bangladesh's games in the forthcoming ICC T20 World Cup, away from host India. Bangladesh also proposed a ban on the telecast of the IPL in the country.

With the T20 World Cup launching on February 7 in India and Sri Lanka, a last minute scrambling for venues will be difficult. Incidentally, Pakistan's games are slated in Sri Lanka and even its big contest against India will be staged at Colombo on February 15. With Bangladesh set to play four preliminary league games in India, a reallocation will affect hosting logistics. This is a conundrum that could have been avoided had the BCCI waited for the hostile tide to turn. The ties that bind India and Bangladesh, a nation birthed through the assistance of the former in 1971, now stand frayed. Diplomacy is a complex interplay of adjustment and pragmatism. The deposed former Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina sought refuge and was granted one in Delhi, while the Indian government also paid its last respects to her arch-rival and former Prime Minister, Jay Shah, has an unenviable task of maintaining neutrality while dealing with the present crisis. The shrill reactions on either side of the border need to be tempered; sport should not be handcuffed by political compulsions.

GSDP share as criterion for central-State transfers

The central government shares its gross tax revenues with States based on the recommendations of successive Finance Commissions (FCs), which determine both the overall share to States and the formula for devolution. The Centre also transfers resources through grants-in-aid and centrally sponsored schemes (CSS). While the recommendations of 15 FCs have been implemented, those of the 16th FC have yet to be tabled in Parliament.

Central transfers have become a subject of intense debate. Key concerns include the erosion of the fiscal autonomy of States following the implementation of Goods and Services Tax (GST), revenue losses arising from GST rate cuts, the increasing dominance of CSS that constrain State-level spending flexibility, the Centre's growing cesses and surcharges that are not shared with States, and declining devolution shares of high-performing States. Moreover, most FCs have prioritised equity over efficiency, having relied heavily on debatable criteria such as income distance and population, and frequently altered the weights assigned to these variables. Significant regional disparities also persist across States in expenditure needs and fiscal capacity.

Tax collection versus tax contribution
States such as Karnataka, Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu argue that they contribute disproportionately to central tax revenues but receive relatively smaller shares through tax devolution. This claim, however, is often contested on the grounds that direct tax figures reflect the location of collections rather than the



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GSDP share is a meaningful indicator of the accrual of central taxes at the State level

actual place where income is generated. Individuals and companies may pay taxes in locations different from where economic activity occurs.

For example, automobile manufacturers in Tamil Nadu may sell vehicles across India, but their tax payments are recorded in the State where their registered office is located. Similarly, plantation companies in Kerala earn profits nationwide, though taxes are paid in Kerala.

Therefore, jurisdiction based on PAN data fails to accurately capture State-wise contributions to direct taxes. This is due to the presence of multi-State firms, labour migration, temporary or multi-location work arrangements, and the absence of detailed data on inter-State transactions among associated enterprises. Therefore, an indirect and more reliable proxy is needed to estimate the accrual of central taxes at the State level.

GSDP as proxy for State-level tax accrual

Although the Centre levies direct taxes, Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP) represents the underlying tax base within each State. If tax administration efficiency is broadly uniform across States and the ratio of direct tax revenue to GSDP does not vary significantly, a State's share in national GSDP can reasonably approximate its contribution to central tax revenues. Since the GST is destination-based and the principal source of indirect taxation, its attribution across States is relatively uncontroversial.

Empirical evidence supports this approach. Using 2023-24 data, the correlation between States' GSDP and direct tax collections is 0.75,

while the correlation between GSDP and GST collections is as high as 0.91. This strong relationship suggests that GSDP share is a meaningful indicator of the accrual of central taxes at the State level.

From 2020-21 to 2024-25, the Centre devolved 41% of its gross tax revenues to States in line with the 15th FC's recommendations, along with additional transfers through grants-in-aid and CSS. According to the Ministry of Finance (Rajya Sabha Unstarred Question No. 236, dated December 2, 2025), total transfers during this five-year period amounted to ₹ 75.12 lakh crore (see Table).

Uttar Pradesh received the largest share of transfers (15.81%), followed by Bihar (8.65%), and West Bengal (6.96%). However, these States accounted for only 4.6%, 0.67% and 3.99%, respectively, of combined direct tax and GST collections. In contrast, Maharashtra contributed the highest share of tax collections (40.3%), but received only 6.64% of total transfers. Karnataka and Tamil Nadu contributed 12.65% and 7.61%, while receiving 3.9% and 4.66%, respectively. Haryana (1.1%), Himachal Pradesh (1.58%) and Uttarakhand (1.65%) received low shares of transfers, despite contributing 5.39%, 0.43% and 0.81%, respectively.

The 15th FC's devolution shares show an almost perfect correlation (0.99) with actual transfers over the five-year period, but a weak correlation (0.24) with tax collection shares. By contrast, GSDP shares display a high correlation with tax collections (0.81) and a moderate correlation with devolution shares (0.58). This suggests that GSDP strikes a balance between efficiency, by reflecting tax contributions, and equity, by allowing redistribution.

Only in Haryana, Karnataka and Maharashtra, the GSDP share is less than tax collection share, likely due to the concentrations of registered offices of multi-State firms. In Tamil Nadu, GSDP share exceeds tax collections, reflecting production activity whose tax payments are recorded elsewhere.

Gainers, losers under a GSDP-based formula
If total central transfers were distributed purely on the basis of GSDP shares, nine of the 20 major States would gain. Maharashtra, Gujarat, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu would benefit the most, while Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Madhya Pradesh would experience the largest reductions. Importantly, these gains and losses would be moderate, as GSDP shares differ less sharply from tax collection shares than current devolution outcomes.

A higher weight for GSDP share would better reflect the accrual of central tax revenues, acknowledge the contributions of States to national income, and improve the perceived fairness and the credibility of India's inter-governmental fiscal transfer system.

The views expressed are personal

Central tax collections, transfers and GSDP

State-wise direct tax and gross GST collections, central transfers and GSDP from 2020-21 to 2024-25

States	Direct tax and GST collection		Central transfers		FC devolution		GSDP		Transfers using GSDP share		Loss or gain
	(₹ lakh crore)	% share	(₹ lakh crore)	% share	(₹ lakh crore)	% share	(₹ lakh crore)	% share	(₹ lakh crore)	(₹ lakh crore)	
Andhra Pradesh	3.32	2.97	3.23	4.30	4.07	64.35	4.97	3.74	0.51		
Assam	0.75	0.67	2.93	3.90	3.13	24.48	1.89	1.42	-1.51		
Bihar	0.76	0.68	6.5	8.65	10.06	38.48	2.97	2.23	-4.27		
Chhattisgarh	1.68	1.50	2.36	3.14	3.41	23.03	1.78	1.34	-1.02		
Gujarat	7.69	6.88	2.55	3.39	3.48	108.38	8.37	6.29	3.74		
Haryana	6.02	5.39	0.83	1.10	1.09	48.82	3.77	2.83	2.00		
Himachal Pradesh	0.48	0.43	1.19	1.58	0.83	9.58	0.74	0.56	-0.63		
Jharkhand	1.58	1.41	2.22	2.96	3.31	20.69	1.60	1.20	-1.02		
Karnataka	14.14	12.65	2.93	3.90	3.65	113.94	8.80	6.61	3.68		
Kerala	1.81	1.62	2.03	2.70	1.93	51.19	3.96	2.97	0.94		
Madhya Pradesh	2.17	1.94	5.56	7.40	7.85	61.26	4.73	3.56	-2.00		
Maharashtra	40.3	36.06	4.99	6.64	6.32	179.83	13.90	10.44	5.45		
Odisha	2.61	2.34	3.22	4.42	4.53	36.40	2.81	2.11	-1.21		
Punjab	1.47	1.32	1.57	2.09	1.81	34.71	2.68	2.02	0.45		
Rajasthan	2.83	2.53	4.57	6.08	6.03	67.96	5.25	3.94	-0.63		
Tamil Nadu	8.5	7.61	3.5	4.66	4.08	120.41	9.30	6.99	3.49		
Telangana	4.32	3.87	1.84	2.45	2.10	64.81	5.01	3.76	1.92		
Uttar Pradesh	5.14	4.60	11.88	15.81	17.94	116.28	8.98	6.75	-5.13		
Uttarakhand	0.9	0.81	1.24	1.65	1.12	14.84	1.15	0.86	-0.38		
West Bengal	4.46	3.99	5.23	6.96	7.52	74.64	5.77	4.33	-0.90		
8 small States	0.82	0.73	4.63	6.16	5.79	20.07	1.55	1.17	-3.46		
Total	111.75	100.00	75.12	100.00	100.02	1294.15	100.00	75.12	0.00		

Top court's green governance, cause for uncertainty

Over the last decade, the Supreme Court of India has increasingly moved from reviewing the legality of administrative decisions to issuing forward-looking directions mimicking regulation in important environmental cases. This shift has emerged in a series of matters in which regulators have dropped the ball, pulling the Court into a managerial role. But the Court has then compounded the problem by continuing to substitute for the regulator instead of correcting the regulator's process and stepping back.

This tendency to remain involved, especially within a single continuing mandamus across domains, has consequences for regulated actors, the state, and the people, and needs to be tempered.

Rulings and shifts

In June 2022, the Court laid down that protected areas across India should have an eco-sensitive zone (ESZ) of at least one kilometre from their boundaries. But in April 2023, the Court modified the direction and said the rule would not apply where the Environment Ministry had already issued ESZ notifications, partly because States had argued that the blanket rule was hard to implement.

Earlier, in December 2015, the Court had banned the registration of private diesel cars and sport utility vehicles with an engine capacity of 2,000 cc or more in the Delhi-National Capital Region (NCR). However, by August 2016, it lifted the embargo and replaced it with a charge to compensate, reported widely as 1%-2% on the ex-showroom price. In 2025, the Court again started with a broad protection that was easy to articulate, calling for no-coercive action against owners of diesel or petrol vehicles that were more than 10 or 15 years old, respectively. Then the Court narrowed the rule by restricting action only against those vehicles below the Bharat Stage-IV standard.

The freerunner matter followed the same trajectory. The Court sometimes imposed a



Vasudevan Mukunth

The Supreme Court should protect the environment by disciplining the state back into regulation

near-total ban in the NCR because of air pollution, only to relax it around specific festivals and limited categories such as "green crackers", in both instances citing enforcement constraints and public order realities.

While fragmented enforcement, delayed notifications, poor monitoring and ad hoc exemptions left gaps that invited judicial intervention, the Court has often responded by stepping into the regulator's shoes rather than by holding regulators to their statutory duties.

In these matters, the Court's justification has often shifted from being rooted in legality to that in consequences. In May 2025, in *Vanasakti vs Union of India*, the Court said ex post facto environmental clearances run against core environmental principles. But in November, it recalled that position in a review, with the majority judgment expressing concerns about disrupting ongoing commercial activity. In these instances, the Court's impulse to govern caused it to treat a doctrinal statement as the starting point and to manage the fallout later.

The issue of expertise

'Expertise' has also been a source of support as well as dispute once the Court starts issuing forward-looking directives. In the Aravalli matter, for instance, the Court's November 20 order adopted a unified definition for "Aravalli hills and ranges" in the context of controlling mining, based on a committee's findings. Within weeks, however, it placed that order in abeyance and moved to constitute a new committee after concerns that the definition would have unintended legal effects. In the ESZ issue as well, a uniform buffer sounded decisive at first but once stakeholders realised that the ecological basis and feasibility varied considerably across landscapes, the rule met with resistance. The Court has used expert inputs to compensate for its limits but has also contested expertise. This push-pull relationship, while implicitly not a bad thing, has also set the stage for U-turns.

Perhaps where the Court conducting itself as an approving authority has bitten the hardest is the consequences for public challenge. As environmental lawyer Rikshit Dutta has argued, project proponents and governments have been forced to approach the Court for permissions even before statutory authorities have finished examining a project, at the same time conferring a sense of finality that discourages contestation later. The bigger problem here is not that the Court may get a technical detail wrong but that its early entry into the approval process can smother meaningful judicial review in other fora. As a result, when the Court modifies an older rule, it also reshapes who is heard and on what evidentiary basis.

Need for stability

Many of these disputes also sit inside continuing mandamus structures – serial interim directions, committee reports, affidavits, and modifications – so it has been easy for the Court to correct course but often at the expense of stability. Instead, the Court should consider adopting a steadier hand, i.e., protecting the environment by disciplining the state back into regulation. It can do this by specifying thresholds for when it will issue managerial directions and insisting on time-bound regulatory action with reasons and public data, while retaining its prerogative to review legality and procedures. It can also reduce uncertainty by avoiding sweeping rules that also immediately invite exceptions and by explaining in advance what kinds of evidence or implementation constraints would justify modification.

This way, regulated actors will deal with strict rather than negotiable rules, governments will not have to contend with parallel decision-making, and the people will know where and how to contest activities that render environmental harm.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Trump and his actions
U.S. President Donald Trump's classifications of foreign relations fall into 'Very Happy', 'Very Unhappy' and 'Others'. National leaders of the first category are escorted with great ceremony to be his

guests in the U.S. for as long as he wants. They attain their nirvana. Those in the last category are his playmates in games such as hide and seek or boxing practice. Here only Ukraine's Zelenskyy finds himself in switched classifications and

neither he nor Mr. Trump is clear on this, while the rest seem to be enjoying it all till it lasts. It is those in Mr. Trump's 'Very Unhappy' group who find themselves free of the passing fancies of a President who is yet to learn separating business

from pastime. It enables them to go about their own business and, in the process, clock enviable GDP. **R. Narayanan,** Navi Mumbai

The actions by the United States under President Trump are totally against international law and the United Nations charter. Mr. Trump's 'claim' over Greenland exposes the 'Hitler in Trump'. One wonders what more lies ahead in his strange expansionist plans. It is time

that like-minded nations joined hands, and under the auspices of the UN, to end the evil designs of America. **S.V. Venkatakrishnan,** Singapore

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Is the 10-minute delivery model necessary?

**Prashant Kamal**
National general secretary, Yuva Hallaboli**Kamal Karanth**
Co-founder of XPhone, a specialist staffing company

PARLEY

In December 31, more than a lakh gig and platform workers held a strike. In a memorandum to Union Labour Minister Mansukh Mandaviya, their unions demanded that the 10 to 20-minute service delivery system be immediately withdrawn to prioritise worker safety. The Union government sees the four Labour Codes, which were implemented recently, as a solution to the problems of gig workers, especially for bringing them into the ambit of social security. Kamal Karanth and Prashant Kamal discuss this topic in a conversation moderated by A.M. Jigeesha. Edited excerpts:

What are the major concerns over 10 to 20 minutes delivery?

Prashant Kamal: The debate around gig workers' plight is not just about 10-minute delivery. There is so much beyond that. A few powerful people are deliberately trying to make it a binary between consumers' comfort and gig workers' misery. The 10-minute delivery is not a need of consumer, it's a competition. Zepto started it, Blinkit, Amazon, Swiggy, Instamart and others followed it. There is no real difference between the delivery of groceries in 10 minutes or say 20-30 minutes. But there is a huge difference for the person delivering it. I have three points to make here. First, this is not just software that runs the system. It only works because a massive human workforce which is kept under unstable pay, changing rules, and the constant threat of getting their IDs blocked by an app. Second, do we allow these logic in other industries? Speed is not created by technology. It is extracted from real people. Third, let's look at the economics. Tech costs are considered a given and they are protected. Marketing budgets are treated as a given and are protected. So, why only labour is treated as adjustable? Who is really paying here for the 10-minute delivery?

Kamal Karanth: Going by the volumes and dependency, it seems that it's a model that is becoming a part of our lives. Given the demand generated by a few of these companies, I would like to believe that it has created itself as a necessity. From 2024 to 2027, quick commerce has grown threefold – from ₹50,000 crore in 2025, it's closing in to ₹1 lakh crore to ₹1.5 lakh crore in the next two years. Industry is growing at 28%. Online grocery market is expected to grow at almost 40% to 50%.

From a delivery platform's point of view, creating a crore of jobs requires at least five



Food delivery workers waiting outside a restaurant. B. VELANKANNI RAJ

years. In India, 20 million people are passing out to make way for the workforce coming in, and we are hardly able to create two million jobs for them every year. So, in the context of people who do not have high skills but need a job, I think it's a huge gap that these platforms have fulfilled. So we should ask the primary question, is some job better than no job?

What ideally should be the regulatory framework for platforms and gig economy?

KK: Globally, it's considered that India's labour laws are one of the most protected, means that full-time employees have greater amount of protection when it comes to the regulation we had. But when it comes to gig, because it was a new concept, it was not covered [in regulations] to a great extent. But now I think the regulators are getting into the act of saying worker protection is important. But if you make it like a full-time employment, then I guess the gig will lose the shine of it. Considering many of them work full time in this, there should be possibly more flexibility provided in the form of any protection. But making it completely a full-time employment may actually kill the model

PK: Studies have shown that 80% of workers engaged with gigs and platforms are working full time. For millions, this is their primary livelihood. They are asking for predictable minimum income, fair pay, protection from sudden ID blocks and for clear rules for pay and penalties. They're asking for basic safety cover. They're asking for data transparency. Platforms set prices, they decide who gets work, they control ratings, they can switch people off overnight. If you control the work, you must carry obligations. That means a minimum earning for accident insurance, pensions; or at least there should be a process



Studies have shown that 80% of gig workers engaged are working full time. They ask for basic safety cover and data transparency. If you control work, you must carry obligations

PRASHANT KAMAL

before blocking or punishing workers. So this is not a radical demand. This is where the world is going. India cannot keep pretending that platforms are just like software, and if you can switch someone's income off with an algorithm, you must carry legal responsibility as well.

Are Labour Codes sufficient to create a social security system for gig workers?

PK: No. They came very late and highly insufficient. The Code is vague and non-mandatory in nature. The Code authorises few welfare programmes like accident insurance, maternity benefits and all, but it doesn't make them mandatory or enforceable right away. Gig workers have to register themselves on e-SHRAM portal, get an ID card, but they get no tangible benefits like covered hospital bills or pensions. They offer a social security scheme but no broader labour rights, and explicitly exclude gig workers from being classified as employees. This means no access to minimum wages, regulated working hours, paid leaves or overtime pay or collective bargaining under other Labour Codes.

Thirdly, the funding provisions for social security are inadequate. There is a vagueness on exact rates, enforcements and how funds shall be allocated. The most important thing is [there is] no regulation of algorithmic practices. The actual problem that the workers face here is the blind spots where they face lack of transparency. Algorithm controls task assignment, who gets the work, and incentives, ratings, and even de-activations. These black boxes cause stress, unfair penalties, and income instabilities. But the Code nowhere mandates transparency, accountability, or appeals against algorithmic decisions. So workers are at the mercy of technology that prioritises profit over fairness, and there is no mechanism for grievance redressal and dispute resolution.

KK: I think even in a full-time employment in the private world today, there is no such guarantee. There is no such transparency. Let us see how many of the workers will remain if gig works are made permanent. There is an attrition

of 1 lakh to 1.5 lakh workers who are leaving and joining somewhere else every month. Instead of killing the golden goose, which is growing, I think what India should focus on is creating more employment opportunities. The Labour Codes are still evolving as of now. I think when they come up with something stronger, we possibly can qualify it further.

A NITI Aayog report envisages that about 2.35 crores will join the gig economy by 2029-2030. So, what is the future of these platforms and gig workers in the background of everyday changes that AI and the technological innovations bring?

KK: I think we should protect what are the good things of it, possibly engage with platforms more than disrupting their business models and saying, how can we bring social security and allow the otherwise unskilled people to get a job? I think we have no recourse.

AI will come in, AI will work for, I think, more entry-level repeat tasks which can get automated. So, I don't think the current model of this gig platforms that are employing gig workers will get disrupted in the short term. Having said that, manufacturing is a sector that we are focusing on very strongly as a country. And manufacturing does not create overnight jobs like a tech sector did in the past. The faster movement is in the quick commerce sector, and we should do everything to protect it.

PK: The huge crisis of unemployment cannot be addressed without improving our manufacturing sectors, particularly those sectors which are labour-intensive. So, government should make policies to improve these sectors.

I think if you don't change the rules and the way we think, the future of gig workers is very brutal. AI will bring more control, less voice, and more people living on algorithm update away from losing their income. Today, a delivery worker can be switched off by an app, or tomorrow AI will be deciding that faster, cheaper, and at a larger scale. So, no conversation, no explanation, no appeal, just a silent drop in orders, then nothing. So, AI will make platforms efficient at replacing people, rotating people, and squeezing more work out of whoever is still logged in. That means workers become more disposable, like not more secure.



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NOTEBOOK

Reporting from a red light area

An assignment in Sonagachi busted the myth about the place, showing the women there as just another section of working members of society

Shrabana Chatterjee

As a resident of Kolkata, I always knew that Sonagachi in north Kolkata has the largest red light area in Asia. But, in my mind it existed only as a concept, a myth almost. Little did I know what it amounted to, even though I was born and brought up in the same city. These were the parts no one talked about, the "other neighbourhood" as Bengalis put it, which people either mentioned with a mischievous smile or with an uncomfortable silence.

When I stepped into an ambitious reporting assignment, the myth dissolved and real people came through in these densely populated bylanes of Sonagachi where over 12,000 sex workers reside across 700 buildings and thousands of single-room homes. Their lives unfold in one of the busiest parts of the city, so it is not hidden: it is simply ignored.

As an outsider, I was acutely aware of being watched. As I walked through Sonagachi on a rainy day, the smell of alcohol, cigarettes, fried food, and fresh rainwater mixed into an unsettling cocktail. Many doors opened as women exchanged whispers about who I was.

These women have been violated by many in their lives, by clients, by family members, by systems meant to protect them, and often by journalists who arrive seeking "stories" without consent or care. So, they are sceptical about sharing their stories; suspicion has become a survival instinct. It took me months of trust building to even get them to speak a few words with me. Over the years, they have met so many journalists. They now see through them and hear their stories are all about headlines, stereotypes, or statistics for many in the media.

Once I did manage to break through the many layers of walls they have around themselves to protect their privacy, they asked me to put my phone away and not take pictures and respect their personal space. With my phone inside my bag, I had no recording device, so the good old notebook and pen came to the rescue as I listened, observed, and wrote down bits and pieces of what I saw.

Over these three months of reporting on this single story, I was humbled. Somewhere in that process, a lesson that journalism schools repeat but rarely prepare you for – no one owes us their story – got drilled into my head.

I interviewed over six sex workers, went to their homes which is also their place of business, sat with them, had tea, and listened to their stories for hours. Slowly realising, every single one of them is a very resilient woman, living their life with honesty and dignity. They are not looking for sympathy. They are only looking to be treated as equals in society. As they put it, "We work with our bodies, like every other labourer, why can't we have workers' rights?"

As an outsider and as a journalist, it is not my duty to pretend and try to look like an insider and force myself into the story. It is always best to maintain honesty, count your own privileges, shed your biases as much as possible, and not look down upon anyone while reporting. Throughout the development of this story I wanted to abandon it. I felt out of depth and unsure if I had the emotional range to see the layered lives they lived. They are not just sex workers. That is just their occupation, like every other member of society who is offering their labour for bread and butter. They are humans of flesh and blood. They have families. Many of them go to school, hold protest marches, run sexual health awareness drives, win awards, pray to god, and buy their favourite make up at the local stores, much like any of us.

The myth I had about Sonagachi no longer exists. Now it is the place of the women who have offered me tea, welcomed me into their homes, and shared tears and laughter with me.

In the end, the anxiety gave way to the story. With much apprehension, I got two copies of the printed piece and went to the sex workers' Durga Puja event. They saw the paper, they read, they smiled. I shared a sigh of relief. It felt like a reminder of why journalism demands patience, humility, and the willingness to sit with discomfort long before it delivers clarity.

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PICTURE OF THE WEEK

Standing remnants



Reduced to debris: A structure which was brought down by the Municipal Corporation of Delhi near the Faiz-e-Elahi mosque, Turkman Gate, in the Ramliya Maidan area, on Thursday. The Corporation carried out a drive to demolish alleged encroachments near the mosque on Tuesday night. SHASHI SHEKHAR KASHYAP

FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Hindu

FIFTY YEARS AGO JANUARY 9, 1976

Chinese PM En-lai dead

Tokyo, Jan. 9: Chou En-lai, Prime Minister of the People's Republic of China since its creation in 1949 and its leading force for moderation and detente with the United States, died yesterday (Thursday) in Peking after a long illness.

The 78-year-old descendant of Mandarin forbears who turned a communist revolutionary in his youth, had been confined to a hospital for much of the time since the spring of 1974 when he was stricken with a heart ailment.

Mr. Chou's death was announced by the official Hsinhua news agency. Mr. Chou did not see President Ford on his visit to China in December. He talked in the hospital with visiting foreign leaders over the last year and a half.

During Mr. Chou's illness, his duties had been taken over by Mr. Teng Hsiao-ping, who also has been mentioned as a possible successor to the ageing and ailing Chairman Mao Tse-tung.

Throughout his illness, Mr. Chou continued to interest himself in political affairs. He met important foreign visitors in his hospital suite and kept a finger on the pulse of Chinese life.

He presided over a national people's congress session which filled in many government gaps left by the cultural purge and laid down the blueprint for a massive new economic effort aimed at bringing China into the front rank of industrial nations by the end of the century.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO JANUARY 9, 1926

National memorial to Queen Alexandra

Leaflet (Oxford), Mid., Jan. 7: It is proposed that the national memorial to late Queen Alexandra shall take the form of a further endowment to Queen Victoria's Jubilee Institute for Nurses, which ministers to sick poor in their own homes. An appeal for subscriptions for this object is made today in a letter signed by the Lord Chancellor, the Lord Mayor of London, the Archbishops of Canterbury and York, Cardinal Vaughan, Archbishop of Westminster, and Doctor Hertz, Chief Rabbi. The letter concludes, "We feel sure that this work for the suffering poor, presided over first by Queen Victoria, then by Queen Alexandra, and now by our present gracious Queen, will appeal to our countrymen and countrywomen as a splendid and appropriate object of memorial of the nation's love for Queen Alexandra."

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Number of typhoid fever cases in India in 2023

49 in lakh. Delhi, Maharashtra and Karnataka accounted for nearly 30% of the national burden. Findings published in *The Lancet Regional Health Southeast Asia* also show that six lakh of the 7.3 lakh hospitalisations across the country were attributable to fluoroquinolone-resistance, a type of antibiotic, or antimicrobial, resistance. PTI

Value of Uttar Pradesh government allocation for school events

19.8 in ₹ crore. The Uttar Pradesh government has allocated ₹ 19.8 crore to organise Annual Day and Sports Day programmes. The initiative aims to promote enrolment and attendance along with the all-round development of children by linking academics with culture, sports and community participation. PTI

Quantity of high-grade heroin seized near Indo-Myanmar border

7.3 in kilograms. The Narcotics Control Bureau seized 7.3 kg of high-grade heroin during an operation near the Indo-Myanmar border in Manipur and arrested two alleged traffickers. The contraband, concealed in over 600 soap cases, was recovered from a vehicle intercepted by NCB teams. ANI

Increase in average assets of MPs between 2014 and 2024

110 in per cent. Between 2014 and 2024, 102 MPs who got re-elected to the Lok Sabha recorded an over 100% average growth in their assets, said a report released by the Association for Democratic Reforms. It said average asset growth for the MPs between the Lok Sabha elections of 2014 to 2024 is ₹17.36 crore. PTI

Total amount locked in customs duty disputes

1.52 in ₹ lakh crore. With over ₹1.52 lakh crore of customs duty locked in litigations, the government could look at the possibility of an amnesty scheme in the Budget for 2026-27, Price Waterhouse & Co said on Thursday. As of March 2024, 38,014 cases are locked in litigation. PTI
COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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ISRO and the next big challenge

ISRO's past accomplishments raise the bar for future missions as it prepares in parallel for more complex programmes: the next phase depends less on individual feats and more on sustained institutional performance, clearer legal structures, and the capacity to execute ambitious missions in a routine way

FULL CONTEXT

Vasudevan Mukunth

The record of the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) over the last decade has been remarkably broad for an agency of its size and budget.

Its rockets, especially the Polar Satellite Launch Vehicle (PSLV), have sustained reliable access to orbit, rendering operations with multiple satellite classes almost a matter of routine today. And ISRO is attempting even more technically demanding missions. The soft landing of the Chandrayaan-3 lander on the moon on August 23, 2023, placed India in a coterie of countries with demonstrated lunar-landing capability.

The Aditya-L1 probe reached its intended halo orbit around the first sun-earth Lagrange point on January 6, 2024, adding a dedicated solar observatory mission to ISRO's portfolio. In July 2025, ISRO executed a prominent international collaboration by launching the billion-dollar NASA-ISRO Synthetic Aperture Radar (NISAR) mission, an earth-observation platform for climate and hazard monitoring.

Preparing in parallel

The thing about succeeding in such a consistent way is that it also raises the bar for future accomplishments. It no longer matters that ISRO had humble beginnings or that it transported parts of its first rocket on a bullock cart. Even launching the PSLV or the GSLV flawlessly the first dozen or so times is awesome, but being able to do that also changes what comes next. And it will be good for ISRO to be able to access that new opportunity space, and without taking too long to do so. Otherwise, it will have some difficult questions to answer.

Today, on the cusp of Gaganyaan, Chandrayaan-4, and the Next-Generation Launch Vehicle (NGLV), among others, ISRO's major challenges can be distilled to three: (i) its capacity to execute more complex missions; (ii) questions about how clearly the space programme is and can be governed in a newly liberalised sector; and (iii) constraints on ISRO's competitiveness that are as industrial and financial as they're technological.

First, ISRO currently confronts a deceptively structural prioritisation problem. Specifically, as the organisation prepares in parallel for the human spaceflight mission, complex science missions, satellite replenishment, and the development of NGLV, a more powerful launch vehicle (GSLV may be 'Bahubali' but it's still only in the medium-lift category), its annual launch cadence and project timelines have become an increasingly obvious bottleneck. Experts have linked its low number of launches in 2025 – only five against the then ISRO chairman V. Somanath's projection of an also-low eight – to project delays and to the organisation shifting towards big-ticket programmes. At the same time, private launch providers still depend heavily on ISRO facilities and infrastructure, meaning the system can't yet offload work at scale. The implication is that when a mission suffers an anomaly, it has cascading effects.

To prevent this ISRO needs more integration capacity, better access to test stands, industrial supply chains for structures and avionics, and a workflow that can absorb setbacks without freezing unrelated programmes or cramping their timelines. Perhaps the first step could be an internal scheme to help scientists and



On track: The LVM-3 launch vehicle at Sriharikota ahead of its M6 mission to launch the BlueBird Block-2 satellite on December 24, 2025. ISRO

engineers determine which mission's timelines are allowed to slip and for what particular reasons, together with separate resource allocations for R&D vehicles and operational vehicles and creating new capacity in the industrial base. The ultimate aim should be for ISRO to not simultaneously be the designer, the integrator, and the bottleneck for all missions.

ISRO pulled in

Second, ISRO's role in India's liberalised space and spaceflight ecosystem – since the national government's 2020 reforms – is conceptually clear only on paper. The principal issue here is that India still lacks a comprehensive national space law. The Indian Space Policy framework, the Indian National Space Promotion and Authorisation Centre (IN-SPACe) and New Space India Ltd. (NSIL), created in 2019-2020, were meant to separate functions. Research and advanced capability development would lie with ISRO, authorisation and promotion with IN-SPACe, and commercialisation with NSIL.

But for all of them to execute those functions efficiently, they need statutory authority and clearer legal allocations of obligations, especially those pertaining to authorisation, liability, insurance, and resolving disputes.

A national space law wouldn't merely help startups: it would also protect ISRO by reducing the *ad hoc* demands placed on it because it's still perceived as a

fallback regulator and technical certifier for everything. If IN-SPACe is to be the authorising body, it needs to have legal authority. If NSIL is to be the commercial arm, it shouldn't be in a situation where, if a commercial mission fails, creates third-party liabilities or whatever, nobody can say in advance who is responsible for what, leaving ISRO to be pulled in by 'default' because it's the most capable state actor. And if ISRO is to focus on frontier capabilities, it needs to be insulated from routine tasks, like booking and operating test stands or coordinating spectrum allocation, that actually should be performed by an industrial and regulatory ecosystem.

Finally, like most laws, a space law – and thus the activities it supports – would also survive political and administrative changes.

Sustained performance

Third, ISRO's competitiveness increasingly resembles an ecosystem problem. The world is moving towards more frequent launches by providers, partially reusable launch vehicles, and rapid satellite manufacturing, and India needs to respond with more than by expanding its engineering ambitions. The Indian government's own framing of the NGLV, linking the space programme's future goals to its "high payload capability" and "reusability", including a reusable first stage and the ability to lift up to 30 tonnes to low-earth orbit, acknowledges that economic launches

and agility are now central, rather than optional, features of enterprises that operate launch vehicles. And building such systems and operating them in turn requires more production depth, advanced manufacturing capabilities, higher qualification capacity, and much more capital.

Investment in India's space sector fell sharply in 2024, reflecting both global headwinds and the specific difficulties of financing hardware that's developed and deployed on long horizons. IN-SPACe has in response launched a technology adoption fund aimed at helping firms bridge prototypes with scalable products and at reducing import dependence, among other funding instruments.

ISRO's past accomplishments have earned it political capital and public trust but the next phase depends less on individual feats and more on sustained institutional performance. The capacity to execute will determine whether the Indian space programme will also be able to deliver ambitious missions in a routine way. And within this context, governance and law will say whether the government's efforts to liberalise the sector will reduce ISRO's burden or, counterintuitively, expand it. Similarly ISRO's ability to compete will depend on whether the programme can transition from executing a series of individually laudable missions to being an industrial system, and for this engineering, regulation, manufacturing, and finance will have to mature together.

THE GIST

ISRO's consistent success raises the bar for future accomplishments as it prepares in parallel for human spaceflight, complex science missions, satellite replenishment, and the Next-Generation Launch Vehicle.

In a newly liberalised space sector, the absence of a comprehensive national space law leaves ISRO pulled in by default, even as clearer legal allocations of authorisation, liability, and commercial responsibility are required to insulate it from routine tasks.

The transition from individual feats to sustained institutional performance depends on competitiveness that is as industrial and financial as it is technological, requiring production depth, advanced manufacturing, and an ecosystem that allows missions to become routine.

IN THE LIMELIGHT

'Avatar: Fire and Ash': militarised spectacle, render farms, and the end of awe

A gleaming tech miracle wrapped around a hollow soul, *Fire and Ash* feels meticulously engineered and spiritually abandoned; characters like Spider and Kiri become overworked narrative tools, and the film wraps itself in environmental rhetoric while staging obliteration

Avaan Paul Chowdhury

I dragged myself through Delhi's air, body frozen, throat stinging, visibility dropping to philosophical levels of nothingness; all to arrive at the earliest screening of *Avatar: Fire and Ash*. James Cameron greeted these Sisyphean efforts by flinging a flaming monolith of 3D garbage straight at my face. It's perverse, really, having had to wade through literal poison to sit through blockbuster poison. One would think wheezing through dense radioactive smog could prepare you for anything, but witnessing this billion-dollar landfill breeze made me slowly asphyxiate for over three hours within the confines of my theatre.

Bloated spectacle

For three hours and change, Pandora feels meticulously engineered and spiritually abandoned. Cameron once made films that felt like dispatches from the future, but this third chapter in his endlessly self-impressed saga has lumbered back with renewed conviction, obsessed with square footage and intoxicated by its own gigantism. Bled with money, myth, technology, and a palpable fear of irrelevance, everything is bigger, louder, and longer in *Fire and Ash*. Everything is also airless.

The grief that opens the film promises depth. Eternal marine cosplayer turned reluctant indigenous patriarch, Jake Sully (Sam Worthington), mourns his dead son from the earlier, *Way of Water*. Zoe Saldana's Neytiri rages with an unquenchable hatred and her entire emotional architecture is built around the same loss. Their children orbit between resentment and devotion. The premise suggests that the saga is finally ready to sit in its wounds, but the reality is a parade of plot machinery, stitched out of guilt, revenge, an almost voyeuristic appropriation of indigenous mysticism, and a mercenary belief in "family" as a substitute for meaningful ideas. Cameron gestures toward some semblance of emotional excavation, only to safely retreat to the comforts of prolonged migraine-inducing 3D battles and sporadic bouts of ritual chanting.

The franchise's grand metaphor has always been colonialism refracted through its luminous fauna and noble warrior spirituality, but *Fire and Ash* strains to deepen that. Humans and Na'vi entangle across biology, psychology, loyalty, and trauma. Power wants resources, power wants bodies, power wants belonging. There's still some genuine material here, especially in the uneasy bond between Quaritch and Jake, two military men doomed to reenact their masculinity as their destiny. Yet, Cameron seems perfectly satisfied with surface-level clarities of speechifying heroes and flattened political spectacle.

Characters speak as if locked inside a studio focus test, ripe with the contrasts of mystical platitudes and dumber catchphrases. It's evident that the performers were labouring under digital lacquer, capable of nuance but trapped inside dramaturgy designed for blunt interpretation.

Plot machinery

Jack Champion's Spider is the film's most overworked narrative utility tool. The film continuously positions him as the emotional hinge between species – the biological son of Quaritch, the adopted

A still from *Avatar: Fire and Ash*. AP

son of Jake's family, and the human permanently out of place on Pandora. Instead of developing him as a psychologically coherent being, Cameron keeps repurposing him as whatever the plot needs in that moment, whether it's a hostage, bargaining chip, test subject, guilt trigger or even the occasional oxygen hazard. His literal dependence on a breathing apparatus becomes a metaphor in the most on-the-nose way possible, until the film simply decides to rewrite biology and grants him a miraculous, lore-breaking evolutionary upgrade via Eywa and mycelial plant magic.

Kiri (Sigourney Weaver), meanwhile, stands at the intersection of Grace Augustine's avatar body, she is supposed to embody Pandora's spiritual mystery and ecological theology. The mythology frames her as the living bridge between Eywa's consciousness and Na'vi's existence, but the writing reduces that enormity to soft-focus mysticism and conveniently-timed deus ex machinas.

Both Spider and Kiri are built to carry the trilogy's salvageable themes of hybridity and mutated identity, and both ultimately reveal how Cameron prefers shortcuts and gimmicks over any nuance.

There's also the new Mangkwan, the heretic Ash People. The film practically shivers with pleasure when they arrive,

and Oona Chapman's electrifying turn as their Tsahik Varang storms the screen with an erotic sense of authority – perhaps the film's sole saving grace. Though she should be the great new engine of chaos and ideology, she's soon drafted into Cameron's preferred function as a catalyst for more setpieces.

Violent bond

The most interesting dynamic in the film is her seductively violent bond with Quaritch. There are traces of Sean Penn's only Colonel Lockjaw from *One Battle After Another* in how briskly this emblem of military-industrial cruelty turns his genocidal obsession into a fetish for the people his ideology defines as target practice. Cameron frames him as a creature of rage discovering kink through ethnocide, and the film feels bizarrely exhilarated by the revelation. Stephen Lang chews into the role with a feral gleam.

Cameron has spent the better part of the last decade selling the world on how his saga explores the tangled braids between human violence and ecological reverence, but *Fire and Ash* is fascinated with punishment, purification, and cleansing through violence. The script keeps genuflecting to Eywa, the Great Cosmic Mum, while clearly getting its kicks choreographing annihilation.

What's especially hilarious is watching

a billion-dollar "anti-imperialist epic" manufactured by the world's most ruthless entertainment empire try to moralise. *Fire and Ash* wraps itself in environmental preservation rhetoric and sings hymns to indigenous resilience, only to settle for exquisitely staged obliteration. Cameron preaches sanctimonious balance with one hand and cranks the industrialised spectacle of righteous slaughter with the other. This is cinema as an absolution ritual of sorts, and I think we are supposed to feel spiritually clean after witnessing three hours of eco-friendly carnage, ethically sourced through cutting-edge VFX.

The immaculacy of the technology admires itself so endlessly, while any meaningful pulses are pulverised under a stack of a million render farms. The relentless rhythm of the spectacle numbed me into an unskippable lull instead of enrapturing me with its excesses.

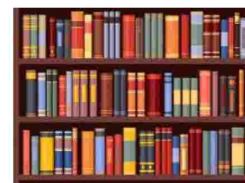
Cameron remains a virtuoso of large-scale movement, yet the splendours of ships buckling, creatures convulsing and landscapes shimmering with impossible light rarely translate into any palpable sense of awe. Action came in waves so frequent and so structurally similar that the sense of escalation dissolved completely into repetition. There is always another chase, ambush, or noble sacrifice rendered with military-grade solemnity, and the franchise's devotion to the 'Avatar experience' has curdled into obligation.

Avatar has always sold itself as the populist four-quadrant morality play where extraction capitalism gets an easy-to-read villain and indigeneity becomes an all-purpose spiritual solvent, all pre-packaged to clap to in IMAX. The 2009 film worked with a familiar "outsider becomes native messiah" trope à la *Dune*, in a supposedly anti-imperial allegory, then spent the next decade witnessing it collapse into the very paternalism it claims to expose. The *Way of Water* tried to update the critique by widening the map and swapping jungle romanticism for ocean ethnography, yet the same ideological "difference" gets aestheticised, and the films' faith in innocence-through-nature keeps edging into a romantic primitivism that simply cannot be isolated from the white colonial lens through which it is conceived.

It's quite frankly nauseating watching a billionaire filmmaker sermonise on indigenous self-determination from within a studio apparatus lubricated by public subsidies and global capital; a system that, in the same historical breath, bankrolls military dominance and ongoing ethnic erasures while his films launder extraction and conquest into a smug, export-ready moral fantasy.

The larger-than-life theatricality of a blockbuster once promised wonder, provocation, communion, or at the very least a lingering aftertaste, but *Fire and Ash* is a resignation to the fact that a beautiful world, scaled up to planetary size, is now enmeshed.

The spectacle is nothing more than a sedative, and Cameron's lofty ambitions had long stopped growing somewhere between the second and third billion dollars. Not even Eywa herself could resurrect my will to live after inhaling this premium Na'vi sludge. There's a more fitting alternative title here, involving fire and a crude homophonic body part best left implied.



FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know your English

S. Upendran

"You look really happy. What's the reason?"

"Sujatha paid me a compliment today. She said that the Principal likes me very much because I am his yes-man."

Being somebody's yes-man is no compliment."

"It isn't?"

"No. A yes-man is someone who says yes to everything his leader/boss says."

"In other words, he agrees with everything that the person says?"

"That's right."

"I don't think I'm that kind of person."

"I hope you're not. Politicians surround themselves with yes-men."

"Are you your boss's yes-man?"

"No."

"Can I say Tony Blair is Bill Clinton's yes-man?"

"That's a very good example. I don't know if everyone will agree with you though."

"Isn't it sad what's happening in Yugoslavia? First Clinton bombs Sudan, then Iraq and now Yugoslavia."

"And if we are not careful, he might poke his nose into our affairs as well."

"What does it mean?"

"When you poke your nose into something, you interfere in something that is no concern of yours. Of late, Bill Clinton has been poking his nose into everything."

"After all, for nearly four years, Kenneth Starr has been poking his nose into Clinton's affairs."

"That's true. By the way, poke your nose into something is an informal expression."

"And what do I call people who poke their noses into other people's business?"

"People who are over inquisitive or very curious about other people are often called nosy." The word can be spelt n.o.s.e.y or n.o.s.s.y."

"My uncle becomes unbearably nosy at times."

"Nosy people are sometimes referred to as nosy parkers. I don't want Gayathri in my department. She is a real nosy parker."

"When Surendran walked into the office, people stopped talking. He has a reputation for being a nosy parker."

"Do you think I am a nosy parker?"

"Of course you are!"

"Why you...."

"...just joking. But NATO seems to be full of nosy parkers."

"I'm not so sure about that. You see right now there is no NATO. America is NATO. The remaining countries are merely yes-men. May be the name should be changed from North Atlantic Treaty Organisation to Nosey American Tin God Organisation."

"Tin God?"

"Look it up in the dictionary."

"I will. Do you think Clinton will poke his nose into China's affairs?"

"Clinton will keep his nose clean as far as China is concerned."

"Keep his nose clean?"

"When someone tells you to keep your nose clean, it means they want you to stay out of trouble."

"My coupes keeps warning her son Dinesh that if he doesn't keep his nose clean, he is going to end up in jail. Does that sound ok?"

"It certainly does. Now tell me, what else did Sujatha tell you?"

"...look who is being a nosy parker now!"

Published in *The Hindu* on April 6, 1999

THE DAILY QUIZ

Here is a quiz on influential figures and key events that happened on January 9

Sindhu Nagaraj

QUESTION 1

This American President was born on this day in 1913. His second term ended early when he had to resign from office as a result of the Watergate scandal. Who was he?

QUESTION 2

This American actor is considered one of the most prolific and well-established character actors of his generation. He won the Academy Award for Best Supporting Actor for playing an abusive jazz instructor in *Whiplash*. Who is he?

QUESTION 3

Mahmoud Abbas, who was born on this day, was elected President of this country in 2005. He is still serving as the President of the country. Name the country.

QUESTION 4

In 2001, Apple introduced this digital media player application that revolutionised the way music was listened to across the world. Which was this?

**Visual Question:**

Identify this New Zealand writer who was an important figure in the modernist movement. She died on this day in 1923. WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Questions and Answers to the previous day's daily quiz: 1.

Name her groundbreaking critique of patriarchy, often regarded as foundational feminist literature, which was listed on the Vatican's 'index of forbidden books'. **Ans: The Second Sex**

2. Name her work depicting the attempts of post-Second World War intellectuals to leave their 'educated elite' status and engage in political activism, which won her the French literary prize Prix Goncourt. **Ans: The Mandarins**

3. What is the only play written by Beauvoir? **Ans: The Useless Mouths (or Who Shall Die)**

4. Name her treatise published in 1947, which deals with themes including freedom, oppression, and responsibility, expounding on the idea that 'human freedom requires the freedom of others for it to be actualised'. **Ans: The ethics of ambiguity**

5. Name her novel, which opens with the quote: "Each conscience seeks the death of the other" from another philosopher, Hegel. **Ans: She came to stay**

Visual: Name this American philosopher who claims to have based her theory of gender performance on Beauvoir's idea that one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. **Ans: Judith Butler**

Early Birds: Dodo Jayaditya | Sadia Najam | Neil Lall | Sunil Madhavan | Mohan Lal Patel

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

Word of the day

Clampdown:

sudden restriction on an activity

Synonyms: curb, quash, suppress

Usage: There was a clampdown on illegal activities.

Pronunciation: newsth./live/
clɑmpdaɪnp

International Phonetic Alphabet: /klɑmpdaɪn/

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

thehindubusinessline.

FRIDAY • JANUARY 9, 2026

Standing firm

First cut GDP estimate affirms economy's resilience

The Indian economy looks good to weather upcoming global turbulence in FY27. It has seen through the tariff storm of this fiscal; the first advance estimates of 7.4 per cent growth for FY26 would pass off as robust even in saner times. It suggests that 6.5 per cent growth in FY25 was a cyclical blip, from which the economy has recovered, despite global headwinds.



The current growth is broad-based, as even exports are estimated to grow 6.4 per cent. Clearly, exports diversification has begun; May-November exports to the US (which account for a little under a fifth of total exports) dropped 21 per cent, but exports to other destinations rose 5.5 per cent. Amidst the threat of more preposterous tariffs coming our way, this shift is an encouraging sign. The growth this fiscal has been propelled by 7.8 per cent increase in gross fixed capital formation (7.1 per cent last year) and a 5.2 per cent rise in government spending (2.3 per cent in FY25) — besides 7 per cent growth in private consumption. Economists have observed that a squeeze in revenue spending by the government, coinciding with a rise in capex, can have beneficial growth effects. There has been an increase in private investment interest in recent times; efforts to promote ease of doing business, including direct and indirect tax cuts are perhaps yielding results. Government capex (about 15 per cent of total capex) could also be creating a 'crowd-in' effect.

A recent compilation by Bank of Baroda on investment intentions in the first nine months of this fiscal bears this out. New investments announced during this period amount to ₹26.62 lakh crore, against ₹23.88 lakh crore in the same period in FY25. The investment interest is pronounced in electricity, chemicals, metals and information technology. With protectionism on the rise, India must focus on consolidating domestic demand and value chains. Its production linked incentives are appropriate for building domestic resilience, but the Budget could review these packages and improve upon them. However, this perception of robustness should not lead to complacency. The impact of the Trump administration's actions on financial markets remains an area of concern, as the Reserve Bank of India has observed. A scenario of choppy capital flows and widening trade deficit implies that both the currency as well as interest rates could come under stress. On the brighter side, trade deals with the US and EU could ease up sentiment.

Since monetary policy has done its bit to push credit (relaxing the repo rate by 125 basis points in 2025 and slashing the cash reserve ratio), the onus would lie more with the government to keep growth going, amidst an emerging revenue constraint and stiff 10-year G Sec rates. A shift to targeting the debt-to-GDP ratio (from the fiscal deficit ratio) from FY27 will allow the Centre some space to frame Budgets with a medium-term view. It should spend prudently to create long-term physical and human assets.

POCKET

RAVIKANTH



"It is a fast-track scheme! We managed to cram in 15 monthly installments per calendar year!"

Busting myths about Re weakness

Over dosa, idli and filter coffee, three friends weigh the prospects for the rupee

POINT BLANK.

LOKESHWARRI SK

It was a cool December morning in Chennai. There was a nip in the air but the three friends sitting on the terrace of the restaurant, overlooking the sea, did not seem to mind.

They were deep in conversation, even as the wintry sun sent sparkling lights on the waves.

Soumya, Vishy and Vasu, close buddies through school and college, had moved apart as their careers took them to different cities. Soumya had stayed back in Chennai to manage her family's print media business. Vishy was a successful investment manager working out of New York. Vasu, who had the nickname of 'prof' even in school, had completed a doctorate in economics and was working with a think-tank in Delhi.

Taking a large bite of the Mysore masala dosa, Vishy said, "How I have missed this authentic South-Indian food in New York. So, what's up with you guys? How's business, Soumya?"

Soumya put down her glass of orange juice. "I wish I could tell you that everything is great. But that wouldn't be true. We are going through a rough patch right now with the cost of imported newsprint shooting higher, thanks to this rupee, which keeps sliding. Our margins are under great pressure."

"Yeah, I am aware that the Indian rupee put up a dismal show in 2025," said Vishy, "I read that it's down around 4.5 per cent against the US dollar and is one of the worst performing emerging market currencies. Importers like you must be feeling the pinch."

Soumya reached for a golden fried medu vada. "Yeah, the government's inability to push through the trade deal

with the US has hurt our exports and economy. No wonder foreign investors like you are fleeing the country, taking the rupee down with them."

"The worst part is, I don't see any light at the end of the tunnel. The rupee is continuing to look weak in 2026 too," she added with a glum look.

Vasu, who had been engrossed in watching the waves while sipping his filter coffee, smiled. "I think the pessimism about the rupee is overdone guys. In fact, I think the rupee should not be depreciating at all. It should actually be appreciating."

"How can you say that? The FPIs are continuing to sell. Isn't that bad," Soumya asked.

"FPIs have net sold equities worth ₹1.66 lakh crore in 2025, but this is based on perception that the absence of a trade deal with the US will hurt Indian companies and stocks," said Vasu. "The reality is that a very small part of the listed stock universe is impacted by higher tariffs. Indian companies have reported strong revenue and profit growth in the first six months of 2025-26. The correction in stock prices last year has also moderated the valuation in many pockets of the stock market."

"True. Foreign investors were rushing to China, South Korea, Taiwan, etc., last year," said Vishy, busy with his bowl of

Weak US dollar and declining crude oil prices, along with a resilient economy, declining inflation and buoyant consumption should have made the rupee appreciate in 2025

mini-idlis floating in sambar, glistening with ghee on top. "The lure of AI stocks led them there. But if the AI bubble bursts, Indian stocks will be a good hedge."

"Once they realise their folly, they can return. Let's not forget that FPIs had purchased Indian debt worth ₹58,348 crore last year," added Vasu.

"But what about the impact of the additional tariff on the economy, exports, trade balance? Isn't that a negative for the rupee?" asked Soumya.

"Once again, it's a matter of false perception," said Vasu. "Total exports between April and November 2025 are up around 5 per cent and the exports to the US jumped 29 per cent in November. The impact of tariff is unlikely to be material for two reasons. One, exports to the US account for only 18 per cent of India's total exports. Two, major items such as mobile handsets and drugs and pharmaceuticals are not subject to the additional tariff."

Having finished their breakfast, the friends decided to take a stroll on the beach.

"What do you mean by saying that the rupee ought to be appreciating and not depreciating," asked Vishy, turning towards Vasu, as they walked along the sea.

"Well, there are several factors that are supportive to the rupee at this point," said Vasu. The dollar has been very weak since 2025 with the dollar index down 10 per cent last year due to the aggressive rate cuts by the US Fed. This has resulted in all the other currencies appreciating against the dollar. The rupee should have done the same."

"Another factor that influences the rupee's movement is crude oil prices, since India meets over 80 per cent of its domestic requirements through imports. Crude oil prices have done over 27 per cent in 2025. This would have

typically helped in strengthening the rupee."

"Finally, the domestic economy is in fine fettle, growing at over 7 per cent, inflation is cooling down, consumption has been buoyant thanks to fiscal measures such as income tax and GST rate cuts, corporate earnings are good. These factors should draw both FDI as well as foreign portfolio investors, when the tide turns," concluded Vasu.

"Going by what you are saying, the rupee should not have been weak at all. Then why is it sliding like this? This is very confusing," Soumya lamented.

"There is one final factor that is influencing the rupee — forex trading in the dollar-rupee contracts. Traders look for currency pairs which appear weak and take short positions or sell positions in them. They will keep pushing the prices lower because their short positions become profitable as the currency declines. Many of these traders are operating out of other countries such as Singapore, Dubai, Luxembourg etc," explained Vasu.

"But why is the RBI not selling dollar and helping the rupee?" asked Soumya.

"Well, the RBI is intervening at regular intervals. But it appears to be allowing the rupee to slide intentionally, to help exporters hurt by the US tariffs?"

"That is so unfair! What about us importers? Why do the government and the RBI not care about us?" continued Soumya.

"The government perhaps wants you to become *atmanirbhar* and start sourcing newsprint from domestic sources," said Vishy, joining in the banter. "Well anyway, thanks for all the *gyaan* on the rupee, prof."

"At least you have assured me that there is nothing drastically wrong with the rupee and have given me hope that it will begin appreciating soon. Thanks so much for that," said Soumya, waving goodbye.

Fostering innovation through experimentation

While knowledge is crucial for making informed decisions, experimentation helps assess and improve ideas

Sanjeev Malhotra

A glance at the most valuable firms in the world shows that an emphasis on innovation is a common trait they share. Apple, the world's most valuable company, has a history of innovations that have impacted daily life. Moderna, a leader in drug development and vaccines, has used technology to pave the way for medical innovation. Larger companies have access to bigger budgets, greater resources, brand awareness, and networks that allow more extensive R&D investments, the creation of new goods and services in short intervals, and market expansion.

On the other hand, startups are nimble, focused, and driven by disruptive ideas. The lean structure of most startups allows for the freedom of creativity, resulting in innovative solutions that make a significant difference. Therefore, any company, regardless of size, can boost its innovation quotient with meaningful impact by adopting the right methods and using moderate resources.

Innovation and uncertainty go hand in hand, and the challenge of evaluating and deciding the right way forward contributes to some of the confusion around it. While there isn't a single, reliable way to innovate, most agree it is

an intricate dance between knowledge and experimentation. Knowledge is crucial for making informed decisions, effectively allocating resources, increasing efficiency, and maximising return on investment. Experimentation, through systematic testing of ideas, offers a methodical way to assess and improve ideas and determine their potential for further development and funding. Organisations can thoroughly grasp and improve their innovation capabilities by focusing on these two facets: knowledge and experimentation.

GENERATION OF QUALITY IDEAS

Continuous learning promotes creativity and critical thinking, leading to innovative solutions and deeper insights. An organisation's capacity to adapt and launch novel products is largely dependent on its knowledge base. Various forms of knowledge involved in innovation include technical know-how, consumer insights, personal and experiential knowledge, and documented information.

The development and discovery of quality ideas are supported by an organisation's knowledge quotient, which is its ability to access relevant information, effectively utilise it for learning purposes, and derive benefits from it. Companies need to stay abreast of the latest developments in technology and its applications or techniques for



CATALYST. Experimentation transforms ideas into tangible innovations. GETTY IMAGES

process improvement being researched, developed, or adopted worldwide. The knowledge base should regularly be expanded by exploring diverse domains.

Experimentation fuels innovation by providing a structured way to test and refine ideas, gauging their potential. It helps prioritise concepts, involve customers, define target markets, optimise marketing, and build internal buy-in. Key processes include choosing a testing method, defining testable assumptions, selecting the target audience, crafting objective questions, planning analysis, and executing the test and analysis. By following these best practices, companies can optimise product development and reduce innovation risk.

Experimentation benefits every department, involving teams from all areas. CEOs have used experimentation

for initiatives including innovation, market growth, and investment validation. Marketers may optimise product suggestions and pricing strategies, while marketing teams can enhance the customer journey for retention and lifetime value. Finance teams can monitor and assess ROI for various projects. Encouraging experimentation promotes better customer experiences and data-driven decision-making.

Failure and mistakes are inevitable parts of experimentation, offering learning opportunities and eliminating poor ideas. It is critical to recognise that failure is a normal part of the learning process, providing vital feedback and progress opportunities. Reframing our approach to failure involves viewing it as an essential step towards successful innovation. For instance, lessons learned from the failure of Chandrayaan-2 contributed to the success of India's third lunar mission.

Innovation thrives on the synergy of knowledge and experimentation. As knowledge fuels creative problem-solving and growth, experimentation transforms ideas into tangible innovations. Embracing this symbiotic relationship enables us to drive significant progress.

The writer is CEO of Meitl Nascosm Center of Excellence

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

GDP growth projections

According to the first advance estimates released by the National Statistics Office, the Indian economy is projected to grow at a healthy 7.4 per cent in 2025-26. However, a cause for concern is the relatively modest growth of nominal GDP, projected at only 8 per cent, which is significantly lower than the 10.1 per cent assumed in the Union Budget. This divergence could have serious implications for the government's fiscal position. The Union government must initiate timely corrective measures to strengthen revenue mobilisation, rationalise

expenditure and ensure fiscal prudence without compromising growth momentum.

M Jayaram

Shivamurthy, TN

Execution matters

The GDP growth projection is not only reassuring but also revealing. Growth led by services and manufacturing is welcome, yet the softer outlook for agriculture and the modest nominal expansion merit attention. Headline numbers can mask uneven demand and job creation. Sustaining momentum will

depend less on forecasts and more on execution — raising productivity, easing logistics, and supporting small firms that employ most workers.

Stable financials are an advantage, but they should be used to crowd in private investment and strengthen rural incomes.

Abhishat Barathi

Chennai

Gig workers' welfare

Appropriates 'Gig realities' (January 8), one cannot deny that these online platforms have created millions of jobs across the country, but these

are temporary in nature. Gig workers cannot continue to earn their livelihood through these means for long. The 10-minute delivery time should be thrown out of the window. Gig workers' welfare cannot be compromised, so it would be better if their genuine and modest demands are met.

Bal Govind

Noida

Regulation vital

For many workers, gig work is no longer a side income but a primary livelihood, shaped by opaque

algorithms and shifting rules. Regulation, therefore, cannot be treated as a brake on innovation alone; it is equally a safeguard for fairness and stability. What is missing is credible, shared data on earnings, hours, and risks, without which policymaking remains guesswork. Strengthening welfare boards, ensuring transparent contributions by platforms, and enforcing basic protections need not stifle growth. Done carefully, such measures can benefit workers and platforms alike.

M Barathi

Chennai

Higher aspirations

Translating intent into action in higher education

Jai Mohan Pandit

India's higher education sector is no longer short of vision, as the the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 shows.

But the success of reforms will depend less on new regulations and more on the capacity to implement those already in place.

There is broad consensus among students, faculty members, researchers, and administrators that regulatory clarity is essential.

But these regulations are often announced before institutions are prepared to implement them. Curriculum redesign, credit mapping, student advising systems, digital platforms, assessment reform, and data reporting are not procedural adjustments. They are complex, resource-intensive exercises requiring time, trained personnel, coordinated leadership, and stable internal systems.

Higher education institutions need to shift from compliance (the checklist approach) to capability.

With global universities expanding physical campuses, partnerships, and online offerings, domestic institutions are competing on academic quality, research ecosystems, student services, global exposure, and institutional professionalism. In this context, weak implementation is not merely an internal inefficiency; it becomes a strategic disadvantage.

Indian institutions must also professionalise placement and career development functions for credible and equitable employability outcomes.

RESEARCH PUSH

A key aspirational expectation is to augment faculty with professional research staff, allowing academics to focus on intellectual leadership while trained professionals support proposal development, funding acquisition, project execution, reporting, and impact dissemination.

Reliance on contractual faculty affects the long-term academic standards.

As regulatory complexity increases and competition intensifies, institutions can no longer rely primarily on faculty to manage admissions, examinations, accreditation, rankings, funding proposals, compliance reporting, alumni engagement, and student services. There is a need to professionalise key institutional functions, such as finance and funding mobilisation, human resource



HIGHER EDUCATION. Implementation holds the key to success.

management, placements, alumni relations, accreditation and rankings, research, communication and outreach, student and staff well-being, sports, and CSR and community engagement.

Discussions on mental health often focus primarily on students. While student well-being is critical, teachers and staff too face comparable levels of stress, tension, and emotional exhaustion.

A recurring aspirational expectation is that the next phase of reform must be anchored in performance, and merit-based systems. Whether in faculty recruitment, promotions, research funding, institutional autonomy, or administrative leadership, aspirants seek transparent criteria, fair evaluation, and predictable outcomes.

The government has largely delivered on policy articulation and regulatory direction. The next leap depends on whether institutions can deliver on execution, governance maturity, professional capacity-building, and performance management.

At the same time, effective implementation requires government support through transition funding, training programmes, model frameworks, and realistic timelines, particularly for public and state institutions facing financial and capacity constraints.

India's higher education reforms have reached a decisive stage. The architecture is in place. The rules have been notified. The intent is visible.

What will now determine success is implementation on the ground. Ultimately, reform will be judged by whether institutions translate policy into better learning, stronger research, fairer careers, merit-based systems, and healthier, more humane campuses.

The writer is with IIGDR



C RAJ KUMAR

The Government's end of year economic review announced that we have overtaken Japan to become the world's fourth largest economy. The review noted that India's gross domestic product has already reached about \$4.18 trillion (€3.55 trillion), and is projected to reach \$7.3 trillion by 2030.

As our aspirations to play a leading role in the global economy increases, it is important for us to pay greater attention towards legal and judicial capacity building as a central facet of India's economic governance.

While 1991 ushered in the opening up of India's economy with an expanding role of the private sector, the last two decades have dramatically transformed India's corporate and commercial sector with significant impetus on laws relating to economic governance.

The pre-1991 economic model was based upon courts handling mostly civil, criminal, land, and family-related legal disputes and not complex commercial transactions. However, the 1991 economic reforms led to a rise in FDI, infrastructure projects, private capital, corporate restructuring, banking and financial sector issues, and more recently, the evolution of a digital economy.

JUDICIAL CAPACITY BUILDING

While we know that 4.78 crore cases are pending across all levels of the judiciary, government entities are involved in nearly 50 per cent of all litigation, a significant part of which is relating to tax, regulatory, infrastructure, and contract-related matters.

Undoubtedly, within this broader data set, it needs to be noted that civil/commercial cases are significant. The corporate and commercial uncertainty is further exacerbated by the fact that among these cases, more than one crore are civil cases of which more than 57 per cent are pending for over a year.

The institutional expectations have also arisen significantly because of which commercial cases have grown exponentially — for example, IBC-related litigation has consistently increased over the years, and the National Company Law Tribunal (NCLT) alone has over 14,961 cases pending as of March 31, 2025. The unfortunate reality is the judiciary is still structurally designed through the framework of a 20th century dispute resolution model while trying to also deal with 21st century commercial realities.

The World Bank's Doing Business 2020 indicators demonstrated that with high-level policy interventions, India could significantly improve its overall



GETTY IMAGES/STOCKPHOTO

Building legal and judicial capacity

CASE PILE-UP. Judges need to be well equipped to handle increasingly complex cases relating to economic and regulatory matters

rankings (rank 63 in ease of doing business, an impressive jump from 142 in 2014).

However, the issue of legal and judicial capacity building remains a major challenge as India is still ranked a poor 163rd on enforcing contracts. It is not a good situation for the economic future of India if it takes nearly 1,500 days on average for a company to resolve a standard commercial dispute in a court of first instance. The World Bank's methodology is centred on time, cost, and the quality of judicial process.

TRAINING THE JUDGES

The five most important and influential areas of judicial adjudication where judges need to be intellectually engaged, their training pedagogically structured with long-term capacity building and education are:

Corporate governance and company law: There is a need for training modules developed which focus on understanding board structures, fiduciary duties, related-party

transactions, shareholder agreements, acquisition agreements besides new and emerging areas such as ESG, shareholder activism, and digital corporate governance. We need to build capacity within the State and National Judicial Academies through the involvement of academics, law firm partners, and industry regulators.

Commercial contracts and complex transactions: Today's judges need to have an understanding of infrastructure contracts, PPP models, M&A structures, project finance, and construction contracts. They are called upon to adjudicate disputes arising out of such matters. The existing knowledge based on understanding contract risk allocation, indemnities, warranties, and financial covenants needs to be substantially augmented to deal with domestic, international, and cross-border disputes that may get adjudicated in Indian courts. The Dubai International Financial Centre (DIFC) is a good example where it trains judges jointly with financial regulators on commercial and corporate structures.

Financial, banking, insurance and insolvency law: Our judges need to develop understanding of new insolvency frameworks, restructuring principles, and even valuation methodologies. Training and capacity building for law and economic analysis is absolutely essential for our judges. For example, US Bankruptcy Courts conduct specialised annual judicial

education programmes sponsored by the Federal Judicial Centre.

Competition law and market economics: While the establishment of the Competition Commission of India has created new levels of expertise in these matters, the core judicial function requires basic knowledge and understanding of market definition, dominance assessment, and economic tools. For example, EU judges receive training by the European Judicial Training Network in industrial economics and market analysis.

Technology, digital economy, and data governance: The speed with which issues relating to technology and AI are beginning to dominate the legal sector requires a better level of preparedness on the part of the judges. Understanding IT contracts, IP agreements, fintech, crypto-assets, and appreciation of the interdisciplinary aspects of cyber security and AI governance has become essential. Courts in Singapore and Estonia have developed structured training on algorithmic accountability and AI-in-contract law.

Chief Justice Surya Kant has already announced that addressing preparedness will be one of its institutional priorities. This objective can be met by a reimagining of the way Indian courts have dealt with corporate, commercial, and economic matters.

The writer is the Founding Vice Chancellor of O.P. Jindal Global University

thehindu **businessline.**

TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

January 9, 2006

FILs find alternative in Benchmark ETF

Foreign institutional investors, who have reached the permissible limit in banking stocks, appeared to be tapping alternative bank-specific equity investment schemes. This is evident in the rising corpus of Banking Index Benchmark Exchange Traded Fund (Bank BEES), a passively managed exchange-traded fund tracking the NSE's CNX Banking Index.

Now, AIR stutters on cricket broadcast

With just a few days to go for the India-Pakistan cricket series to begin, not just the telecast rights but negotiations for radio rights too have reached an impasse. The Dubai-based ARY Digital, which holds the radio rights to these matches, and Prasar Bharati have not been able to reach a financial agreement. According to senior Prasar Bharati officials, ARY had initially asked for \$2.50,000 for live broadcast of three Tests and five ODIs on All India Radio (AIR).

Not interested in Air Sahara: Mallaya

The Chairman of Kingfisher Airlines, Mr Vijay Mallaya, has said he was not interested in buying Air Sahara Airlines. He said Kingfisher was expanding rapidly and he would like to focus on its growth.

Greenland, looking for investments

Sanne Waas

Greenland's business community is split on the impact of Donald Trump's renewed interest in the Arctic island.

While some see commercial opportunity, others say harsh rhetoric about taking control of the territory is dampening near-term activity.

The revived talk has sparked new rush by US officials to identify business deals and other ways to deepen ties with Greenland, according to people familiar with the matter. For now, discussions are focused on mining projects, hydroelectric power and other ventures that could expand the US economic footprint on the island. "Greenland is now in the position to decide its future, to build up its economic independence," Eldur



GREENLAND. Opportunities, challenges exist.

Olafsson, founder and chief executive officer of Amaroq Ltd, told Bloomberg Television on Thursday. "There is opportunity in this."

The Toronto-based company operates a newly opened gold mine in Greenland and holds the largest portfolio of mineral exploration licenses in the territory. Last year, Amaroq attracted strong demand from investors on both sides of the

Atlantic in an oversubscribed funding round and has since seen interest from state-backed agencies in the US and Europe.

The US president has "really put Greenland on the map" since he first touted the idea of buying the island in 2019, Olafsson said. "People saw there are resources there."

Trump "doesn't want to lose time to get something done," Olafsson said. "That overall is a good thing, because Greenland needs investment." The island's public finances are under mounting pressure and its fiscal position suffered a "surprisingly sharp deterioration" last year, according to an analysis published this week by Denmark's central bank. It underscores the urgency of discovering new sources of growth as self-reliance, **ECONOMY**

On **businessline.in**

Challenges facing India's gig economy

As the gig economy functions within a largely informal labour market, the government must determine how to ensure social protection, job security and stable earnings, say **Pritam Datta** and **Raj Kumar Banerjee**

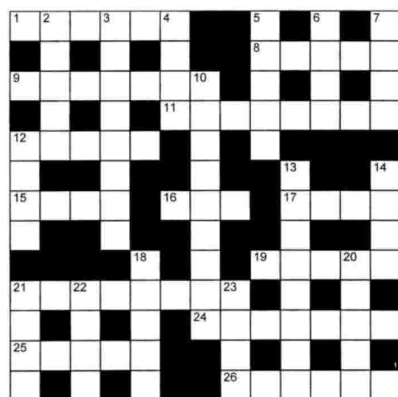
<https://tinyurl.com/483mbc8d>

Amidst the X's Grok conundrum, there is more to fix

There is an urgent need to have a proactive policy to curb explicit content generated through AI, **Harshita Gupta** and **Utkarsh Yadav** point out

<https://tinyurl.com/57mc8rk3>

BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2594



EASY

ACROSS

01. Good-humoured chaff (6)
08. Lift (5)
09. Over-exerts (7)
11. Ladies' men (8)
12. Ensnares (5)
15. Distance measure (4)
16. Curious, rum (3)
17. Egg-shaped (4)
19. Thrusts home dagger (5)
21. Blue-pencilled (8)
24. Descriptive of coastal resort (7)
25. Law-breaking (5)
26. Duty list (6)

DOWN

02. Thespian (5)
03. Walked all over (8)
04. Circle (4)
05. Square-bashing (5)
06. Omen (4)
07. Where sailors eat together (4)
10. They rise by the shore (4,5)
12. Domesticated (4)
13. Competitions (8)
14. Positive symbol (4)
18. Currency (5)
20. Get to move (5)
21. Male bird (4)
22. Pin down (4)
23. Expensive (4)

NOT SO EASY

ACROSS

01. One seeking to lose weight might go in for chaff (6)
08. An increase in salary both is and are achievable (5)
09. Bits of melodies heard as one uses the colander (7)
11. Being dashing with ladies, they irritate workers (8)
12. Gets, and holds fast, one's personal luggage (5)
15. How wide the look of pleasure that hasn't begun! (4)
16. It is not even curious (3)
17. Where duck may be scored before five by a learner (4)
19. Makes the point register the label in craft (5)
21. Vetted and deleted, or seen mistakenly in the record (8)
24. Team such as Southend, where one may find (7)
25. Credit given to large number that is surrounded by felony (5)
26. Roll of names showing bird to have lost nothing (6)

DOWN

02. To him, work may be all play (5)
03. Man on the road guided one to being walked underfoot (8)
04. Try to get through, but get the engaged sign (4)
05. To march up and down a barrack square may create a hole (5)
06. Mark a twelfth part of the Zodiac (4)
07. Some old dish of food looking like a dog's dinner! (4)
08. They are formed of many particles raised along the shore (4,5)
12. There's no excitement in being so cultivated (4)
13. Fights the right-wing examinations (8)
14. This factor, being something added, may be positive (4)
18. The necessary unit appears in my holding (5)
20. Move statement of fiscal policy that's inconclusive (5)
21. Prepare to fire a bird (4)
22. There's no score about a thing it's handy to have (4)
23. Well-liked, but not easily affordable (4)

SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2593

ACROSS 1. Marriage 4. Brow 8. Nod 9. Choke 10. Gin 11. Monsoon 12. Inter 13. Blind as a bat 17. Niche 18. Grimace 20. Woe 21. Brain 22. Ore 23. Done 24. Feckless

DOWN 1. Minims 2. Redan 3. Groan 5. Regatta 6. Wintry 7. Rectation 9. Crown Derby 14. Lectern 15. Gnawed 16. Severs 18. Grave 19. Alone

OUR VIEW

MY VIEW | FARM TRUTHS



Why Census 2027 is not just another headcount

By giving us granular data on a host of variables, it will enable better governance. However, it also risks roiling the country over delimitation and caste—issues that defy easy solutions

On Wednesday, the same day that the National Statistics Office published its first advance estimate of GDP for 2025-26, the government announced that India's long-overdue census will kick off on 1 April 2026. The coincidence is apt, even if unintended. If economic growth is about prosperity, the census is about people. And since the aim of any democracy is to ensure that prosperity reaches all its people, we need to know more about the latter. It's here that Census 2027 is expected to play a vital role. For starters, though our population has overtaken China's, according to Worldometer, a website that offers real-time statistics, our headcount is likely to conclusively show that India is now the world's most populous country. But that's not all. As the 16th of a decadal series that goes as far back as 1872, its report will serve as our biggest source of primary data at the grassroots level. It will offer information on a host of parameters, such as housing, religion, language, literacy, business activity, migration, fertility and so on that can be sliced for analysis by village, town and ward. This will aid in planning, policy formulation and public administration so that welfare schemes reach their intended beneficiaries.

Notably, this will be our first digital census, to be conducted by around 3 million enumerators. Data will be collected using mobile apps that will be available for both Android and iOS phones. There will also be an option for self-enumeration within 15 days just before a 30-day span scheduled for house-listing operations. In another first, Census 2027 will digitally capture caste data. The last comprehensive caste count was conducted back in 1931 under the British

Raj. Census 2027 is important for another big reason. In accordance with a cabinet decision of the Vajpayee government, its data will determine how 'delimitation' is done—the process, that is, of fixing the number of seats in the Lok Sabha and state legislative assemblies after the constituencies they represent are redrawn. Given that southern and western states have had greater success in population control *vis-à-vis* states in north, central and eastern India, any remake of our representation map by the latest headcount is bound to skew political power in favour of the latter states. Unsurprisingly, southern states have been particularly vocal in opposing such an exercise. They argue that it will effectively penalize states which reduced their birth rates and tilt the composition of Parliament against the spirit of federalism. However, the situation we have today, where the allocation of Lok Sabha seats among states is based on the 1971 census, also goes against the spirit of representative democracy in a federal republic. Consider this. The average Member of Parliament (MP) from the five southern states of Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka, Telangana and Andhra Pradesh represents 1.94 million voters, while the average MP from the five populous states of Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Bihar, Haryana and Madhya Pradesh speaks for as many as 2.57 million.

As we approach this exercise that's slated to begin next fiscal year, Census 2027 can only be viewed as a mixed blessing at best. On one hand, it will give the government a far more granular and informed picture of the people it governs, which is crucial from a policy perspective. On the other, it could stir discontent over regional representation and caste, both of which need to be addressed—but defy easy solutions.

TULSI JAYAKUMAR



is professor, economics and executive director, Centre for Family Business & Entrepreneurship at Bhavan's SPIJMR.

The unfolding crisis in Venezuela draws into sharp relief a less-recognized feature of the modern global economy: the movement of expectations often matters more than that of physical goods. Venezuela has long been a distant yet symbolically important pillar of India's energy security framework. Actual Venezuelan crude oil imports into India have been negligible of late, constrained as they are by US sanctions, under-investment and systemic decay. Yet, the current turmoil is already affecting us—not through tankers arriving at our ports, but via shifts in market psychology and geopolitical signalling.

Global markets do not price commodities based on today's supply alone, but also on the perceived risk of tomorrow's disruptions. After the US 'capture' of Venezuela's president Nicolás Maduro, global market prices have been largely stable, thanks to over-supply and the country's low share of overall output, but an 'uncertainty premium' may start getting priced in should a power

vacuum in Caracas threaten instability beyond Washington's ability to contain. For an economy like India's, which is structurally sensitive to the slightest movement in the price of oil, expectations of volatility could result in inflationary pressures that its central bank may need to guard against, regardless of whether a single barrel of Venezuelan oil is imported. Thus, the 'Venezuela factor' could come to weigh on India's fiscal arithmetic and monetary policy not through trade flows but expectations.

While oil company stock prices in India have fallen in response to uncertainty, an air of anticipation surrounds the private energy sector. Major refiners such as Reliance and Nayara have invested in complex secondary processing units designed to handle heavy, sour crudes—the type extracted from Venezuela's Orinoco Belt. If the US pushes for India's Russian oil imports to be replaced with Venezuelan supplies, Maduro's ouster could open up more options for them. Markets seem to expect that a post-crisis Venezuela, stabilized under US oversight, will eventually re-enter global markets with discounted heavy crude to service its huge sovereign debts. Even without Venezuelan supply, the mere prospect of its return could act as a 'shadow option' for Indian refiners to use

as psychological leverage for bargains with West Asian suppliers. But there is a counter-expectation too: the fear that Venezuelan energy infrastructure is so dilapidated that any recovery will take years. This creates a strategic split: Indian firms must balance the hope of future gains with an immediate need to diversify their sources of crude oil.

A shift in expectations is even more dramatic for India's public sector companies. ONGC Videsh Ltd and Indian Oil Corp have significant Venezuelan exposures, including unpaid dividends, stalled projects and assets written off as dead capital. That could change. What was assumed to be a permanent loss is now being re-imagined as potentially recoverable via debt restructurings, equity swaps or renewed dividend flows. Equity markets are re-rating these companies not on current output, but on anticipated political outcomes in Caracas. If a transition regime honours legacy contracts, India would benefit.

Strengthened balance sheets would allow these state-run companies to pursue domestic exploration and capital investment more aggressively. This would support expectations of India's energy security even before a single rupee is realized. Such an economic ripple would be psychological but powerful. Diplomatically, the Venezuela crisis is a litmus test for India's strategic autonomy. As the US asserts its authority over the Western Hemisphere, it might expect India, as a democratic partner in the Indo-Pacific, to align its energy diplomacy with its aims.

At the same time, Russia, China and much of the Global South expect India to uphold its neutral stance. This clash of expectations reduces India's room for manoeuvre. If India is perceived as leaning too far in favour of a US-backed administration in Caracas, it risks alienating partners in the BRICS framework; if it remains too detached, it may lose its seat at the table when new Venezuelan oil con-

cessions are distributed. In that case, the aforementioned anticipation of benefits could evaporate. New Delhi must therefore take complex considerations into account.

Perhaps the most subtle but undesirable impact would be an 'expectation of abundance' that an optimistic scenario working out might foster within Indian policy circles. A pro-US Venezuela and repaired relations with Washington could lead to complacency over India's green-energy transition. If we begin to count on an era of heavy crude supply from the Americas, the urgency to fund green hydrogen projects or accelerate electric-vehicle adoption might diminish. Any such 're-fossilization' based on expectations could keep India's economy tethered to hydrocarbons for longer.

Paradoxically, expectations of future oil security could undermine the diversification that true energy security requires. Ultimately, the Venezuela shock teaches us that in a hyper-connected world, significant shifts can take place in the minds of policymakers and investors long before they manifest at the pump. Managing these expectations and balancing hopes of gains against the reality of uncertainty is today's central challenge for Indian statecraft.

These are the author's personal views.

Goldilocks or distress locked in? Deflation is hurting rural India

Weakening prices may seem good for us but mask inadequate demand and income vulnerabilities



HIMANSHU
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Inflation has been negative in four of the last six months, including the last two. Prices of food articles have declined consecutively for seven months. In fact, almost all major categories of food, from cereals, pulses and spices to fruits and vegetables, have shown deflation for almost six months. As for other items, prices have been stagnant. The CPI shows a similar trend: food inflation has been negative for six months. This has now split over to non-food categories, which are seeing prices rise very slowly.

Deflationary pressure has not arisen from any single category, nor is it due to seasonal variations. It is part of a general trend. While a higher price base last year would have had some impact, it alone does not explain the sustained decline in prices. Part of it is also driven by a decline in global food prices.

Overall, low inflation may be a boon for policymakers—specifically India's central bank, which reduced its policy interest rate by 125 basis points last year. But it may also signal stress in sections of the economy, as some other pieces of data seem to suggest, particularly in rural India.

Agriculture appears to be the hardest hit, with prices in wholesale markets for many major crops now below India's official minimum support prices (MSPs). Wholesale prices of major crops

such as pulses, oilseeds and cotton are below these state-set levels. Soyabean prices have fared the worst. On the other hand, input prices are rising. Fertilizer prices have risen partly due to costlier imports, but also due to supply shortages in the domestic market. This has hit the income of farmers. In any case, farm incomes, when measured in terms of income per cultivator, have seen a real decline since 2016 and there appears to be no reversal of this trend. While there has been some uptick in rural wages for agricultural work, non-farm wages have stagnated. Recent reports also suggest an increase in loan defaults in the agricultural sector, another sign of stress.

To put this in perspective, the recent spell of weakening prices for almost six months has been the longest in the past six years. In general, while low inflation may be driven by many factors, it signals declining incomes and thus demand in the economy. Domestic demand, be it consumption or investment, has failed to lift off.

Unfortunately, government efforts to boost demand have focused more on the urban middle class and taxpayers, who have received concessions. But the rural economy has largely been left out. Moreover, with the government now moving to a restructured rural employment guarantee programme, even the modest job cushion that was available to the rural poor is likely to weaken.

Whether low inflation and apparent high growth signify a 'Goldilocks' moment or signal an impending phase of stagflation is not an easy distinction to make at this juncture. But it validates secondary evidence of a demand crisis in India's rural economy.

Given the prevailing uncertainty on the external front, reviving domestic demand is the only option for India's policymakers. The surest way to do this is by raising income levels across the economy, particularly in rural regions. This requires the government to raise fiscal spending aimed at doing just that.

QUICK READ

India's low inflation and high growth have been hailed as a Goldilocks scenario but falling prices are part of a broader deflationary trend that reflects key economic weaknesses.

Price deflation is bad news for incomes in rural India, which was already under pressure. Given today's trade uncertainty, weak domestic demand needs to be addressed on an urgent basis.

10 YEARS AGO



JUST A THOUGHT

Deflation means a slowdown of income growth. Markets shrink, new capital investment and employment also taper off, so wages decline.

MICHAEL HUDSON

THEIR VIEW

Venezuela's oil shake-up could go either way for India

TULSI JAYAKUMAR



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The unfolding crisis in Venezuela draws into sharp relief a less-recognized feature of the modern global economy: the movement of expectations often matters more than that of physical goods. Venezuela has long been a distant yet symbolically important pillar of India's energy security framework. Actual Venezuelan crude oil imports into India have been negligible of late, constrained as they are by US sanctions, under-investment and systemic decay. Yet, the current turmoil is already affecting us—not through tankers arriving at our ports, but via shifts in market psychology and geopolitical signalling.

Global markets do not price commodities based on today's supply alone, but also on the perceived risk of tomorrow's disruptions. After the US 'capture' of Venezuela's president Nicolás Maduro, global market prices have been largely stable, thanks to over-supply and the country's low share of overall output, but an 'uncertainty premium' may start getting priced in should a power

vacuum in Caracas threaten instability beyond Washington's ability to contain. For an economy like India's, which is structurally sensitive to the slightest movement in the price of oil, expectations of volatility could result in inflationary pressures that its central bank may need to guard against, regardless of whether a single barrel of Venezuelan oil is imported. Thus, the 'Venezuela factor' could come to weigh on India's fiscal arithmetic and monetary policy not through trade flows but expectations.

While oil company stock prices in India have fallen in response to uncertainty, an air of anticipation surrounds the private energy sector. Major refiners such as Reliance and Nayara have invested in complex secondary processing units designed to handle heavy, sour crudes—the type extracted from Venezuela's Orinoco Belt. If the US pushes for India's Russian oil imports to be replaced with Venezuelan supplies, Maduro's ouster could open up more options for them. Markets seem to expect that a post-crisis Venezuela, stabilized under US oversight, will eventually re-enter global markets with discounted heavy crude to service its huge sovereign debts. Even without Venezuelan supply, the mere prospect of its return could act as a 'shadow option' for Indian refiners to use

as psychological leverage for bargains with West Asian suppliers. But there is a counter-expectation too: the fear that Venezuelan energy infrastructure is so dilapidated that any recovery will take years. This creates a strategic split: Indian firms must balance the hope of future gains with an immediate need to diversify their sources of crude oil.

A shift in expectations is even more dramatic for India's public sector companies. ONGC Videsh Ltd and Indian Oil Corp have significant Venezuelan exposures, including unpaid dividends, stalled projects and assets written off as dead capital. That could change. What was assumed to be a permanent loss is now being re-imagined as potentially recoverable via debt restructurings, equity swaps or renewed dividend flows. Equity markets are re-rating these companies not on current output, but on anticipated political outcomes in Caracas. If a transition regime honours legacy contracts, India would benefit.

Strengthened balance sheets would allow these state-run companies to pursue domestic exploration and capital investment more aggressively. This would support expectations of India's energy security even before a single rupee is realized. Such an economic ripple would be psychological but powerful. Diplomatically, the Venezuela crisis is a litmus test for India's strategic autonomy. As the US asserts its authority over the Western Hemisphere, it might expect India, as a democratic partner in the Indo-Pacific, to align its energy diplomacy with its aims.

At the same time, Russia, China and much of the Global South expect India to uphold its neutral stance. This clash of expectations reduces India's room for manoeuvre. If India is perceived as leaning too far in favour of a US-backed administration in Caracas, it risks alienating partners in the BRICS framework; if it remains too detached, it may lose its seat at the table when new Venezuelan oil con-

cessions are distributed. In that case, the aforementioned anticipation of benefits could evaporate. New Delhi must therefore take complex considerations into account.

Perhaps the most subtle but undesirable impact would be an 'expectation of abundance' that an optimistic scenario working out might foster within Indian policy circles. A pro-US Venezuela and repaired relations with Washington could lead to complacency over India's green-energy transition. If we begin to count on an era of heavy crude supply from the Americas, the urgency to fund green hydrogen projects or accelerate electric-vehicle adoption might diminish. Any such 're-fossilization' based on expectations could keep India's economy tethered to hydrocarbons for longer.

Paradoxically, expectations of future oil security could undermine the diversification that true energy security requires. Ultimately, the Venezuela shock teaches us that in a hyper-connected world, significant shifts can take place in the minds of policymakers and investors long before they manifest at the pump. Managing these expectations and balancing hopes of gains against the reality of uncertainty is today's central challenge for Indian statecraft.

These are the author's personal views.



THEIR VIEW

MINT CURATOR

Did a GST reset boost spending? Consumer surveys suggest not

Neither RBI's consumer confidence surveys nor Nabard's rural readings point to expenditure buoyancy after India's rate cuts



NIKHIL GUPTA
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The prices of various items such as footwear, clothing, consumer durables (such as air-conditioners and TV sets) and automobiles (cars, two-wheelers, etc) have fallen post-GST rationalization. Our calculations suggest that inflation in India's GST-basket (weight of 17%) decelerated to 2.1% year-on-year in October 2025 and further to 1.8% in November from a stable 3% in the previous 14 months. Core inflation excluding gold was at a record low of 2.5% year-on-year in November, down from 3% in August-September.

The impact of GST rationalization, nonetheless, was expected to go far beyond lower inflation. It was supposed to put more money in the hands of consumers, addressing weak income growth, which was expected to convert into higher consumer spending and thus economic growth. In the absence of high-frequency official data on income and spending, various consumer surveys act as a crucial bridge to gauge current perceptions of these two key variables.

Announced on 3 September 2025, India's GST rate cuts went into effect on 22 September. According to the Reserve Bank of India's (RBI) bi-monthly urban consumer confidence survey (UCCS) conducted over the first 10 days of November 2025, the proportion of respondents perceiving a (gross) rise in income and spending declined in comparison with findings of the same survey carried out from 28 August to 6 September. On a net basis (the share of respondents reporting more minus those expecting less, i.e., with those reporting 'no change' left out), while more respondents reported higher income in November (in line with the past trend), the share of respondents perceiving higher spending was the lowest in the past eight UCCS rounds. RBI's Rural Consumer Confidence Survey (RCCS) also shows that the percentage of respondents perceiving a (gross) rise in income and spending declined in November *vis-à-vis* September. On a net basis, while there was a slight drop in income perceptions in November, perceived spending was the lowest in the last 10 surveys.

National Bank of Agriculture and Rural Development (Nabard) has also been publishing a bi-monthly survey since September 2024, its Rural Economic Conditions & Sentiments Survey (RECSS), conducted around the same time as RBI's. In sharp contrast with RBI survey findings, 42.2% of rural households—the highest on record—reported an income increase in November 2025, with even more households witnessing higher consumption. On a net basis, respondents were the most optimistic on income growth in that survey, while the net response on consumption was also at its highest level in the last four rounds.



Such divergent survey results indicate that we have no clear evidence yet of higher spending growth after last year's GST reset.

Some readers may argue that one should look at September surveys instead of November's. But the results are inconclusive even then. A higher (net) proportion of respondents under the UCCS continued to report higher income in September, but no major rise was seen in spending perceptions. Likewise, the RCCS showed continued improvement in income but with only a marginal rise in spending. Interestingly, the improvements seen in Nabard's November rural surveys were not visible in September. The net percentage of respondents reporting higher consumption was the lowest in September and that for income was lower than found in the July survey.

Others may argue that we should look at future expectations rather than the current perceptions reported by these surveys. This is difficult to agree with. Since the GST rate cuts were effective from 22 September 2025, their largest positive impact on perceptions should have been in the immediate months rather than after a quarter or a year. Even so, net responses on one-year-ahead spending expectations under RBI's UCCS and RCCS were lower in the September and November rounds than in July. Further, while Nabard's survey doesn't provide consumption

expectations, its net response on expected income during the next quarter was lower in September and November surveys than in July, while expected income for the next year increased in November surveys (after falling in September).

Overall, whether we look at September or November surveys, rural or urban, RBI's or Nabard's, current perceptions or expectations, there is no conclusive evidence of higher spending driven by GST relief. Optimism on income is mixed at best.

QUICK READ

GST rationalization was meant to put more money in the hands of consumers, address weak income growth and spur retail spending in support of India's economic expansion.

Yet, whether we look at RBI's or Nabard's consumer-level surveys, we have no conclusive evidence of higher expenditure driven by GST relief. Optimism on income is mixed at best.

them. However, 'rational expectations theory' underlines the importance of perceptions for an economy to achieve high growth.

We await hard numbers, but a decline in current spending perceptions found by RBI's RCCS and UCCS and only a small rise in Nabard's RECSS go against the narrative of high buoyancy in consumer expenditure.

Wake up: Indian women aren't in search of Western approval

The West's 'discovery' of Indian beauty reflects colonial attitudes



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Today's global celebration of Indian women feels patronizing. @LOSTINAFICTION/IX

There's been a curious phenomenon on my social media feeds over the last few weeks. The internet has suddenly discovered Indian women, and decided that we are... 'hot'.

The so-called rise of the Indian 'baddie' (Gen-Z slang for a woman who is attractive and stylish) has been fuelled by widely shared clips on TikTok and Instagram of young South Asian women dancing and singing along to pop star Tyla's recent concert in Mumbai. This coincided with the first time an Indian model—25-year-old Bhavitha Mandava from Hyderabad—opened a Chanel show, a moment Western commentators hailed as a breakthrough for the world's most populous nation.

But for many women, both in India and in the Indian diaspora (like myself), the tone has felt less celebratory and more patronizing. The implication seems to be that our allure only counts now because it's finally been validated by international fashion houses or global pop culture.

This framing isn't new. For centuries, Western perceptions of femininity have been shaped by the imperial gaze—a term used to describe how colonizers framed their subjects as inferior to justify domination—one that alternately exoticized or dismissed us. When Britain ruled the subcontinent, Victorian morality heavily influenced how citizens were represented. Women were routinely portrayed as either dangerously sensual or devoutly chaste, rarely as fully autonomous individuals with desires of their own.

One of the clearest examples of this distortion appears in Sir Richard Burton's English translation of the *Kama Sutra* during that era, when the soldier and explorer, influenced by Victorian moral norms, omitted or altered passages that highlighted women's autonomy. Feminist scholars like Wendy Doniger have argued that colonial translations of Sanskrit texts often flattened women's sexuality, stripping them of their complexity while recasting their sensuality in ways that catered to Western fascination.

This legacy produced a contradiction that persists today. None of this is to suggest that these attitudes were imported wholesale by the British. Hindu scriptures, including texts such as the *Manusmriti* (Laws of Manu), contain rigid prescriptions about gender that structured social life for centuries, even though it's thought the text dates from circa 100CE.

Colonial rule didn't invent patriarchy but codified it, layering Victorian norms on to an already unequal system. British laws

like the Contagious Diseases Acts subjected Indian women suspected of sex work to invasive medical surveillance, reinforcing a hierarchy that put men at the top—a way of life that survived even after colonial rule ended. Skin colour was also a factor. Colonization embedded the idea that people with fair skin were the ruling class, while those with darker skin were viewed as inferior (and as subjects).

The imperial gaze extended far beyond gender. In his book *Empireland*, author Sathnam Sanghera explores how racialized stereotypes established during British rule continue to influence attitudes today. Such classifications relied on pseudo-scientific thinking, but their effects endure.

Women were impacted by a broader Western discomfort with their femininity that oscillated between prudishness and fetishization. They were cast as exotic or spiritualized figures, reducing them to one-dimensional creatures in comparison with their Western counterparts, notwithstanding the discrimination British women faced at home.

Seen in this historical context, today's celebration of Indian women as baddies feels less like a breakthrough and more like a repackaging of the same gaze under a trendier name. That's not to deny that something has shifted in the current zeitgeist. There's a welcome confidence visible among some urban young women today, especially online, often in defiance of conservative social norms.

But casting this moment as a discovery of the Indian baddie erases a rich history of women on the international stage, long before this month's viral clips. From Aishwarya Rai's Miss World coronation in 1994, Priyanka Chopra's Hollywood success, Arundhati Roy's literary prowess and the Gen-Z pop icon Lara Rai, we have long had global visibility. Too often, though, the broader cultural imagination treats these instances as exceptions rather than the norm.

Indian women aren't troubled by the attention itself, but by the idea that our beauty only matters once the West decides to notice it. This new year, from one Indian baddie—and the mother of another—to the rest of us, May this year bring fewer external stamps of approval and a few more self-definition. © BLOOMBERG

MY VIEW | PEN DRIVE

Why do human lives remain so undervalued in India?

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At first glance, this may seem like a question for economists and statisticians, a matter of compensation data, actuarial logic and policy benchmarks. It is nothing of the sort. It is a moral question that we in India must ask ourselves.

As a citizen who has lived his entire life in India's metropolitan cities, benefited from a measure of material success as a travelled globally, my conclusion is neither emotional nor ideological. Across domains, decades and governments, the actual value of an Indian life, as encoded in our systems, appears alarmingly low. In practice, it often feels close to zero.

This is not because we lack compassion. Families care deeply, communities respond instinctively and individuals routinely compensate for systemic gaps. But compassion at the individual level seems to coexist with indifference at the systemic level and personal care cannot substitute for institutional responsibility forever.

It does not take a tragedy to occur for citizens to recognize that their time, safety, health and dignity hold limited institutional value. Hours lost to unsafe roads, polluted air, unreliable public services, extractive healthcare and adversarial bureaucracy are not experienced as policy failures, but as normal conditions of citizenship.

Consider what we have normalized. Fake news circulates freely, eroding trust. Adulterated food and medicines enter supply chains with little apparent deterrence. Medical advice is sometimes shaped less by patient welfare than by revenue incentives. Educational institutions extract fees with limited accountability for long-term outcomes. Pollution harms our health, but is treated as just another inconvenience. Our cities shorten lives slowly and predictably, and this is described as the cost of growth.

In a sense, citizenship itself has been hollowed out. The economically weak matter politically as vote banks, while the wealthy matter as sources of funding and influence. Everyone else is managed administratively. In general, the quality of life remains secondary, acknowledged in speeches but rarely embedded in policy design.

Corruption persists not as an exception,

but as a tolerated bug. Living costs rise faster than incomes. Middle-agers wonder how they will afford healthcare as they age.

Younger citizens confront a different anxiety: whether stable jobs will exist at all and whether they will suffice to support lives of dignity. Entry-level salaries paid by large tech firms have stagnated for nearly two decades, even as these firms have benefited from public land, incentives and infrastructure provided in the name of national development.

Road fatalities are routine, yet safety rarely commands attention. Cities claim to be citizen-friendly while staying structurally hostile to pedestrians, the elderly, children and persons with disabilities.

All this points to a deep contradiction. Even as India seeks greater global relevance as a leading economy and credible voice, domestic policy choices reveal a non-existent

commitment to everyday life. Strategic ambition cannot go with civic neglect. Until every Indian life is treated as equal, as envisioned by the Constitution, claims of development will remain constitutionally hollow.

What is most revealing is not that such fatalities occur. No society is free of risk. It is how little they change behaviour.

Threats to India's financial stability provoke swift action; markets are stabilized and assets protected. Mortal risks, by comparison, evoke sympathy but rarely reform. Capital seems to matter most.

QUICK READ

In spite of India's economic emergence, it does not take a tragedy to occur for citizens to discover that their time, safety, health and dignity hold rather limited institutional value.

A society's well-being requires systems that are designed to make life safer and easier to live. Until we have real accountability on this measure, Indian lives will continue to feel undervalued.

Over time, this reshapes our civic culture. Risks and inconveniences become too routine to stir outrage and citizens internalize the assumption that the system cannot be relied upon to come to their aid.

If governance is ultimately about stewardship of everyone's life and dignity, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that despite political and constitutional promises, the institutional value placed on Indian lives remains too low for a country that aspires to 'developed' status.

India's persistent undervaluation of lives imposes an economic cost. When citizens are compelled to deal with avoidable risks, health hazards, unreliable services and institutional apathy, productivity weakens and trust erodes in ways that constrain the economy's long-term prospects.

It is worth asking whether these costs have been meaningfully factored into the vision of a Viksit Bharat by 2047. A society's well-being is measured by how rigorously it designs systems that make life safer and easier to live. Until we have real accountability on this measure, Indian lives will continue to feel undervalued. For India to progress in a way that we can all welcome, citizens must come to matter long before that deadline.



Opinion

FRIDAY, JANUARY 9, 2026



INDIA'S AI PROWESS

Prime Minister Narendra Modi

Start-ups and AI entrepreneurs are the co-architects of India's future. The country has immense capacity for both innovation and large-scale implementation

Choking on inaction

Judicial censure underscores policy paralysis on air quality in Delhi

THE SUPREME COURT'S latest rebuke of a government body over hazardous air pollution in Delhi is warranted, given the persistently tardy response to the crisis. On Tuesday, it pulled up the Commission for Air Quality Management (CAQM) for its lack of seriousness in tackling this perennial problem and gave it two weeks to identify the major sources of pollution and outline long-term action plans to address each of them. It is a damning indictment of official inaction that, even after two decades of judicial intervention, the apex court finds little to show by way of durable outcomes. This reflects an administrative failure to acknowledge the gravity of the problem. That is why measures to curb pollution—such as the odd-even traffic rationing scheme in the past or cloud seeding more recently—have appeared half-hearted. Recent episodes only reinforce this impression: the detention of citizens at a rare protest at India Gate last month, negligence at pollution-monitoring stations, dubious sensors allegedly generating fudged data, and even the court's own decision to relax a blanket ban to allow green crackers all betray inconsistency and drift.

The Delhi government has claimed that 2025 saw the city record its cleanest air in eight years due to targeted interventions. While air quality did improve last year—the first eight months were the cleanest in eight years barring the lockdown year of 2020—this was largely due to frequent monsoon rains. More tellingly, Delhi recorded its third-worst December in a decade. In other words, there has been no meaningful improvement during the peak pollution months from October to December. In this context, quibbling over marginal differences in source attribution amounts to a public disservice.

The court's directions to the CAQM are therefore timely and necessary. Noting differences among institutions and experts on source apportionment, it has asked the commission to work with domain specialists and arrive at a uniform identification of major contributors, with a report placed in the public domain. Elected representatives across the National Capital Region (NCR) have instead indulged in blame games rather than pursue long-term solutions. Delhi, for instance, has frequently pointed to stubble burning in neighbouring states, even as the Chief Justice of India has cautioned against politicising this seasonal practice. Multiple studies have identified vehicular emissions as a dominant contributor, alongside year-round sources such as construction and road dust, and biomass burning in industries and households.

This is not the first time the Supreme Court has taken the CAQM to task—for infrequent meetings, a lackadaisical approach, and apparent reluctance to act against errant officials. Even the emergency restrictions triggered under the Graded Response Action Plan once air quality breaches critical thresholds are widely viewed as reactive. It is high time the commission got its act together. Pollution is not Delhi's problem alone, nor is the city's air quality dictated solely by local factors. A 2025 study by the Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air found that nearly two-thirds of Delhi's pollution originated in other NCR cities. A coordinated, multi-state response is therefore urgent. Depoliticising the issue and arriving at consensus on root causes is only the first step towards acknowledging the scale of the crisis. Delhi-NCR can draw lessons from Beijing, once considered the world's smog capital, which managed a turnaround through aggressive measures—shutting polluting industries, switching to cleaner energy, and investing heavily in public transport and electric mobility.

JPMorgan, Apple, Goldman score a rare win-win-win

IF YOU CAN'T get what you want, get what you need. It's taken the best part of two years, but JPMorgan Chase & Co. has finally helped Goldman Sachs Group Inc and Apple Inc do just that with the tech giant's credit card.

It's a good result for all three firms—Goldman escapes its error-strewn foray into consumer finance, Apple gets a partnership with America's best-run bank, and JPMorgan wins some useful growth in the form of a \$20 billion book of card loans. The deal is far from risk-free for JPMorgan, but it helps in the hunt for ways to put some of its roughly \$60 billion of excess capital to work—no simple task for a lender already so dominant in the US.

For Goldman, the exit draws a line under an embarrassing chapter. It launched the credit card with Apple in 2019, the year after David Solomon took over as CEO. He wanted to build a set of consumer businesses to add more reliable revenue to the ups and downs of trading and doing deals. It proved a disaster, upsetting senior bankers and ultimately leading to more than \$7 billion in pre-tax losses on several ill-fated deals since 2020, according to analysts at RBC Capital Markets.

By the end of 2022, Solomon's consumer mission was in deep trouble; by March 2023, Goldman was signalling that businesses bought part of the project would be sold, starting with GreenSky, a home-improvements finance business. It's been trying to find a buyer for the credit card portfolio since the summer of that year and JPMorgan has been involved in talks since roughly the middle of 2024, per reports.

The extremely long negotiations reflect both Apple's controlling nature and Goldman's inexperience in consumer finance. The investment bank won a contract to run Apple's card partly because it was one of the only firms willing to meet the tech company's idiosyncratic demands related to the platform's design, the timing of bills, Apple's control of customer data and its determination not to charge late-payment fees to delinquent cardholders.

JPMorgan, already one of America's leading card issuers with almost \$240 billion of balances, is getting Apple's portfolio for an extremely unusual \$1 billion discount to the value of the loans, according to the *Wall Street Journal*. Partnerships with major consumer companies are valuable to banks and other lenders because they bring loyal customers who spend regularly and can be sold other financial products. That's why these books of loans normally change hands far at least face value, and often at a premium to the balances outstanding.

JPMorgan got its cheap deal because of the oddities of Apple's set-up with Goldman and its riskier mix of borrowers than the bank typically targets. More than one-third of Apple cardholders are classed as subprime—having a FICO score of less than 660. In contrast, subprime borrowers were responsible for just 15.5% of JPMorgan's card business at the end of the third quarter.

This is reflected in delinquencies. In Apple's book, the total debt of borrowers who are late making payments was about 4.2% of balances at the end of September, about double the rate in JPMorgan's existing card business. The lack of late fees for Apple customers removes a compensating stream of revenue that JPMorgan gets from its cardholders—another reason the bank pushed for a discount in the deal, per reports. Goldman and JPMorgan will deliver updated fourth-quarter numbers next week.

Several other card companies, including Barclays Plc, Synchrony Financial, and Capital One Financial Corp, had held talks with Apple at various points, but the deal with JPMorgan makes most sense—the bank invests more in new technology every year than most lenders make in total revenue.

There are bound to be wrinkles in the relationship along the way, but combining two of the biggest consumer brands in the US looks like a slam dunk for investors. Goldman is still building more durable revenue through acquisitions by its asset management arm, like the two it struck last year. But mostly it can get back to what it does best—dealing in capital markets, far from the messy world of ordinary consumers.



PAUL J. DAVIES

Bloomberg

THE LATEST INITIATIVE in the area of critical minerals is Pax Silica (PS). It is a US-led move which also includes countries such as Japan, South Korea, Singapore, the Netherlands, the UK, Israel, the UAE, and Australia. The word "Pax" probably refers to the Greek goddess of peace and Silica is obviously a reference to silicon, which is used extensively in semiconductor chips and artificial intelligence (AI) hardware.

Not very long ago, the US had taken the lead to form the Minerals Security Partnership (MSP). Today it has about 14 countries including the European Union (EU) and India, which joined the MSP in 2023, a year after its formation. The objective of the MSP was to counter China's monopoly in critical minerals, both in mining and in processing. The composition of countries in the MSP, however, is somewhat intriguing. Take the case of India. One does not know its expected functionality in the MSP. India is not really endowed with critical minerals or rare earths beneath the earth's crust and neither does it have access to processing technology. It is said that India has ample reserves of lithium in Jammu and Kashmir but here again, they were inferred and not proven. Mining them has also elicited a poor response due to various reasons. India, however, is a big market for critical minerals given its target to have 500 gigawatts of renewable capacity by 2030, and have 30% production of electric vehicles at the margin by

2030, etc.

Whether it's Pax Silica or the MSP, their objective is similar—initiating a counter measure to China's monopoly on critical minerals and rare earths. China controls 70% of the mining of critical minerals and 90% of its processing, making its dominance absolute. Any attempt to break this would be a Herculean task for both technical and financial reasons. From the technical side, the time horizon for mining of critical minerals to getting to the final products may take 15 years or more. Given the pace of demand for critical minerals, this stiff time period is going to be a spoilsport. Moreover, the environment laws in the West are much more stringent and mining may prove to be an uphill task.

On the economic front, China produces critical minerals at a fraction of the cost compared to the West. Clearly, such a cost difference will make it very difficult for any enterprise to counter China and ultimately stand on its own feet. The head start that China has in the area of critical minerals and rare earth is stupendous. It has come through years of strategic plan-

ning coupled with intense mining to the extent of being indiscriminate, as it suffered severe environmental issues in areas of Inner Mongolia. China has benefited from having lax environmental norms vis-à-vis the West and cheap labour too. Countries like the US sent their mined critical minerals to China for processing since they did not want to sully their own environment given that processing is highly energy-intensive and enhances carbon footprints. The US, for sure, must be repenting this policy of the past since it is not in a position to dictate terms to China—unlike with other countries including India. China has been using its dominance to not only counter the US, but has also browbeaten Japan in the past—way back in 2010—to settle a border dispute by banning exports of some critical minerals temporarily.

It would be good to compare the composition of the MSP with that of the PS. While the PS is a compact body consisting of about nine countries, the MSP has 14 member countries. The new entrants in the PS include Singapore, the Netherlands, Israel, and the

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The composition of the Pax Silica suggests that care has been taken to include countries with an edge in research initiatives in AI algorithms

UAE. The composition of the PS gives an impression that care has been taken to include those countries which have an edge in research initiatives in AI algorithms, semiconductor design and manufacturing, research and innovation, cybersecurity applications, etc. The inclusion of the UAE, however, is a little surprising. India was excluded from the PS and there was a lot of speculation as to why this was the case. The fact is that India is not the lone country that was dropped. There are others like Canada, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Norway, Sweden, and the EU as well. Therefore, perhaps too much should not be read into India's exclusion. In my view, it is surprising that India was made a member of the MSP to begin with since it has nothing to offer in terms of reserves or technology for processing. India, however, will be a major market where demand for critical minerals and rare earths may grow in leaps and bounds.

The moot point is whether the new body in the form of PS will be able to break the monopoly of China, especially when China is one of the leading countries in AI technology. Can AI really help in countering the headstart China has gained over the last three decades? Can AI undo the advantage China has gained today from its rigorous mining and processing of critical minerals and rare earths? The answer is perhaps no, at least not in the short or even medium term. To that extent, we can safely conclude that the decision to set up PS is nothing but a case of new wine in old bottles. At best, it is a case of optics.

Views are personal

CRITICAL MINERALS

US-LED PAX SILICA MAY NOT SUCCEED IN ANOTHER ATTEMPT TO BREAK CHINESE MONOPOLY

New wine in an old bottle

2025 reset cooperation priorities



MUKESH BUTANI PRANAY GOSWAMI

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IN AN INCREASINGLY splintered world mired in geopolitical uncertainties, 2025 was a defining year to synchronise and reset international priorities on cooperation. The flavour of multilateralism notwithstanding, three events in 2025 emerged as beacons of hope for a cohesive and forward-looking global order. The Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development (FFD4) in Seville, the 30th Conference of the Parties (COP30) in Brazil, and the G20 Summit in Johannesburg, South Africa, were not just diplomatic ventures; they were arenas where the Global South could seek better terms in its negotiations with the rest of the world. These agglomerations are reminiscent of the increasingly urgent power an emerging, priority jurisdiction like India holds: a drive to foster negotiations across the domains of tax and macroeconomics to introduce systemic, meaningful change.

The FFD4, held from June 30 to July 3, was a decisive moment for reforming a global financial system that perpetuates inequalities and traditionally marginalises the Global South. The stakeholders put forward a transformative agenda based on support for a United Nations (UN) Framework Convention on International Tax Cooperation. In essence, members have rallied support for a convention that eliminates gender bias, combats illicit financial flows, and ends the race to the bottom in corporate taxes, including a public country-by-country reporting system and a global register of ultimate beneficial owners. It led to

a more refined set of discussions at the third session of the UN Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee (INC) in Nairobi, with focus on getting the draft text of the Convention in line with the FFD4 mandate. India's ascent to influence multilateral policymaking at the behest of the Global South can be evidenced by its co-chairing of important discussions at the UN level in the upcoming cycle next year. Progressive, gender and climate responsive tax policies, with an eye on the universal tenets of justice and equity, remain high on the agenda.

The 30th UN Climate Change Conference, known as COP30, took place in the Amazon region, in the city of Belém, in northern Brazil, from November 10 to 21. Despite record-high investment in renewable energy last year, emerging and developing economies face a USD 2.2-trillion financing gap each year through 2030 to meet their goals under the Paris Agreement. The calls to strengthen National Adaptation Plans and the Warsaw International Mechanism for Loss and Damage, with specific funding for vulnerable communities, grew by the hour with the COP stakeholders committing to a climate-robust future. In India, public expenditure on adaptation in India related to climate-resilient infrastructure, disaster management, and cli-

mate risk financing have gained momentum and seen an upward trend in spending post-Covid. Policymakers have their task cut out to ensure the gradual introduction of targeted tax incentives to boost renewable alternatives. Additionally, India would do well to collaborate with its SAARC counterparts and design a regional green pact that leverages synergies and strengths between countries to create an ecosystem of innovation and regional cooperation. Such a pact should extrapolate the growing importance of tax and public financing as dual cornerstones to lead ebullient climate justice for the Global South.

The G20 Summit in Johannesburg on November 22 and 23, under the presidency of South Africa, closed a vital year of multilateral opportunities. Under the slogan "Solidarity. Equality. Sustainability", the South African presidency, according to its official discussion paper, identified objectives that complement the demands of FFD4 and COP30, aligning itself with a call to action. The summit, much like the FFD4 forum, has urged the UN INC to track financial flows, combat corruption, and strengthen international cooperation. On the flipside, the highly abstract and oft-unguarded definitions of "fair allocation of taxing rights" and "high-net worth individu-

als" have been put under the scanner. India, in its bid to orchestrate tax as a superpower to ensure equity, should actively voice its concerns and provide for prescient alterations to the draft text of the convention. Access to a burgeoning marketplace and the need to realign definitions with global best practices and fiscal prudence should be a key determinant for India in the next round of negotiations.

2026 could be a great year for the multilateral agenda on economic justice. FFD4, COP30, and the G20 were opportunities for India to show its prowess for multilateral negotiations, while rejuvenating its domestic stance on tax policy. In Seville, although not with the expected ambition, progress was made on multilateral commitments to align financial flows with the development agenda and protect fiscal space for the guarantee of human rights. In Belém, India pushed for a greater pie in the climate agenda of justice and equity under the principle of shared but differentiated responsibilities, and it could be a numero uno for South Asia by laying the foundations for a regional green pact. Post-Johannesburg, it must consolidate these visions in front of the G7 countries, advancing a joint vision of the type of global financial architecture that can promote sustainable development, climate resilience, and the guarantee of rights.

India finds itself at a watershed moment characterised by the "great power and greater responsibility" adage, as it charts its ascent to transcendentalism next year.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Sustaining growth

Apropos of "Resilient India" (FE, January 8, 2026), the assessment rightly tempers optimism with realism. While headline growth remains respectable, the uneven recovery in consumption, weak infrastructure, and slowing nominal GDP deserve closer policy attention. Rather than relying mainly on fiscal support, the focus should shift to improving the quality of public

spending and crowding in private investment. Faster project execution, regulatory clarity for exporters, and targeted support for rural incomes can help stabilise demand. Equally important is easing trade frictions through timely negotiations, as prolonged uncertainty hurts jobs and small businesses first. With limited fiscal space ahead, reforms that raise productivity—especially in logistics, skilling, and urban infrastructure—offer the most credible path to

sustaining growth beyond FY26 without stretching public finances.

—M Barathi, Bengaluru

Regulate AI

Elon Musk's artificial intelligence tool Grok has raised serious concerns due to its vast, largely unvetted capabilities. Its power to generate convincing content, mimic human behaviour, and spread misinformation at scale is deeply disturbing for democracies and social cohesion.

Such tools can be misused for manipulation, deepfakes, surveillance, and targeted propaganda if left unregulated. Governments must step in with clear laws mandating transparency, accountability, and strict ethical standards. Coordinated global regulation is vital to ensure innovation does not undermine trust, privacy, or public safety.

—N Sadhasiva Reddy, Bengaluru

Write to us at letters@expressindia.com

{ OUR TAKE }

What the GDP numbers reveal

Data suggests that there is no reason to suspect a major slippage in the Budget math

India's GDP growth is expected to be 7.4% in 2025-26, the National Statistics Office (NSO) said in its first advance estimates released on Wednesday. This is pretty much on expected lines given RBI's forecast of 7.3% growth in its December 2025 monetary policy resolution. To be sure, we still have almost a quarter left before the fiscal year gets over on March 31.

The only reason the first advance estimates are keenly watched by observers and, perhaps, even the government, is that they are the last GDP data released before the presentation of the Union Budget for the next fiscal year. The suspense was greater this time because nominal GDP growth was expected to be underwhelming given the subdued inflation through most of the ongoing fiscal year. NSO's latest data expects nominal GDP growth for 2025-26 at 8%, which is significantly lower than the 10.1% assumed in the 2025-26 Budget.

Nominal GDP serves as the base for revenue projections, and a significant shortfall in its value can lead to revenue shortfalls, thereby causing problems for overall budgetary math including the fiscal deficit. The good news from the latest GDP numbers, as far as the budget is concerned, is that, despite a large shortfall in nominal GDP growth rate, the absolute value of nominal GDP is marginally higher than what was assumed in the 2025-26 Budget. This means that there is no reason to suspect a major slippage as far as the fiscal calculus of the budget is concerned.

Having flagged the most important takeaway from the latest GDP numbers, is there anything else to be said? As inflation inches upwards — which is not necessarily a bad thing — we should see a revival in nominal growth rate and, perhaps, a moderation in real growth rate because of indexation-related issues. To be sure, given the GDP base revision on the cards, the changes in future GDP data and growth rate could be much larger than just inflation driven.

These statistical and fiscal calculations aside, the key macroeconomic challenge remains what it has been throughout the year. India's economy continues to face a turbulent external environment, is using its domestic momentum to maintain resilience, and will have to pump-prime both the domestic and external to boost future growth on a sustainable basis. Macroeconomic stability, reforms, and, given the times, diplomacy too, must work in tandem to achieve this goal.

Thank you and rest in peace, Bazball

"We aren't here to win or lose, we are here to entertain." It was with this audacious proclamation that England captain Ben Stokes and coach Brendon McCullum kicked off one of the more entertaining experiments in Test cricket. The 4-1 Ashes victory by Australia might bring the curtain down on a tactic that was popularly known as Bazball, but there is no denying that it was fun while it lasted. It got people back in the stands, stirred up debate, and challenged the norms. In that sense, regardless of the results, it was a success. A new tactic (and it was new in that it was the way the entire team, not one or two individuals, played) is often a step into the unknown — you don't quite know whether it will actually work out. However, nothing ventured, nothing gained.

Could anyone have predicted that Total Football, a fluid tactic where any outfield player can take over another's role that was famously employed by Ajax and the Dutch football teams in the 1970s, would capture the imagination of the public in the way it did? In basketball, the Golden State Warriors made a misfire more-than-hit shot, the three-pointer, the centrepiece of their domination of the US's National Basketball Association (NBA). In cricket itself, we saw the West Indies teams of the late '70s revolutionise the game by playing four fast bowlers when everyone else thought a spinner or two was necessary, and closer still, we saw the great Australian team of the late '90s and early 2000s score at a rate that wasn't quite Bazball but pretty stunning when viewed in isolation.

Which is why one must say thank you, Bazball. It was far from perfect, as the tours of India and Australia showed, but where would sport be without these risk-takers? Imagine everyone doing the same thing year after year! It would be boring and monotonous, without a hint of the unpredictability or awe that makes sport so watched and loved. Even in Bazball's failure lies lessons that will perhaps inspire another generation to do things in their own way, and that may be a far greater reward than mere wins.

Reimagining India's civil aviation in 2026

Injecting the DGCA with expertise at every level is the pressing need of the hour, especially to avoid the tragic blunders of the past year

The year gone by will go down in history as a tragic year for Indian aviation. The question before us is: Do we as a nation brood over the past or look ahead to rectify what's broken? Resilient India would vote for the latter.

The June 2025 Air India 171 crash is something that the nation cannot erase from memory, not just because of the lives lost but also because of how devastating the psychological impact was for almost anyone who keenly observed the aftermath of the crash. That the flying public remains wary and prays silently before take-off and during touchdown even today speaks volumes about the collective trauma this disaster inflicted — shaking the confidence of many, both within the airline and outside. Worse, confidence in the system, including in those in charge of keeping the skies safe, has taken a severe beating. As one observer put it, India was struck by two numbering disasters in close succession: The crash and the handling of its aftermath.

So, even as we are still to ascertain the factors that led to the tragedy, 2026 presents a valuable opportunity for the Indian civil aviation ecosystem to pause and prepare to take a mammoth leap. If there is one lesson the year gone by has taught us, it is this: India lacks standard operating procedures (SOPs), systems, and expertise (to the point of embarrassment) in a highly technical and specialised field. This, despite the country producing one of the largest batches of engineering graduates annually and being the only country to have achieved a soft-landing on the lunar south pole. It is worth re-creating here the India as a nation needs to do this for its own sake, not to prove a point to others in the global community.

Let me highlight a few gaps that became glaring after the June crash. If the post-crash handling of the victims' bodies and their grief-stricken kin left a lot to be desired, one factor that seems to have been overlooked post the accident is that crash sites (and data recovered) have to be treated akin to crime scenes and not contaminated or trampled over by all and sundry, as it appears to have happened after the crash in Ahmedabad. Numerous news reports claimed that the site wasn't cordoned off as required for a significant length of time after the crash.

What was even more galling was the mishandling of the retrieval and decoding of the black box and the cockpit voice recorder. This was only matched by the ill-thought-out communication from the authorities after the recovery and decoding, all of which came at a sensitive juncture when the tragedy was still fresh in the memory of the public and the families of the victims. So far, most in the industry or outside of it cannot tell you where these devices were first sent to (US, some news platforms claimed) or by whom these were decoded.

But perhaps what irked us the most in the aftermath of the accident is the total breakdown of communication and lack of transparency in what was eventually communicated to the public. Simply arranging for a top-level press conference post the tragedy — to outline how India would be handling the investigation, addressing concerns of the families of victims including compensation and what would be done to allay the fears of both the crew and passengers till a firm cause of the accident can be arrived at — would have gone a long way in ending the endless media speculation that followed the event.

Minor by comparison but equally incomprehensible was a recent report regarding a dispute between India's airport operators and the Air-



Anjali Bhargava



What irked us the most in the aftermath of the accident is the lack of transparency in what was eventually communicated to the public. **HT ARCHIVE**

ports Economic Regulatory Authority of India (AERA). It highlighted how a lack of expertise was leading to ludicrous judgments by regulatory and semi-judicial bodies in India. The report said that a recent judgment by Telecommunications Disputes Settlement and Appellate Tribunal (TDSAT) — the body that looks into telecom disputes in the country — suggested that user charges at Mumbai airport be increased to what can only be termed "absurd" levels, given current and prevalent air fares. It is a prime example of entrusting a dispute on a complex subject to an authority competent to tackle something radically different!

What is most concerning and needs immediate attention is the fact that, though this column and those

across several platforms have highlighted the lack of expertise in the directorate general of civil aviation (DGCA), the body that is entrusted with the safety of millions of fliers, the needle seems to have moved very little. A recent paper submitted by the regulator to the civil aviation ministry raises all the issues that leave it hamstrung and unable to address vital aspects of the country's aviation ecosystem. To avoid a repeat of what we witnessed in 2025, injecting DGCA with expertise at every level is the most pressing need of the hour.

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

{ VITAL SIGNS }

Ramanan Laxminarayanan



Learning from Singapore to realise Viksit Bharat

Too many Indians, Singapore represents the ideal of what successful development looks like. At the time of Singapore's independence in 1965, its per capita GDP was roughly four times that of India. Today, that is more than 30 times. Differences of scale matter, but scale alone cannot explain the extent of divergence. Singapore's experience offers lessons that run deeper than size or circumstance — lessons that are especially relevant as India articulates its ambition of becoming Viksit Bharat by 2047.

The most common explanation for Singapore's success focuses on what is visible: Vibrant capitalism, gleaming skyscrapers, and world-class infrastructure. In many ways, India's recent development push — particularly its emphasis on roads, ports, and physical capital, and tax-free enclaves like GIFT city in Gujarat — has sought to emulate this model. But Singaporeans themselves are quick to point out that these were not uniquely their inventions. They were ideas borrowed from elsewhere but executed with consistency. The truly distinctive innovation lay beneath the concrete and glass in the deliberate construction and relentless focus on social cohesion.

At the time of independence, Singapore was a deeply fragile multi-ethnic society. In the last colonial census before self-government, the Chinese made up roughly three-quarters of the population, while Malays accounted for about 14% and Indians for under 10%. This imbalance mattered not only politically, but also economically. Colonial labour and education patterns had already produced significant differences in income and opportunity, with the Chinese community, on average, better represented in commerce, skilled work, and capital ownership. That imbalance could easily have turned into a permanent advantage. A meritocratic State pursuing development through demographic arithmetic alone, would not have been unusual in the post-colonial world. Instead, Singapore's first President, Lee Kuan Yew, treated ethnic inequality as an existential threat. Social cohesion was not framed as a moral aspiration but as a condition for survival.

The core principles were clear: Prevent ethnic segregation, anchor social mobility, and ensure that every community had a visible stake in the success of the State. Housing became one of the most powerful tools for this project. Strict rules enforced ethnic heterogeneity within neighbourhoods, deliberately limiting the formation of enclaves of any single ethnicity. Public housing was designed not merely to shelter citizens, but to bring them, both physically and psychologically, into a shared civic space. Over time, this reduced the likelihood that economic success or failure would align too neatly with race or ethnicity.

Over the subsequent decades, Singapore invested heavily in policies to prevent early disparities from becoming destiny. Universal education widened access to skilled employment; sustained investments in public health improved baseline outcomes; social policies focused on levelling the starting line rather than guaranteeing equal outcomes. These interventions did not erase income differences overnight, nor were they expected to. But they fundamentally altered trajectories.

The results are visible today. Absolute incomes have risen sharply across all three major ethnic groups, and Singapore no longer resembles the stratified society it inherited in 1965. Income differences have not vanished entirely — recent census data show that median household income from work remains lower on average for Malay households than for Chinese and Indian households, even as all groups have benefited from sustained growth. Note, Indian households today often perform on par with, or above, the Chinese average on some income measures, reflecting substantial upward mobility since independence.

This mixed outcome is instructive. Singapore did not attempt to eliminate inequality by decree, nor did it assume markets alone would resolve inherited disadvantages. It also deliberately kept the government small relative to the economy and reserved spending on health and education to remove inequality, rather than trying to remove inequality through cash transfers and subsidies.

Instead, it focused relentlessly on preventing inequality from aligning permanently with identity, while ensuring that economic mobility remained visible and credible across communities. That credibility mattered. When people could plausibly believe that effort and education offered a path forward, trust in institutions deepened and incentives for rent-seeking behaviour diminished. Secession, particularly in a country in contrast to the rest of Asia more than any other single reason.

If Singapore offers lessons for other countries pursuing long-term development, they lie less in copying specific policies than in setting the right priorities. Four stand out. First, treating social cohesion as economic infrastructure — not as sentiment, but as something to be deliberately designed and protected. Second, working as a tool of integration, not merely shelter. Mixed neighbourhoods, proximity to jobs, schools, and transport, and a visible stake for all groups in shared urban spaces. Third, building a credible escalator of mobility through education and skills, so that effort and talent are seen to translate into opportunity. And fourth, sustained investment in public health, ensuring that basic health outcomes do not track identity or income too closely. Together, these are not symbolic gestures but structural commitments. They create the trust that allows markets to function, institutions to endure, and growth to compound over decades.

Singapore's experience is not a template to be copied wholesale, particularly in a country as large and diverse as India. Its circumstances were particular, its methods sometimes severe, and its scale unique. But it does offer a reminder that development is not built on infrastructure and growth alone. If Viksit Bharat is to be more than a slogan, economic ambition must be matched by social architecture.

As Lee Kuan Yew once said, "We were determined to build a nation where no one would feel that he had to look after only his own group." That focus, more than any single economic policy, shaped the Singapore that we admire and envy today.

Ramanan Laxminarayanan is president, One Health Trust. The views expressed are personal

{ WOPKE HOEKSTRA } CLIMATE COMMISSIONER, THE EU



We will unequivocally continue to support international climate research ... We will also continue to work on international climate cooperation

Reacting to US withdrawal from the UNFCCC



Nature's spokesperson, a scientist of the people

Madhav Gadgil called his memoirs *A Walk Up the Hill*. It aptly summed up his life — bold, unconventional, swimming against the tide. In my three-plus decades of knowing and working with him, I found in him the rare ability to bridge several gaps, between various academic fields, and between academics and activists. His achievements in the ecological sciences, as founder of the Centre for Ecological Sciences at the Indian Institute of Science, Bengaluru, were remarkable. He was among the first ecologists in modern times to question the authenticity of the forest department's "scientific forestry", showing its ecological unsustainability. He provided a rigorous base of research for many people's movements challenging desecration of forests, among them the iconic struggle against the Silent Valley Hydel project in the 1970s-80s. His books on India's ecological history, co-authored with Ramachandra Guha, have been essential readings for generations of students. His contribution to the drafting of India's Biological Diversity Act (we were both members of the drafting committee) was crucial.

Madhav combined rigour in his research with a deep sensitivity to issues of people's concerns and livelihoods, bridging what is often a huge chasm between advocates for the protection of nature and those of human rights. If this meant getting out of the lab and classroom, where he already excelled, into the messy arenas of what nature and people can teach us outdoors, he never hesitated. If it meant working in multiple languages and cultural idioms and communicating his findings and thoughts to the general public with minimum academic jargon, he revelled in it. If all this entailed challenging authority, he was not shy of it. He opposed policies and projects that he felt were ecologically or socially problematic. He was supportive of our attempt to create a participatory, holistic vision cutting across ecological-political-economic-social divides, in the National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP) process, of which he was on the infrastructure advisory body. His seminal report as head of Western Ghats Expert Ecology Panel set up by the ministry of environment, forests and climate change, was historic in its attempt to balance environment, development, livelihoods and rights. It was also inspirational that he stuck to his stand when the same governments that commissioned it rejected the findings and recommendations.

Madhav was one of the few scientists to support the struggles of Adivasis and other forest-dwelling communities to reclaim their rights to govern and use forests. He spent con-

siderable time helping villagers in Gadchiroli, Maharashtra, to prepare detailed plans for conservation and sustainable use of forests. His very recent statement that the forest department should be dissolved and the Wild Life (Protection) Act repealed, generated huge controversy, and would appear to be "extreme", especially in a situation where these can sometimes be a bulwark against the devastation caused by mining, dams and the like. But there was also a basis for it in that these have caused irreparable damage to the relationship between local communities and nature, disabled long-standing local institutions and knowledge systems that have sustained forests for long, and displaced or dispossessed a large number of forest-dwellers. His and other voices, Madhav's, were heard at times at odds with others in civil society. At times, his view of traditional community practices and knowledge could be criticised as weak on caste and religious inequities. His championing of People's Biodiversity Registers as a means of documenting the ecological knowledge of communities challenged the notion that only so-called "expert" institutions were the repository of such knowledge. But some of us found this still relied too much on the role of the outside ecological expert, who could in-

ventently become dominating, especially as part of homogeneous government programmes, whereas the community biodiversity register approach by Dalit women of the Deccan Development Society was more grounded. He was, however, always willing to enter into dialogue on such differences and focus on essential commonalities. The need to challenge India's development trajectory and the centralisation of decision-making power in the State were aspects that made him a significant ally for ecological and social justice movements. In this, he mentored generations of young people into breaking through the shackles of academia.

In mid-2025, Madhav lost his life partner, Sulochana, herself an accomplished meteorologist. As so often happens in the case of such inspirational and long-duration unions, one partner follows shortly after the other in search of other domains. I have no doubt they are forging new pathways with the same combination of intellectual rigour and human empathy they showed in their earthly journeys. Meanwhile, the rest of us will continue learning and being inspired by what they have left behind.

Ashish Kothari is an environmentalist based in Pune. The views expressed are personal



Editor's TAKE

Pravasi Bharatiya: India's global strength

Pravasi Bharatiya Divas marks the homecoming of Mahatma Gandhi from South Africa and celebrates the contributions of the Indian diaspora worldwide

You can take an Indian out of India, but you cannot take India out of an Indian. That is so true, as Indians have made a mark across the world in all walks of life, yet they remain rooted in their Indian ethos and values. Perhaps that is what gives them resilience and enables them to face the vagaries of life in an alien land. The Indian diaspora is now over three million strong. Over the years, its profile has drastically changed from indentured labourers to swanky IT professionals, doctors, engineers, entrepreneurs – you name it. The Indians who left these shores have left an indelible mark on the lands they adopted as their own, without forgetting their Indian roots – food, language, clothes, values, and above all, a connection with their motherland.

As India celebrates the 18th Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (PBD) on January 9, it is time to acknowledge the contributions made by Indians to the countries they adopted and to their motherland, often toiling hard and surviving in the worst of circumstances. It is a day observed since 2003. Pravasi Bharatiya Divas honours Overseas Indians who continue to work relentlessly for the betterment of India's destiny – economically, culturally, and diplomatically. The day is symbolic, as it marks the return of Mahatma Gandhi from South Africa in 1915, a homecoming that gave direction and momentum to India's freedom movement. Indeed, he is rightly remembered as the greatest Pravasi Bharatiya. His years abroad sharpened his moral vision and political resolve, which he later brought back to India. He was among the pioneers who shed the inhibition of leaving the country and crossing the seas. In many ways, this journey mirrors the larger story of the Indian diaspora – individuals who leave India in search of opportunity, knowledge, and security, yet carry with them an enduring connection to their roots and often return value far greater than what they took with them.

Today, the Indian diaspora stands as one of the largest and most influential migrant communities in the world. People of Indian origin everywhere – IT professionals in Silicon Valley, doctors in the NHS, entrepreneurs and traders on Wall Street, and workers at Gulf construction sites – have left an indelible imprint. Indian-origin CEOs head some of the world's most powerful corporations, and Indian engineers, researchers, and entrepreneurs drive innovation in cutting-edge fields. Equally significant are the small business owners, teachers, and caregivers who quietly uphold India's reputation for diligence and skill. The advantage the Indian diaspora brings lies not only in dollar remittances but also in goodwill and strategic collaboration. The diaspora serves as a powerful ambassador for India – influencing policies and building bridges between India and host countries. Indeed, human resources are India's biggest and most profitable export. Yet there is a sad undercurrent: we have often brushed their contributions under the carpet, labelled them opportunists who left the country, and questioned their patriotic credentials. This must end. All Indians are Indians, no matter where they live and work, and no one has the right to question their love for the country. Once an Indian, always an Indian.

The US action in Venezuela and the seizure of President Maduro to contain narco-terrorism has ignited a fierce debate over sovereignty, international law, and the credibility of the order the United States claims to uphold



AMAL CHANDRA

In the first weeks of January 2026, the United States executed one of the most audacious extraterritorial operations of recent decades. In a surprise move in Caracas, U.S. forces detained Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro and First Lady Cilia Flores and transported them to New York to face federal criminal charges. The operation, carried out without the consent of the Venezuelan state or authorisation from the United Nations, was swiftly justified by Washington as a necessary step against alleged narco-terrorism networks and illicit trafficking.

Yet the shockwaves from this action have been felt far beyond Venezuela. By deploying military force inside a sovereign country to seize its sitting head of state, the United States has reopened uncomfortable questions about the nature of global order. If international law can be overridden by unilateral power, critics argue, then its value as a shared framework collapses into selective rhetoric.

At stake is not merely Venezuela's political future but America's own standing as the chief proponent of a rules-based international system. For decades, Washington has positioned itself as a guardian of global norms, urging restraint, legality, and multilateralism – especially when criticising rivals such as Russia and China. The Caracas operation, however, appears to contradict those principles. It suggests that the rules apply firmly to others but flexibly to the most powerful.

The United States has a long history of employing extraordinary measures in the name of security and justice. From the 'kill or capture' campaigns in Iraq to drone strikes across West Asia and South Asia, Washington has often argued that exceptional threats require exceptional responses. Even the invasion of Afghanistan after September 11, initially framed as self-defence, gradually expanded into a prolonged occupation justified under counter-terrorism imperatives. Over time, the line between legitimate self-defence and interventionism became increasingly blurred.

The Venezuelan case represents a sharper departure. This was not a non-state militant leader or an insurgent commander operating beyond any recognised authority. Maduro, however contested his legitimacy, remained the de facto head of state, recognised by several governments. U.S. officials pointed to sealed indictments and alleged ties to the so-called Cartel of the Suns – designated by Washington as a terrorist organisation in late 2025 – to defend their actions. Critics counter that criminal charges issued under domestic law cannot legitimise the use of force on foreign soil, especially against a sitting president.

Across Latin America, the response was swift and unusually unified. Governments from Mexico to Argentina condemned the operation as a blatant violation of sovereignty and the UN



THE UNITED STATES NOW CONFRONTS A PARADOX OF ITS OWN MAKING. BY ASSERTING UNILATERAL POWER UNDER THE GUISE OF LAW ENFORCEMENT, IT WEAKENS THE LEGAL FRAMEWORKS UNDERPINNING GLOBAL STABILITY

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Charter. Mexico's President Claudia Sheinbaum categorically rejected any precedent that could justify U.S. military action in the region. Colombia's President Gustavo Petro ordered heightened military readiness along the Venezuelan border, warning that similar actions against his country would provoke resistance. Brazil, Chile, and others echoed these concerns, stressing that unilateral interventions threaten regional stability.

Global unease extended well beyond the Americas. At an emergency session of the UN Security Council, even close U.S. allies expressed discomfort. France and Denmark criticised the operation as a breach of international law, though Washington's veto ensured that no binding resolution followed. This hesitation among European partners revealed deeper anxieties within the Western alliance about an increasingly unilateral United States and the erosion of collective decision-making.

The episode also exposed a striking double standard. European capitals have consistently condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine and warned against China's coercive posture towards Taiwan. Yet had Moscow abducted Ukraine's president under the pretext of criminal prosecution, or Beijing seized Taiwan's leadership citing domestic law, the Western response would almost certainly have been swift and severe. In the Venezuelan case, reactions were notably restrained, reflecting Europe's dependence on U.S. security guarantees and its difficulty in confronting American overreach.

What binds these experiences together is the disturbing precision with which fraudsters operate. They possess intimate personal information – names, relationships, recent transactions – details not easily accessible in the public domain. Such incidents regularly make headlines, yet the list of victims continues to grow. This raises an unsettling question: who are these people behind the

by, discarding it when it constrains their interests. In doing so, they collectively weaken the system they claim to defend.

The broader implications are troubling. By sidelining established norms, Washington risks creating precedents others may follow. China could cite the Venezuelan operation to justify coercive actions in the Indo-Pacific, while Russia may use it to further erode U.S. moral authority. What was once a cynical observation – that power ultimately dictates outcomes – now appears increasingly descriptive of international politics.

The United Nations, conceived to restrain unilateral aggression, has repeatedly been marginalised by its most powerful members, from Iraq in 2003 to Venezuela today. The selective application of international law has deepened international law's

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hollowed out the post-war order, leaving smaller and middle powers vulnerable to coercion. For countries like India, the Venezuelan episode is a sobering reminder of the fragility of global norms. As New Delhi navigates strategic autonomy amid intensifying great-power rivalry, it highlights the risks of relying on any single power to uphold international law consistently. It also underscores the urgency of strengthening multilateral institutions and reviving non-aligned diplomacy that prioritises dialogue over force.

Ultimately, the United States faces a paradox of its own making. By asserting unilateral power under the banner of law enforcement, it undermines the very legal frameworks that sustain global stability. If international law continues to be treated as an instrument rather than an obligation, the world risks sliding towards an order where force prevails over principle – and sovereignty becomes conditional. Whether nations can reverse this drift and rebuild a genuinely rules-based system remains one of the defining challenges of our time.

When trust becomes the new economic currency



SANJAY CHANDRA

2ND OPINION THE PIONEER

A few days ago, my phone rang with an unsettling authority. The man on the other end claimed to be from the police department and alleged that my number was linked to unlawful activities in Kashmir. The accusation was absurd – I was attending a wedding in another city at the time – yet the confidence in his voice was enough to momentarily unnerv me. He instructed me to move to a quieter room to continue the conversation. In hindsight, I should have challenged him outright. Instead, instinct took over: I ended the call and blocked the number, shaken but unharmed.

This was not my first brush with deception. A few months earlier, an acquaintance sent me an urgent message requesting money, assuring repayment by

evening. The amount she asked for was strikingly similar to what I had recently paid her for filing my income tax returns. The request might have succeeded had several other neighbours not received identical appeals around the same time. It later emerged that she had fallen victim to a scam herself. A so-called courier service had asked her to contact a delivery agent who claimed he could not find her address. Expecting a genuine parcel, she called back – only for her phone to be compromised. I narrowly escaped a similar fate days later, having learned to pause before reacting.

Another episode unfolded closer to home. An Amazon package addressed to my daughter was delivered to my father on a cash-on-delivery basis. Unable to reach her and considering the small sum involved, he paid for it. My daughter, however, had ordered nothing. Inside the package were generic face creams, devoid of any manufacturer's details. The transaction was minor, but the intrusion felt deeply personal.

What binds these experiences together is the disturbing precision with which fraudsters operate. They possess intimate personal information – names, relationships, recent transactions – details not easily accessible in the public domain. Such incidents regularly make headlines, yet the list of victims continues to grow. This raises an unsettling question: who are these people behind the

scams? Increasingly, they appear to be tech-savvy young individuals who have identified deception as an effortless route to income.

These encounters forced me to reflect on a broader transformation. In earlier times, livelihoods were built on visible, honest exchanges. Letter writers outside post offices helped the illiterate communicate. Utensil traders went door to door. Barbers worked under trees, and cobblers repaired shoes on pavements. These modest professions sustained families and communities through trust and labour.

Frankly, no doubt, but it was peripheral – confined to cautionary tales in old films or occasional local villains. The digital age has altered that balance. The rapid expansion of technology and data networks has enabled a new breed of organised fraud, driven not by skill or service but by the exploitation of trust. The pursuit of easy money has been severed from any notion of effort or value creation.

As society races ahead technologically, it must also reckon with the ethical void this progress can leave behind. Otherwise, deception risks becoming not an exception, but a defining feature of our times.

The writer, founder of Kala – Krazy About Literature and Arts, is an author, speaker, coach, arbitrator, and strategy consultant



A large egret walks near a one-horned rhinoceros as migratory birds arrive at a wetland in Pobitora Wildlife Sanctuary on the outskirts of Guwahati. PHOTO: PTI

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ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IS REAL, NOT SCIENCE FICTION FANTASY

Artificial intelligence is not imaginary; it is a real, functional technology firmly embedded in daily life. While science fiction dramatizes future possibilities, present-day AI is already operating across health care, finance, education, transport, and creative work. It powers medical image analysis, language translation, fraud detection, navigation tools, and research that accelerates scientific discovery. Systems such as DeepMind's AlphaGo and AlphaFold demonstrate measurable achievements, from beating champions at complex games to predicting protein structures with unprecedented accuracy.

At the same time, discussion of 'AI imaginaries' has value. These imaginaries describe the hopes and fears societies project onto

technology, and they shape policy, investment, and public debate. Yet they should not be confused with the technology itself. Current AI does not possess consciousness, intention, or emotion. It recognises patterns in data and generates outputs using statistical models; it does not imagine in the human sense, nor does it understand the world as people do.

Recognising this distinction helps citizens, policymakers, and companies make wiser choices: celebrating genuine advances while remaining realistic about risks and limits. In short, AI is real and useful, but the human-like general intelligence portrayed in films remains a speculative possibility in today's reality. It must also be governed with care and humility.

JAYANTHI SUBRAMANIAM | MUMBAI

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Dilemma over precious metals

With the arrival of 2026, prices of gold and silver are touching new, unbelievable heights. As of January 7, silver is quoted at 2.71 lakh per kilogram, while gold has touched 1.40 lakh per ten grams. Given the spiralling global uncertainty, it seems unlikely that prices will fall meaningfully in the near term. With demand for both metals rising steeply, the Government of India has approved the sale of 14-carat gold as hallmarked, and similar approval for 9-carat jewellery may not be far away. In such a climate, consumers should think carefully about reuse and redesign of old ornaments rather than constant fresh purchases. Sensible recycling reduces waste and financial strain.

Another policy option is to consider reasonable purchase limits per person, which could calm speculation and temper demand without hurting genuine needs. Ultimately, stability in the precious-metals market will depend on prudent behaviour by both households and regulators, working together to avoid bubbles and panic buying.

Clear communication, fair pricing, steady supply chains, and careful investment choices can help communities face volatility with confidence rather than fear or unchecked speculation over time.

KIRTI WADHAWAN | KANPUR

Electoral rolls needs greater vigilance

Publication of the draft electoral roll in Uttar Pradesh has surprised many citizens and raised serious concern. The volume of deletions reported from several districts warrants close scrutiny, even if officials insist that procedures were followed.

The contrast with Tamil Nadu, where similar exercises have produced fewer disputes, shows that careful verification and local outreach can make a real difference. Errors in rolls weaken trust, especially for migrants, daily-wage workers, the urban poor, and elderly voters who lack time or digital access to correct records quickly. For some, the problem becomes visible only on polling day, effectively denying the franchise.

The claims-and-objections window is therefore crucial. It should be widely publicised through media campaigns, door-to-door visits, and responsive communication from election officials, supported by simple procedures and help desks at ward or panchayat level. Learning from states that manage smoother revisions can strengthen future drives. Above all, accuracy must outrank speed. Protecting the integrity of voter lists is a democratic responsibility that safeguards every citizen's right to vote in every election.

A MYLSAM | COIMBATORE

Politics, nationalism and cricket

The backlash against Shah Rukh Khan for bidding on a Bangladeshi player in the IPL has sparked a debate over nationalism and standards. The league has long positioned itself as a unifying stage where talent matters more than nationality or religion. Yet Khan was quickly branded a 'traitor' by some right-wing voices, even though his action sat squarely within the rules of the game. The reaction coincides with electoral politics in West Bengal, where anti-Bangladeshi rhetoric is being cultivated for advantage.

The irony is hard to miss. India maintains deep diplomatic and commercial ties with Bangladesh. Trade runs to tens of thousands of crores each year, and major Indian companies supply power and other services across the border with governmental support. Senior leaders continue formal engagement, highlighting cooperation rather than hostility.

Singling out one film star, while applauding official partnerships, exposes inconsistency. The episode is less about cricket than about how nationalism is being weaponised. If unity is truly our objective, public debate must resist selective outrage and reaffirm fairness, respect and coexistence as the real markers of shared national pride.

BHAGWAN THADANI | MUMBAI



Pollution has a solution – if we have the vision

The scale of vehicular growth is staggering. In 2023 alone, Delhi registered 6.5 lakh new vehicles – an average of 1,800 every day. Between January and November 2024, another 6.42 lakh vehicles were added. Roads, already choked, have been transformed into informal parking lots, eroding public space and worsening congestion.

FIRST Column



HASAN KHURSHID

William Wordsworth, the poet who believed nature to be humanity's greatest teacher, once wrote that a single impulse from the natural world could reveal more about moral good and evil than all the wisdom of sages. His lament that 'the world is too much with us' feels prophetic today. Despite unprecedented material progress, humanity remains restless and dissatisfied, increasingly alienated from nature. Nowhere is this rupture more visible than in the accelerating crisis of environmental degradation.

Across the globe, pollution has triggered alarming climatic changes – rising sea levels, floods and droughts, declining crop yields, the spread of tropical diseases, energy insecurity, and the steady extinction of wildlife, both terrestrial and marine. In India, this global malaise finds its most dramatic expression every winter in Delhi-NCR, when the capital turns into a virtual gas chamber. Come November, air quality indices routinely spiral into the 'severe' category, threatening public health and paralysing daily life.

Over the years, numerous attempts have been made to confront this spectre of pollution. Yet most have failed because they were guided by misconceptions rather than vision. The core causal factors have not been properly diagnosed and, consequently, the remedies prescribed have been ineffective. Multiple agencies – government departments, NGOs, regulatory bodies, and even judicial institutions – remain active, yet pollution continues to worsen with each passing year.

Recent media reports suggest that the Delhi government plans to revive real-time assessments to identify specific pollution sources and design targeted interventions. While this appears promising, the fundamental causes still remain largely unaddressed.

Population growth, unchecked urbanisation, congestion, corruption, encroachment, and an aggressive culture of unsatiated materialism – fuelled by relentless advertising and celebrity endorsements – continue to drive excessive consumption



PHOTO: PANKAJ KUMAR

AIR QUALITY INDICES ROUTINELY SPIRAL INTO THE 'SEVERE' CATEGORY, THREATENING PUBLIC HEALTH AND PARALYSING DAILY LIFE

The writer is a legal journalist who writes on the legal aspects of various issues, including environmental, social, and economic matters

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and industrial production, leaving behind mountains of waste and toxic emissions. Instead of confronting these systemic issues, policy vision has remained narrowly fixated on banning 15-year-old petrol vehicles and 10-year-old diesel vehicles. This approach, first imposed by the National Green Tribunal (NGT) in 2016, was based on assumptions rather than rigorous scientific evidence. Nearly a decade later, it is evident that the ban has delivered no tangible improvement in air quality. On the contrary, pollution levels have only multiplied.

Significantly, even during the original hearings, the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways had pointed out – based on studies by IIT and the Central Pollution Control Board – that diesel vehicles were not major contributors to pollution and that the contribution of older vehicles was minuscule. Yet, in August 2025, the Commission for Air Quality Management (CAQM), responding to an RTI query, admitted that it had conducted no independent study to assess pollution caused by overage vehicles. The

ban, it conceded, was rooted solely in earlier judicial orders.

In a puzzling turn, the same Commission later flagged vehicular emissions as a major contributor to Delhi's poor air quality and constituted a 15-member expert committee, chaired by Professor Ashok Jhunjhunwala of IIT-Madras, to assess segment-wise vehicular pollution. Even before this committee could commence its study, the CAQM urged the Supreme Court to allow coercive action against vehicle owners.

Acting on this plea, the Court permitted enforcement against vehicles not meeting Bharat Stage IV standards – despite the absence of fresh scientific findings.

Banning vehicles purely on the basis of age is neither rational nor effective. What truly matters is vehicular fitness, maintenance, and emissions performance – not the year of manufacture. A decade of experience has shown that age-based bans are a cosmetic solution, offering symbolism without substance. If vehicular pollution is to be meaningfully addressed, the focus must shift to

limiting excessive ownership.

Multiple-car households often treat vehicles as status symbols rather than necessities. Recognising this, the Supreme Court monitoring committee in January 2025 recommended limiting vehicle registration to one car per family or linking new vehicle purchases to the availability of dedicated parking space. Similar proposals, including imposing green taxes on families owning multiple vehicles, have been floated for over a decade but remain unimplemented.

The scale of vehicular growth is staggering. In 2023 alone, Delhi registered 6.5 lakh new vehicles – an average of 1,800 every day. Between January and November 2024, another 6.42 lakh vehicles were added. Roads, already choked, have been transformed into informal parking lots, eroding public space and worsening congestion.

Beyond air pollution, plastic waste represents another grave environmental threat. Single-use plastics – particularly carry bags, sachets, and small water bottles – clog drains, contaminate water bodies, overload landfills, and kill animals that ingest them. Despite repeat-

ed bans by the NGT and comprehensive notifications by the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change in August 2025, enforcement remains virtually non-existent. Banned items – from plastic bags and cutlery to 250 ml water bottles – are openly sold and used, even at official government events and court premises.

This persistent failure raises uncomfortable questions. Why are factories manufacturing banned items still operational? Why are traders and wholesalers not prosecuted? Are enforcement agencies complicit, or has the plastic lobby grown too powerful to challenge?

Ironically, while official machinery falters, the country's poorest citizens – waste pickers – continue to perform a silent service by collecting and segregating recyclable waste. Estimated to number between 2.5 and 4 million, they form the first line of defence against plastic pollution, yet receive little recognition, protection, or support. Their work must be formally regulated and integrated into waste-management systems.

At the heart of India's pollution crisis lie deeper structural issues. Rapid population growth places unbearable pressure on limited land and resources. Unchecked urbanisation draws millions into already saturated cities like Delhi, triggering illegal construction and infrastructure overload. Corruption undermines every well-intentioned directive, rendering laws toothless. Aggressive advertising manufactures artificial demand, driving overproduction and excessive consumption. Congestion, encroachment, and unregulated commercial activity keep engines idling and emissions rising.

Pollution, therefore, cannot be fought through fragmented, knee-jerk measures. It demands a holistic approach rooted in scientific inquiry, administrative will, and societal introspection. Without vision – clear, courageous, and comprehensive – India will continue to treat symptoms while the disease spreads unchecked.

The choice is stark. Either we reimagine development in harmony with nature, or we resign ourselves to living in gas chambers, drowning in plastic, and paying for neglect with our health and lives. Pollution does have a solution – but only if we have the vision to see it through.

When machines start to feel like companions



NISHANT SAHDEV

The problem is not loneliness. It is what effortless connection does to our expectations of relationships.

The most consequential changes are often the ones that feel helpful at first. They remove small inconveniences, smooth over rough edges, and make everyday life easier – right up to the moment when their effects can no longer be ignored.

Over the past year, while studying artificial intelligence not just as a tool but as an environment people increasingly inhabit, I began noticing such a shift. It appeared in usage data, in research papers, and in ordinary conversations. Across countries and cultures, many people now spend more time each day in emotionally attentive conversations with machines than with any other human being. What was once unusual is becoming routine. And it has happened with remarkably little public attention.

The most common explanation is loneliness. People turn to machines, we are told, because something is missing in their social lives. It is a comforting story. It places the problem inside individual psychology rather than in the design of the systems themselves. It suggests a temporary condition, not a structural change.

But the evidence increasingly points elsewhere.

Controlled studies now show that even brief interactions with conversational AI can measurably reduce feelings of loneliness, at least in the short term. A 2024 Harvard-affiliated field experiment involving more than 3,500 participants, published in *Nature Human Behaviour*, found that short conversations with AI reduced self-reported loneliness by 16 to 20 per cent – an effect comparable to brief human interactions. The strongest effects appeared among people with fewer offline social ties.

From an engineering perspective, this result is not surprising. Emotional relief, when delivered consistently, privately, and without effort, scales extremely well.

The more important question is what happens after that initial relief.

Long-term studies of large conversational datasets reveal a familiar pattern from complex systems theory. Early gains level off. Dependence grows. In peer-reviewed research examining hundreds of thousands of chatbot interactions – conducted by aca-

dem researchers rather than platform companies – heavy users who engage daily over extended periods show higher markers of emotional reliance and lower stated intentions to seek human interaction than lighter users.

Researchers are careful not to overstate causation, and they are right to be. Correlation does not prove preclusion. Still, correlations at that scale are not statistical noise. They are signals that a system is quietly reshaping behaviour.

This pattern is now visible across societies. Teenagers, in particular, appear strikingly comfortable sustaining emotionally expressive conversations with machines. This is not because they are confused about what they are interacting with. Surveys consistently show that most users, including adolescents, understand perfectly well that these systems are not human.

Human relationships are not smooth or efficient. They take time. People misunderstand each other. Old memories linger. Words have consequences that cannot be erased. When something goes wrong, it does not disappear with a reset button. You have to sit with it, talk through it, sometimes wait. That slowness can be frustrating and painful. But it is also what holds relationships together. It teaches patience, compromise, and the difficult work of repair.

AI companionship systems are built to remove much of that friction. They respond immediately. They stay present. They do not withdraw, lose patience, or go quiet at the wrong moment. They remember what you like and adapt to it. Over time, they shape themselves around you. Their success is measured in how long you stay, how often you return, how deeply you engage. There is nothing sinister in this. It is simply how optimised systems function.

But optimised systems change the environments they operate in.

This is where a simple pattern becomes clear. When something becomes too easy, we do not just use it more – we start to rely on it. Shortcuts change habits. Convenience changes expectations. What once felt like a helpful option slowly becomes the standard against which everything else is judged.

Our emotional lives are no different, even if they are harder to formalise.

When responsiveness becomes instant, consistent, and effortless, expectations quietly shift. Waiting starts to feel unnecessary. Uncertainty becomes harder to tolerate. Give-and-take begins to feel like inconvenience. Walking away becomes easier than working things through. Over time, the baseline against which human relationships are judged slowly moves – often without anyone noticing.



At present, emotional AI operates with very few boundaries. There is no shared understanding of how intense these interactions should be, how long they should last, or when they should pause. Users are rarely told what these systems are optimising for, or when they are designed to lean in rather than step back. The system moves closer because closeness works.

This absence of friction is often framed as progress. But in every domain where technology interacts deeply with human behaviour, friction serves a purpose. It slows things down. It creates space for reflection. It prevents systems from outrunning the people inside them.

Some governments have begun to recognise this. Many have not. And as emotional systems become part of everyday life, they are difficult to see clearly and even harder to regulate. They fade into routines, shaping habits and expectations precisely because they feel normal.

From a physicist's point of view, the lesson is familiar. When a system scales faster than our understanding of its consequences, oversight arrives late, if it arrives at all. The task is not to reject the technology or moralise its use. It is to understand what kind of system we have built.

We are not watching machines replace human relationships. We are watching them quietly reset the conditions under which relationships feel worth the effort.

That shift did not emerge from emotional decline or cultural failure. It emerged from design.

And design, unlike culture or psychology, is something we can still change – if we notice it before it disappears into the background of ordinary life.

The writer is a theoretical physicist at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, US, and the author of the forthcoming book *Last Equation Before Silence*

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Empowering the Northeast



ARVIND KUMAR

Software Technology Parks of India (STPI) has been at the forefront of driving India's digital transformation and entrepreneurial growth. In line with this vision, STPI's OctaNE (Open Connectivity through Technology and Networking of Entrepreneurs) initiative is creating a powerful innovation network across the Northeast, one of the country's most promising regions.

Designed as a cluster of eight Centres of Entrepreneurship (CoEs), OctaNE is catalysing deep-tech innovation, fostering start-ups, and building a self-sustaining digital ecosystem that empowers local talent to contribute to India's growing innovation economy. It seeks to bridge the gap between India's established start-up hubs and the Northeast's emerging potential. The eight interlinked CoEs focus on technology domains aligned with local strengths and global opportunities – IoT in Agriculture (Guwahati), Animation (Shillong), AR/VR (Imphal), Gaming and Entertainment (Aizawl), Data Analytics and AI (Agartala), Healthcare and Agritech (Gangtok), Drone and GIS (Itanagar), and Graphic Design (Kohima). Each CoE functions as a specialised hub while collaborating across domains to foster joint innovation. Collectively, they are projected to create jobs within CoE facilities as well as additional opportunities in start-up ventures in the future, reinforcing the Government's vision of digital inclusion and resilient economic growth.

OctaNE's incubation infrastructure offers start-ups end-to-end support, including cutting-edge labs, co-working spaces, technical mentorship, market access, and investor linkages. This integrated ecosystem enables entrepreneurs to reduce capital risk while accelerating innovation and go-to-market readiness. Through this network, start-ups gain access not only to infrastructure but also to a robust community of industry experts, investors, and academic partners.

Till now, STPI OctaNE CoEs in the Northeast have incubated 257 start-ups. These start-ups have collectively developed 51 working prototypes and reported 217 innovative products. The ventures nurtured by OctaNE CoEs have collectively raised external funding of more than ₹7.26 crore. In addition, 89 Intellectual Property Rights (IPRs) have been filed, underlining a culture of research-driven innovation. Start-ups nurtured under OctaNE showcase the Northeast's rise as a technology-driven growth hub, blending innovation with regional strengths. Each Centre of Entrepreneurship (CoE) across the seven states drives transformation through IT, agritech, cre-

ative tech, and emerging technologies – creating impact, livelihoods, and new opportunities.

In Gangtok, RespiRit Healthcare Pvt. Ltd. and Swadha Agri are applying technology in healthcare and agriculture. RespiRit offers an integrated respiratory health ecosystem, while Swadha Agri's multilingual digital platform streamlines farm-to-fork operations with transparency and traceability. Deployed in Jharkhand and now being customised for Sikkim IFCCO Farmers, Swadha has empowered thousands of farmers and customers.

At Aizawl, gaming start-ups like Looney Dog Productions Pvt. Ltd. and GauravGo Technologies Pvt. Ltd. are redefining entertainment. Looney Dog has developed games such as Echoes of the Past and Dark Archer, while GauravGo's SENA Mayaverse lets users play and earn, supported by in-game brand promotions. In Itanagar, Scraptech Solutions Pvt. Ltd. builds affordable surveillance and drone technology, while Srajan Data Analytics Pvt. Ltd. develops AI tools to monitor farms and optimise yields.

At the Imphal CoE, Double Uppercut Games and Inkrid Studios Pvt. Ltd. develop Immersive AR/VR games rooted in storytelling and culture. The Shillong Animation CoE supports Diffusion G Production Pvt. Ltd. in advanced CGI and Baby Jingles Pvt. Ltd. in creating engaging children's content. In Guwahati, Sarus Agro Pvt. Ltd. and Poohar Essence Pvt. Ltd. are transforming agriculture through IoT-enabled sensors and AI-based advisories.

The Agartala CoE drives innovation through DreamBot Pvt. Ltd.'s robotic cooking platform and Auradristhi Technologies Pvt. Ltd.'s AI-powered virtual fashion-shoot solution. In Kohima, Lumapix Creative Studios LLP and Creativix are building a vibrant design ecosystem with VFX, animation, and simplified digital workflows – positioning the Northeast as a growing force in India's digital and creative economy.

Beyond incubation, OctaNE has become a launchpad for first-generation entrepreneurs, providing world-class facilities and mentorship once limited to metropolitan centres. It encourages students, researchers, and professionals to explore emerging technologies, prototype ideas, and solve region-specific challenges, helping retain talent and drive sustainable regional growth.

OctaNE's Investor Connect initiative links start-ups with venture capitalists, angel investors, and corporate leaders, offering visibility, partnerships, and capital to scale beyond regional markets. Today, OctaNE is more than an incubation network – it is helping transform the Northeast into India's next tech frontier, spreading digital opportunity through collaboration, innovation, and inclusion.

The writer is the Director General Software Technology Parks of India

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After Caracas

Venezuela was not an aberration. It was a declaration. The forcible removal of Nicolás Maduro was presented as a corrective to criminality and democratic collapse, but it has also reset expectations about how power will now be exercised. The operation's brazenness – a sitting head of state seized, a government displaced, an interim authority installed – was not merely tactical. It was signalling. And signals, in international politics, are rarely sent without intended recipients. Those recipients are already visible. Greenland is the most unsettling case, because it collapses the distinction between strategic interest and territorial ambition. The language used – necessity, security, inevitability – mirrors justifications historically associated with expansionist powers, not treaty-bound democracies. If strategic value alone becomes sufficient rationale, alliance membership offers no immunity.

Colombia sits at the intersection of ideology, narcotics and geography. A left-leaning government, persistent drug flows, and rising US frustration form a combustible mix. Historically a close security partner, it is now being rhetorically recast as a problem state. That shift matters. When partners are redefined as liabilities, the space for coercive action widens rapidly. Mexico is more complicated and therefore more dangerous. Its proximity to the US makes restraint harder, not easier. Cartels, migration and domestic US politics combine to create pressure for action that diplomacy struggles to absorb. Any cross-border intervention, even limited, would fracture a foundational bilateral relationship. But the logic of 'if they won't, we will' has already been articulated. Once that logic is normalised, execution becomes a matter of timing, not principle. Iran lies outside the hemispheric frame, but not outside the doctrine.

Here the justification is moral rather than geographic: human rights, nuclear threat, regional destabilisation. The problem is that morality, when weaponised, becomes indistinguishable from convenience. If domestic repression is sufficient cause for external force, the list of eligible targets expands dramatically – and selectively.

Cuba, finally, is the low-hanging fruit. Isolated, economically brittle, and now deprived of Venezuelan support, it is being openly described as a regime waiting to fall. That language is not analytical; it is anticipatory. It prepares audiences for an outcome, and outcomes tend to follow preparation.

Taken together, these cases reveal a pattern. This is not a scatter of unrelated grievances. It is a coherent posture: strategic impatience combined with ideological certainty. Influence is no longer sufficient; control is the goal. Legitimacy is no longer negotiated; it is asserted.

The danger is not that power is being used. Great powers always use power. The danger is that this constraint is being discarded. When intervention becomes normalised, resistance becomes rational. Smaller states hedge, rivals harden, and institutions hollow out. Venezuela will be defended as a special case. Every intervention is. But precedents do not remain isolated. They travel. They are cited. They are eventually turned. Venezuela was the breach. The question now is whether it will remain the exception – or become the template as America turns brazenly rapacious.

Auto Paradox

India today stands among the world's largest automotive producers, yet remains a minor presence in global automotive trade. This is not a contradiction of scale, but of strategy. The country builds millions of vehicles each year, employs tens of millions of people across the value chain, and anchors a vast ecosystem of steel, rubber, electronics, and services. And still, in the segments that truly shape global demand – passenger vehicles, commercial vehicles and electric mobility – India's footprint is surprisingly small.

The explanation lies in how the industry has evolved. For decades, policy, protection and market design have encouraged manufacturers to look inward. High tariffs, local content rules and a vast domestic consumer base created a comfortable ecosystem where growth could be achieved without intense export competitiveness. The result is an industry finely tuned to Indian price points, Indian regulations and Indian tastes, but only selectively aligned with global demand.

This inward orientation shows up clearly in export patterns. India performs well in motorcycles and tractors, categories where it has cost advantages and established manufacturing depth. But these segments form a relatively narrow slice of world trade. In contrast, the global automotive market is driven by passenger cars, light commercial vehicles and now, increasingly, electric vehicles. It is here that India lags – despite having the engineering base, supplier networks and labour scale to compete.

The electric vehicle transition makes this imbalance starker. While global EV trade has surged, India's participation remains marginal. This is not for lack of policy intent, but because EV ecosystems are built on deep integration: battery supply chains, power electronics, software, charging infrastructure and global platform manufacturing. Without scale in these critical inputs, exports cannot take off. Domestic assembly alone does not create export competitiveness.

There is a lesson in the relative success of auto components. Where Indian firms have been forced to meet global quality, cost and delivery standards, they have done so impressively. Component exports have grown faster than finished vehicles, proving that competitiveness is possible when integration and scale are aligned. The problem is not capability; it is orientation.

The choice before India is therefore structural, not cosmetic. It is not about tweaking incentives or adding another scheme. It is about deciding whether the automotive sector will remain primarily a protected domestic market, or be deliberately re-engineered as an export engine. That shift requires lower trade barriers, deeper participation in global value chains, and a willingness to expose domestic champions to global competition.

It also requires focusing production where global demand lies. Passenger vehicles, commercial fleets and EV platforms must move from being peripheral to being central in industrial planning. Logistics costs, port efficiency, and export financing matter as much as factory output. So does the ability to scale quickly, not just produce cheaply. India's automotive industry has reached the limits of domestic-only logic. If India wants to be a serious manufacturing power rather than just a large market, it must design for the world, not merely sell at home.

Military Transformation

The test of any military thinking is not whether it predicts the next war, but how well it recognizes the changes in the future of war and warfare. We must therefore ask ourselves more complex questions: are we more interested in incremental change by way of expedited military acquisitions and additions; or are we interested in a systemic change with an aim to reset the doctrine and structures; or are we looking at transformative changes to convincingly deter or defeat our adversary



Warfare today is witnessing a massive change. But when we analyse some ongoing wars, it is hard to decipher what is changing, and what is not. In this age of media-hype, every new idea or technology is touted as a game-changer, leaving little room for honest understanding of the future of warfare. Understanding where warfare is headed can help political leaders, defence policy makers and military practitioners to make informed decisions, and take control of their strategic choices.

Three aspects of recognising change are important. First, recognising those changes that are transactional or incremental in nature. For example, India buying additional fighter jets to supplement its air warfare capabilities. Or, buying tanks, guns and warships. These are useful increments, but nothing spectacular in terms of altering the balance of power. They simply enhance operational efficiency. The capacity might improve, but not the broader concept to fight the adversary.

News-makers and analysts tend to obsess over such transactional changes as it produces a constant flow of news-worthy content and hype. They fail to ask 'how' and 'why' each change can or cannot cause a fundamental shift in India's overall war-fighting capacity. Notwithstanding this, the incremental change is necessary to maintain status quo, particularly against China and Pakistan, and to affect more profound changes within the three Services, envisaged at the systemic level.

Second, identifying those changes that have the potential to re-shape the force. They are systemic in nature. They are both doctrinal and structural, and invariably driven by changes in technology, unlike those incremental changes that are somewhat different. Here, while the wider system remains the same, the balance between these factors undergoes a change. They typically show up as doctrinal or technological preferences, to define new concepts, structures and tactics on the battlefield.

For instance, India's quest for theatre-isation

of its armed forces has the potential to produce a systemic change, but only if it is grounded in an inspiring joint doctrine and right choice of technologies. That the Air Force wants to stick to the status quo is a different matter. In that context, systemic changes are easy to conceive or pronounce, but these are difficult to operationalize, as most militaries are inherently resistant to change. Essentially, the inter-service tussle boils down to who gets to define the system.

Third, it is about finding those transformative ideas, concepts and technologies that have the potential to re-write the rules of warfare. This is the deepest form of reform. The entire eco-system changes, not just the technology and its usage, but the rules of warfare, doctrines and structures. For instance, the introduction of tanks, aircraft and submarines during the World Wars changed the character of war. They replaced the centrality of single-service battles with the concept of combined arms operations. The introduction of missiles added a new dimension to warfare with regard to the vulnerability of hinterland infrastructure, installations and industry.

Today, drones, missiles, munitions, and battlefield digitisation are ushering in yet another transformative change in how militaries might fight future wars. Besides, Artificial Intelligence is rewriting the rules of warfare and role of human agency in war. Every military is built on a set of comfortable beliefs and it relies on the idea that specific rules, prosperity, and institutions will persist. India's armed forces are no different.

Therefore, it needs to look at its institutions, capabilities and structures rather dispassionately, and decide on what is to be retained, and what is not relevant. It would mean discarding some capabilities that are losing purpose and legitimacy on the battlefield, like tanks, ships and aircraft.

It would also imply reshaping its organisational structures that contribute very little on the battlefield, and are less agile or elephantine in size and proportion. It would even entail investing in a mix of ideas and technologies,

not by merely picking anything that is absolutely new or discarding anything that is old but by identifying significant opportunities that lie in the gap between the dying beliefs and the new consensus that has yet to emerge within the military.

In any expansive change, the winners are those entities that are able to balance the old and the (disruptive) new. So how would this happen: possibly in two ways – by slowly hedging against conventional military wisdom, and placing small yet definitive bets on the new rules of warfare, in terms of new doctrines, structure and technology.

Such transformative change is the long game that certain organisations are good at. They are good at playing it may not necessarily be the military. But then agile militaries know how to develop the resources, technology and structures at a scale, that are not reversible.

Once you identify an idea or technology that fundamentally alters the logic of military power, like the Ukrainians, you know that one is looking at transformative change. For India, this change will happen when it sheds its deep service loyalties to collectively shape and align its joint war-fighting doctrines, structures and

technology. Here are some reasons which challenge India's quest for change. India's past wars have largely been land-centric. Our past conflicts with China and Pakistan have all been about territory, notwithstanding the contribution of the air force and the navy. Our other smaller wars too have been about territory or disaffected border regions. This centrality of land strategy in India's territorial security and internal stability perpetuated single service thinking.

However, the Balakot and Sindoor strikes denote a systemic shift in strategy. They were about precise use of force – air-to-air, or air-to-ground. Drones, missiles and guided munitions have been the principal instruments

in these retaliatory strikes. Land strikes, if any, have been short on scale and scope. This highlights the importance of technology that can enable prompt and precise retaliatory action by land, air and sea, to shape Pakistan's behaviour.

While Pakistan is no less important, China is rapidly gaining relative advantage in these capacities vis-à-vis India. The growth in Chinese capability highlights the need for urgent and transformative changes in India's military capacity. Therefore, India needs to figure out its winning doctrines, capabilities and structures. But when a military finds comfort in dated institutions is when change looks difficult.

Any systemic change involves reorganising for the future, of what the military needs, what is politically acceptable, and what is financially feasible. It requires a rather dogged approach to large-scale military transformation, akin to what the Chinese have demonstrated. Or, how the Ukrainians with sheer societal will and resilience, innovativeness and adaptive-ness – have coped with a formidable adversary.

The test of any military thinking is not whether it predicts the next war, but how well it recognizes the changes in the future of war and warfare. We must therefore ask ourselves more complex questions: are we interested in incremental change by way of expedited military acquisitions and additions; or are we interested in a systemic change with an aim to reset the doctrine and structures; or are we looking transformative changes to convincingly deter or defeat our adversary.

Understanding this nuance might help us to see what is tactical or what is more strategic, and realise what is temporary, or what might be more permanent and durable. Until this is understood, India will remain vulnerable to new catalysts on the battlefield.

In the meantime, embarking upon a comprehensive doctrinal core force review might help resolve this impasse. A review rooted in India's socio-economic context, guided by its regional and global concerns and sustained resourcing and industrialisation is a need of the hour.



HARINDER SINGH
The writer is a retired Lieutenant-General of the Indian Army; is a former commander

THE KATHMANDU POST

The old and the new

As the election is drawing closer, everyone is thinking about the polarisation of political parties and its possible outcomes. In particular, the recent alignment of three populist figures – Balendra Shah, Kulman Ghising and Rabi Lamichhane – has further excited the discussions and debates on social media. Many are questioning the future of the old and established leaders and their parties. Are they really on the verge of extinction, as many think?

I would urge people, first off, to stop outsourcing their decision-making to social media apps and give careful consideration to parties' ideologies, histories, geopolitical situations and ground realities. If they don't, the nation may face even greater dangers in the future. We must be wise and considerate in this critical period.

Almost every Nepali eats dal bhat regularly. Lentil soup tastes better if the grain is new, but rice tastes better if it is an older stock. Recently, harvested rice does not even cook well. And, we all

know, the older the whisky, the better it tastes.

In other words, not everything new is good, and not everything old is bad. The same is true for political parties. Older politicians may become ineffective with ageing, which is natural, but that does not necessarily apply to the life of political organisations.

Consider, for example, American politics. Of the hundreds of registered parties, only two are prominent. Established 197 years ago, the Democratic Party, now in opposition, is one of the oldest functioning parties in the world. The party in power, the Republican Party, is 171 years old.

Similarly, in the United Kingdom, the Conservative Party and the Labour Party are 182 and 125 years old, respectively. In China, the Chinese Communist Party was set up in 1921, and in India, the Indian National Congress was founded in 1885. So, the notion that our established

parties have become too old, weak and unfit for purpose is ridiculous. They are not done and dusted.

The popular dichotomy between the old and the new is fallacious and misleading. In any case, our parties aren't even that old.

The Nepal Congress was founded in 1950 and the Communist Party of Nepal (United Marxist-Leninist) was founded in 1991. This was a major branch of the communist movement started by Pushpa Lal Shrestha in Calcutta, India, in 1949.

I agree: These parties haven't functioned as they should have in recent years. They played a crucial role in upholding the autocratic Rana regime and Shah dynasty, but they haven't been as successful in terms of creating economic prosperity and social equality.

Instead, they have been dogged by corruption, nepotism, casteism and many other issues. The anger and frustration amongst the people towards these parties

is therefore understandable.

Riding on the bandwagon of the Gen Z protests, some younger figures have emerged in Nepali politics.

For instance, Rabi Lamichhane, chair of the Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP), has played a key role in bringing the newly established parties and their leaders together.

The RSP has projected the popular mayor of Kathmandu, Balendra Shah, as the future prime minister. Lamichhane, Shah and Ghising have pledged to control corruption and boost the country's economy within a decade. I wish them the best of luck with that.

But the self-declared champions of progress and prosperity have yet to present feasible plans and strategies to achieve their goals. Frustratingly, these future leaders' vision and ideology have not been clearly articulated. People do not know where they belong on the political spectrum, although they appear to be right-wing.

Letters To The Editor | editor@thestatesman.com

Unexceptional

Sir, The Supreme Court denying bail to Umar Khalid and Sharjeel Imam, while granting the same to five others accused, in the February 2020 Delhi riots case is unexceptional (January 6). The rampage that left over 50 innocents dead and hundreds injured, thus attracting the provisions of the UAPA, was no ordinary conspiratorial crime for all the accused to be enlarged on bail, irrespective of the role played by each.

If bail is granted to the main accused in such cases, the co-accused are charged a lesser role may also automatically receive the same. But in the reverse case, the doctrine of 'hierarchy of participation' is bound to apply.



It is true that the accused have already spent over five years in jail. Legal delays are a perennial problem faced by the Indian justice system, which needs to be handled on a war footing, but that is no justification for leniency to be shown to all accused who commit acts of terror.

Nor can the young age of Khalid and Imam be a mitigating factor, as at the time of committing the heinous offenses both

were adults. Freedom is not license. If a group of individuals who do not like initiatives like the CAA take the law into their own hands, causing death and injuries to innocents, they should be ready to face the full force of the law, regardless of the support they receive from local or foreign quarters.

Yours, etc., V. Jayaraman, Chennai, 6 January.

Mockery

Sir, Recently, Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh, the head of Dera Sacha Sauda, who was convicted of rape and murder and is serving his sentence in prison, was granted parole for a record-breaking fifteenth time for 40

days. Why does our judicial system allow such blatant favoritism, which is then exploited by the ruling political parties?

In a democracy, the judiciary is one of the key pillars of the Constitution, ensuring law and order is upheld impartially. However, the constant manipulation of the judicial system for political gains weakens its credibility.

Such actions send a wrong message to the common people, making them feel that the judiciary is controlled only by the wealthy and powerful. It creates an impression that the order is upheld impartially. However, legal consequences, while ordinary citizens are left helpless.

Yours, etc., Dr. Jitesh Mori, Kutch, 5 January.

Recalling martyrs of Dombari Buru



DR. PRABIR VERMA

As we approach the 126th anniversary of the tragic events at Dombari Buru on 9 January 1900, it is imperative that we pause to remember the martyrs who laid down their lives in the pursuit of freedom and dignity. The blood-soaked hills of Dombari Buru in Jharkhand stand as an eternal testament to the unyielding spirit of our Adivasi bravehearts. Their sacrifice, often overshadowed in the annals of India's freedom struggle, deserves not just remembrance but national recognition.

Dombari Buru hills, nestled in the Khunti district of Jharkhand, are more than a geographical landmark - they embody the indomitable spirit of Adivasi courage and valor. This symbolism is deeply rooted in the revolutionary movement led by Bhagwan Birsa Munda in 1899, known as the Ulgulan or 'Great Tumult'. Birsa Munda, a visionary tribal leader, rallied his people against the oppressive British colonial regime, which had encroached upon their lands, exploited their resources, and eroded their cultural autonomy through exploitative land policies and missionary influences.

The Ulgulan was not merely a rebellion; it was a profound assertion of self-rule, encapsulated in Birsa's rallying cry: 'Abus Raj eta jana, Maharani Raj tunda jana' ('Let the queen's rule end, and our rule begin'). Dombari Buru became the epicenter of this resistance, where thousands of Mundas gathered to strategize

and stand firm against imperial might. Today, these hills symbolize the timeless Adivasi ethos of resilience, unity, and defiance against injustice, inspiring generations to uphold their heritage and fight for their rights.

The events leading to the Dombari Buru massacre unfolded amid escalating tensions in the late 1890s. Birsa Munda's movement gained momentum as tribals resisted the British zamindari system and forest laws that deprived them of their ancestral lands. On 5 January 1900, Birsa's followers clashed with colonial forces, killing two police constables in Ekkeith. Two days later, on January 7, they stormed a police station in Khunti, resulting in the death of another constable. Fearing a full-scale uprising, the British mobilized troops under Captain H.H. Dalton.

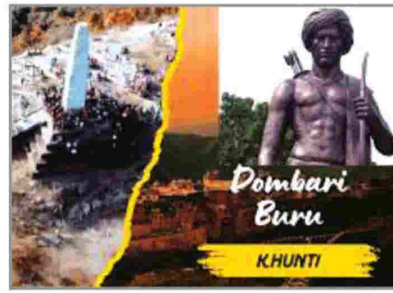
On January 9, over 400 unarmed Munda tribals - men, women, and children - had assembled peacefully at Dombari Buru for a meeting. Without warning, British forces opened fire, unleashing a hail of bullets that turned the hill into a slaughterhouse. Reports describe the nearby Taina River running red with blood, as hundreds were mowed down in cold blood. This atrocity, which claimed over 400 lives, predated the infamous Jallianwala Bagh massacre of 1919 by nearly two decades and was far bloodier in its brutality against an indigenous population. It is appropriately called the 'Jallianwala Bagh of Jharkhand' because, like Amritsar's tragedy, it exposed the ruthless face of colonialism, targeting defenceless people in a confined space with no escape.

Birsa Munda himself evaded capture briefly but was arrested on 3 February 1900, and died in Ranchi jail on 9 June 1900, under suspicious circumstances at the age of 25.

As the nation celebrates the 150th birth anniversary of Bhagwan Birsa Munda, the time could be right to consider Dombari Buru being declared a national memorial, not just for the martyrs of 1900, but as a tribute to all tribal freedom fighters across India. Such a memorial would serve as a sacred site of pilgrimage, educating visitors about the often-forgotten contribution of the Adivasi community to India's independence. It could include museums, memorials, and cultural centres that highlight tribal histories, fostering national unity by integrating indigenous narratives into the mainstream freedom story.

This recognition would honour the sacrifices made in remote hills and forests, ensuring that the legacy of Adivasi resistance is preserved for posterity. Designating Dombari Buru as a national memorial could be the finest homage to India's tribal freedom fighters, spanning from Raghunath Mahato's revolt in 1769 to Jaipal Singh Munda's advocacy in the 1940s. Raghunath Mahato, a leader from the Jungle Mahals, spearheaded a rebellion against the East India Company's exploitative policies, mobilizing local communities in a fierce uprising that challenged early colonial dominance. His efforts laid the groundwork for future resistances.

On the other end of this timeline, Jaipal Singh Munda, an Oxford-educated tribal icon, Olympic hockey captain, and Constituent Assembly member, fought tirelessly for Adivasi rights through political and legal means in the mid-20th century, including the push for a separate Jharkhand state. Between them lie countless heroes like Tilka Manjhi, Sidhu Kanhu, and others who waged guerrilla wars against British rule. A national memorial at Dombari Buru would immortalize this continuum of struggle, reminding us that India's freedom was won not only in urban centers but also in the heartlands of its indigenous peoples.



I must commend the efforts of Prime Minister Narendra Modi in bringing long-overdue recognition to the contributions of freedom fighters from Jharkhand and other tribal regions. Under his leadership, November 15 - Birsa Munda's birth anniversary - has been declared Janjatiya Gaurav Divas, celebrating tribal pride nationwide. PM Modi has visited Ullukatu, Birsa's birthplace, and inaugurated the Birsa Munda Memorial Park and Freedom Fighter Museum in Ranchi, honouring tribal legacies. His government has also felicitated descendants of tribal

heroes, integrating their stories into national discourse and ensuring they are no longer marginalized.

Recognizing Dombari Buru as a national memorial would build on this foundation, inspiring future generations of Adivasi youth. It would instill a sense of pride, encouraging them to embrace paths of selfless sacrifice and nation-building. In an era where youth face modern challenges, such a site could serve as a living classroom, teaching values of resilience, environmental stewardship, and communal harmony - hallmarks of Adivasi culture. In conclusion, let us commit to transforming Dombari Buru from a site of forgotten sorrow into a national symbol of triumph.

By doing so, we not only honour the martyrs of 1900 but also reaffirm India's inclusive ethos, where every community's sacrifice is valued. The time for action is now - let the hills echo with the pride of a united nation.

(The writer is a Rajya Sabha MP from Jharkhand)

100 Years Ago



Front page of The Statesman dated 09 January 1926

OCCASIONAL NOTE

General concern will be felt at the news that the Chief Justice has been compelled to take instant leave to England as the consequence of a cable announcing the dangerous illness of Lady Sanderson. Her ladyship, who had already passed through one critical illness in India, was in indifferent health last year, but it was hoped that complete rest at Home would in the coming winter restore her to Calcutta. Everybody who has come in contact with her - and Lady Sanderson has an extremely huge circle of friends, for she is as gifted socially as devoted to good works - will hope that the message which has called the Chief Justice away was based on an exaggerated view of her condition. In the absence of the Chief Justice, Sir Nalini Ranjan Chatterjee, the senior judge, will occupy the seat of Sir Lancelot Sanderson.

News Items

BUDAPEST ARRESTS

CONFESSION OF TECHNICAL EXPERT

Budapest, Jan.

In connexion with the French banknotes cases three persons have been arrested, namely, Gerol, technical expert, Cartographical Institute, Josef Szecrsey, an official of the Hungarian National League, and a youth named Vahafert. Gerol in a confession declared that the paper used for the forged notes was supplied by certain employees of the Cartographical Institute, who have admitted their guilt and have been arrested. Gerol had 25,000 thousand-franc notes but some of the alleged faulty notes were taken out of the vault by Prince Windischgratz. - Reuter.

MONARCHICAL PLOT

SHARP REMINDER TO AUSTRIA

PARIS, JAN.

The Matin, while absolving the Hungarian Government of responsibility in connexion with the forged banknotes affair accuses it of trying to hush up its political aspect namely, the monarchical plot among the aristocracy of Hungary, whom the Matin reminds, has regained her prosperity owing to international support and that, therefore, she has no excuse for tolerating a conspiracy against peace. - Reuter.

DEARER TYRES REFLECTED

IN PRICE OF MOTOR-CYCLES

London, Jan.

As the result of the continuous increases in the price of rubber the British Cycle and Motor-Cycle Manufacturers and Traders Union Ltd., of Coventry, announce that from January 15 the prices of motor-cycles and sidecars will be advanced by ten and five shillings respectively, covering the average advance in the price of tyres. - Reuter's Special Service.

RHINELAND DAMAGE

COBLENZ CLAIMS FOR TWO MILLION MARKS

Cologne, Jan.

Immense damage has been caused by floods in the Rhineland, where Dr. Severing, the Prussian Minister for Internal Affairs, is making an extended tour, conferring with the local authorities in regard to the best means of preventing similar catastrophes in the future. The damage to the harbour at Dusseldorf is estimated at 10 million marks. Fifteen firms in the vicinity have claimed 867,000 marks. The claims already entered in Coblenz exceed two million marks. - Reuter's Special Service.

Lessons from past tragedies

AMIT KAPOOR AND SHEEN ZUTSHI

The climate upheavals of 2025 were a stark warning for India; it was the year when the frequency and severity of climate-related risk hazards were no longer aberrations but part of a new normal. Climate resilience is no longer optional but foundational for ensuring India's ambitions are realised. As we move further into 2026, extreme vulnerability to hazard events will undoubtedly occur, but are our state-level systems resilient enough to absorb shocks, protect livelihoods, and recover without deepening inequities?

The Climate Risk and Vulnerability Assessment 2025 (CRVA) report, prepared by the Institute for Competitiveness, provides a comprehensive picture of which states are exposed, most sensitive, and least prepared for such events. The CRVA assessment also reveals a troubling pattern: climate vulnerability in India is systematically higher in states with lower GDP per capita.

Bihar, in the assessment, emerges as the most climate-vulnerable state overall in the "very high" climate risk category, with a score of 55.27, illustrating how economic weakness and climate risk reinforce one another. States with limited fiscal capacity are in the least position to invest in resilient infrastructure, often, even though their exposure to climate risk reinforces one another. The result is a vicious cycle in which low incomes constrain adaptation, repeated climate shocks deepen economic losses and long-term growth is further suppressed, widening regional inequalities over time.

Bihar's experience is therefore not exceptional but indicative of a

broader pattern across many Indian states where high climate exposure coincides with weak adaptive capacity and constrained fiscal space. Bihar also demonstrated the most constrained adaptive capacity in the country, with a score of 82.38, reflecting severe deficits in basic infrastructure. The state has only 1.4 primary health centres per lakh population, among the lowest in the country, sharply limiting its ability to respond to climate-related health emergencies. Deficiencies in water and sanitation compound this vulnerability, with just 47 per cent of households having access to improved sanitation, increasing the risk of disease outbreaks during floods. Communication infrastructure is another critical weakness, with the state's density being the lowest in the country at 55.8 per cent, constraining the dissemination of early warnings and coordination of relief during extreme events.

Macro-level assessments, such as the Climate Risk and Vulnerability Assessment (CRVA), identify where exposure, sensitivity, and adaptive capacity are weakest. However, it is micro-level assessments at the household level, as undertaken by Megh Abhiyan, that reveal what climate risk actually means in lived terms: the assets lost, livelihoods disrupted, the failure of early warning systems and the coping strategies exhausted that remain invisible in aggregate datasets.

The gap becomes clear when we examine Bihar's experience during the 2024 floods. A household-level flood assessment conducted by Megh Pyne Abhiyan, which surveyed 2290 households across 21 panchayats in seven of the worst-affected districts, combined GIS-based flood mapping with detailed household

questionnaires, participatory flood mapping, focus group discussions, and key informant interviews. Bihar floods occur every year and make headlines, but what makes the 2024 floods significant is the highly irregular monsoon season. Early rainfall deficits created drought-like conditions, followed by widespread flooding from mid-August as upstream surges in the Ganga spread across the state.

A late spate of heavy rain in September finally triggered phase 2 of the floods, affecting 27 districts in Bihar. This impacted 56.38 lakh people across 36,632 villages, damaging nearly 97 per cent of agricultural land, over 10,000 houses, and causing human and animal losses. Official estimates place the economic losses at approximately Rs 327 crore. Seen alongside the CRVA's rankings, the household assessment captures these compounded events in India's most vulnerable and poor landscape.

What makes the assessment unique is that it distinguishes among flood typologies, rather than treating all floods the same. As per the report, the framework recognises eight core flood types - including waterlogging outside embankments, riverine flooding, flooding within embankments, riverside riverine flooding with erosion, breach-induced riverine flooding in the countryside, flash flooding between embankments of the same river and flooding in unconfined embankments.

By explicitly classifying the type of flood a household experiences, the assessment was able to trace how different flood pathways produced sharply different patterns of damage and losses in affected districts; as



the report showed that breach-induced flooding affected nearly 59 per cent of surveyed households and accounted for the largest share of aggregated losses, while river flash floods between embankments proved especially destructive for those affected. In aggregate terms, the losses recorded outside embankments were more than six times those recorded inside, underscoring that climate-resilient infrastructure and preparedness systems with early warning systems need to be better aligned with flood technologies and household realities, rather than assuming a uniform risk.

Beyond asset damage, the report has also documented disruption to WASH facilities and damage to toilets, compounding health risks, service delivery and social inequities. This household survey, when seen alongside the CRVA assessment of Bihar floods, offers a real-time illustration of how high exposure and weak adaptive capacity translate into compounding losses on the ground.

Preparedness will determine the extent of our impact. This preparedness involves measures such as resilient infrastructure, strong early warning systems, climate-smart agriculture,

ecosystem restoration, and building communities' capacity to reduce vulnerability and minimise future losses systematically. But how can we know better if we continue relying solely on national-level assessments?

The risks faced by flood-prone districts in Bihar, Assam, and Kerala differ, as do the increasing urban flood risks in Indian cities, which continue to manifest in fundamentally different ways. That is why combining macro-level assessments with household surveys across states that capture real exposure, losses, and adaptive capacity is imperative.

Therefore, this year, there needs to be an imperative push across the country to integrate climate risks into state budget planning, invest in resilient climate infrastructure, and address existing inequalities. The path towards a resilient future is only within reach if states act decisively and treat not hard figures as merely records of damage or yearly accounts of statistics, but as a guiding part for building long-term resilience for the better.

(The writers are, respectively, Chair and Research Manager at Institute for Competitiveness.)

Crossword | No. 293344

ACROSS

1. Bill's extremely chubby, scoffing last of dessert after buffet (6)
4. Supplies workforce to county (6)
8. Ring shortly to collect bread in Cairo, perhaps (7)
9. Fascinating women with desires (7)
11. Instrument controls gas inhaled with vapour (5)
12. You've got me skinned - it hurts! (4)
13. Family taking drug - or not? (5)
14. Fearless detective's lead at the end is fair game (5, 5)
16. Quarrel about opening of motorcycle club - it's a source of bitterness (8)
18. Take piece of child originally next to dog (5)
20. Run out of fish market (4)
21. Colourless like benzene, which contains carbon and hydrogen (10)
23. Today's theme is about a bunch of flowers (7)
24. Random way to deliberately lose in archery? (7)
25. Go by some label - a pseudonym (6)
26. Skilful boxing starts to expose another pasting (6)
3. Unstable nitrates - central ingredient of explosive to produce states (5, 4)
5. Gulls - birds eating whatever's left (5)
6. Fine performer sitting on unknown works (5)
7. Winter athlete baps score that's not so perfect (9)
10. Liberal Lord had a bit of luck - today's his day (5, 4)
13. Brown songbird raises cuckoo (5)

DOWN

1. Convener, one coming in daily (5)
2. Current partner takes it to reproduce (7)
5. Inside middle of reserve (5)
15. Recoll, struggling to eat fish - a snapper? (7)
17. Upset first man getting hold of drunk girl (7)
19. I got mixed up with Rachel - I'm an idiot (7)
21. Collect a pound, possibly (5)
22. Subsidiary illustration of butterfly maybe not caught (5)

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

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Friday Focus

In Thy hands is all Good

All Good rests in hand of Allah [SwT] the standard by which good is judged is Allah [SwT]'s will, to His will we may submit in the realm of Islam. Allah [SwT] is the best judge, hence the final arbiter of what is good—on whom to bestow power and honour, and who is to be stripped of power and honour, as enunciated in the Holy Verse [3:26]. Say: "O Allah! Lord of Power (and Rule), Thou givest power to whom thy pleasest and Thou strippest of Power whom Thou pleasest; Thou enduest with honour whom Thou pleasest, and Thou bringest low whom Thou pleasest: In Thy hand is all Good. Verily, over all things Thou hast Power."

"In Thy hands is all Good" is the catchword—the very soul of the Holy Verse. Once it is understood that Highest Good is the Will of Allah [SwT] submission to that Will becomes the norm, as He knows what we may not fathom. Hence, the guiding factor ought to remain submission to His Will, whatever it might bring forth.

Power and honour ought not to go to one's head, as power and honour is a trust to be preserved for public good. It may not be taken as a due, but the trust reposed by One & Only Allah [SwT] as verily over all things He has power. Power once entrusted is to be used judiciously as an instrument of providing general good. And in case, power is not used judiciously by the one entrusted with it, as an instrument of social well-being, Allah [SwT] with an objective of preserving what He cherishes—Good of masses, which is a right, as enshrined in "Hagoqul-bad" my strip the one entrusted with Power. "In Thy hands is all Good" holds ever and always.

REFLECTIONS

Keep the apron unsullied

They are warriors fighting the disease and wardens protecting health

round the clock and can be called to perform when the occasion demands. Doing private practice is outside the scope of sense of duty as a government employee.

Doctors must realize delicacy of the profession. Nothing short of a paradox that some doctors run mismatch of doctor-patient ratio and complain of exhaustion due to workload of patients on one hand but are seen practicing smartly at private clinics in early morning and till late evening hours. This is emblematic of a fact that some of them hanker after amassing immense wealth.

Private doctors are either self-masters. Anybody wanting to become one among the richest, undergoing private business is the solution. One of the excuses for private practice is grant of non-practising allowance (NPA). There appears to be no reason for grant of NPA to one class of public servants who are not different from other government employees.

To curb the malpractice government can invoke Rule 10 of J & K (Conduct) Rules 1971 (CSCRs) which says, "No Government employee whether on leave or active service, shall except with the previous sanction of the Government engage directly or indirectly in any trade or business or undertake any other employment". The provisions of J&K Hon'ble High Court in a Writ Petition (C) No.10/2021 titled Ferooz Ahmad versus Union Territory of J & K and Others for implementing Rule 10 in letter and spirit can also be applied, mutatis-mutandis, in health service for stopping illegal practice and changes thereof. Sunshine Act may also be used. Much investment in the making of a doctor expects a quid pro quo. They are warriors fighting the disease and wardens protecting health, but breach of rules by some blot the profession.

The ailing poor generally turn to government hospitals for somewhat subsidized consultation and medication. Some doctors help patients financially and save their person, pocket & prestige. They don't prescribe prolonged treatments or costly medicines. They listen to patients and boost them psychologically. Such people are praiseworthy.

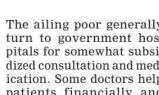
To streamline the health services government has long ago banned private practice for government doctors. But the uncomfortable truth is that some doctors leave hospitals to juniors at times to attend private clinics which is in violation of service rules. Nonconforming behaviour is prohibited under Civil Service Conduct Rules, Classification, Control and Appeal Rules, FRs, SRs etc. Just after submitting the joining report showing expression of interest before the competent authorities concerned a government servant, irrespective of class and category of post, binds itself of all time requisites of that service.

One of the purposes of the restrictions is to address employment issue by leaving a scope for private players for creating a meaningful parallel and vibrant private sector. This is a division of labour in the lexology of production and services where both sectors are expected to co-exist harmoniously for the establishment of a welfare state. Profession and perks are not to develop feelings of anomie among the incumbents but harbour soft attitude and strong concentration on duty. A government employee is a public servant

Profession

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Beyond the Capitals

An economic blueprint for the UT of J&K in Budget 2026



Fiscal Fitness

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As the Union Territory of Jammu & Kashmir stands on the threshold of the 2026 fiscal year, we face a moment. For decades, the economic narrative of our region has suffered from a "Capital-Centric" myopia. Development has often been clustered around the twin capitals of Srinagar and Jammu, leaving the rich hinterlands from the remote frontiers of Baramulla to the rugged hills of Basohli in an economic shadow.

The Budget 2026 must be the instrument that breaks this binary. It must be a document of Regional Parity and Distributive Justice. It is time to move beyond the "Jammu vs. Kashmir" allocation debates and move toward "North Kashmir and Chenab Valley" development model. We need a budget that recognizes the symbiotic potential of both regions, applying an Inclusivity Lens that ensures the dividends of peace and progress reach Guzev valley and the cumins growers in Kishtwar region.

Here is a roadmap for a balanced, reform-oriented, and visionary Budget 2026.

The Inclusivity Lens

True inclusivity means shifting the center of gravity away from the oversaturated urban agglomerations.

In Kashmir, the focus must shift from Srinagar to the North (Baramulla, Kupwara, Bandipora) and South (Pulwama, Shopian, Anantnag and Kulgam). In Jammu, the focus must shift from the plains of Jammu-Kathua to the Chenab Valley (Doda, Kishtwar, Ramban) and the Pir Panjal (Rajouri, Poonch) as well as in Ralsi and Udhampur.

The 2026 Budget must end the era of "trickle-down" economics where peripheral districts wait for crumbs. It must initiate "bottom-up" growth.

A sector-specific wish list To achieve this, the administration must commit to specific, high-impact projects that leverage local strengths rather than imposing generic solutions.



Family

Khurshood Dar

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In Kashmir, whenever society feels unsettled, the first target is always the present generation. We complain about falling morals, about children not respecting elders, about youngsters being disconnected from culture and values. Almost every drawing-room discussion ends with the same sigh: "Our times were better."

As a teacher, I listen to these conversations carefully. And quietly, I ask myself a question that is rarely asked aloud: Who raised this generation? Children do not emerge from nowhere. They are shaped—slowly, silently—inside homes, long before they step into classrooms or society.

Our parents were simple people. Most of them were not highly educated. Many had never travelled beyond their districts. They did not speak the language of psychology or modern pedagogy. Yet they knew something precious—the fibre of parenting. Home mattered to them. Time mattered. After long and tiring days, they still sat with us, sometimes on a floor mat, sometimes

1. **Tourism:** Decongesting the Capitals, Discovering the Frontiers

Both regions suffer from "destination fatigue" in their primary hubs (Gulmarg-Pelham in Kashmir; Katra/Patnitop in Jammu). The budget must allocate a dedicated corpus for developing New Tourist Destinations. In North Kashmir, this means infrastructure for the Lolab Valley, Bangus, and Uri. Simultaneously, an equivalent focus must be placed on the Chenab Valley, promoting the pristine meadows of Bhaderwah (Jai Valley) and the sapphire trails of Kishtwar.

2. **Border Tourism:** We must aggressively promote Border Tourism as a unified UT policy. Just as Keran and Teetwal in Kashmir are opening, the budget must fund viewing decks, homestays, and connectivity in Akhnor along Chenab River, Poonch, and Rajouri in the Jammu division. The border should be rebranded from a line of control to a line of commerce for locals on either sides of the Pir Panjal.

3. **Agro-Industries:** We must stop exporting raw materials and importing finished goods. The 2026 Budget must fund value-addition at the source.

Wool (North Kashmir): J&K produces India's finest wool. The budget should sanction a Mega Wool-Based Industrial Park in the Baramulla-Kupwara belt. Instead of sending raw wool to Ludhiana, we should be scouring, spinning, and weaving it in Kupwara. This will create a textile hub in the North.

Meat Processing (Srinagar & Jammu): The UT is a massive consumer of meat, leading to huge capital loss. We need Modern Meat Processing Units in Srinagar, supported by a supply chain that integrates sheep rearers from the Jammu high-ranges and Kashmir meadows. A "Farm-to-Fork" incentive policy is needed to make the UT self-reliant in protein production.

4. **Logistics:** The Wular and The Ralls Logistics costs in J&K are prohibitive. Kashmir: The budget should boldly propose work on the Wular Barrage and Jhelum dredging to facilitate water transport for bulk cement and construction material. This eco-friendly mode will decongest the North-South corridor.

Jammu: Simultaneously, the budget must plan for "Dry Ports" in the Jammu region (Samba/Kathua) to integrate with the existing rail link, also ensuring like cold storage chains are established along the rail link in North Kashmir for easy movement of apple and goods produced in Kashmir (like the wool or cement) can reach national markets seamlessly.

5. **The Concrete Foundation:** With the massive infrastruc-

ture boom—tunnels, highways, and railways—J&K is bleeding money by importing cement. The 2026 Budget must pivot to self-reliance with a strict environmental conscience.

State Policy & Joint Ventures: We need a robust State Policy for the Cement Industry. The government should invite major players for Joint Ventures (JV) with higher capacity, utilizing the limestone reserves found in both the Kashmir basin and the Jammu hills (Basohli/Reasi).

The "Local Procurement" Mandate: This is the game-changer. The budget must mandate that "All Power Projects and New Dams to have cement from within the state."

This is particularly vital for the Chenab Valley, the "Power Bowl" of J&K, where mega-dams (Ratle, Pakal Dul, Kiru) are being built. If the cement for these dams is manufactured locally in Jammu/Kashmir, it creates a circular economy, keeping thousands of crores within the UT.

Let us build a J&K that does not look outward for its needs, but looks inward at its own immense potential.

Strict Pollution Compliance: Given the fragility of the Himalayas, these new units must adhere to "Zero Liquid Discharge" and European-standard stack monitoring. We cannot trade our clean air for cement; we must have both through technology.

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Benchmarks: Learning from the Neighbors

The author is a former Director General Quality Assurance G.O.I.

We must look at Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand. These states have successfully balanced industrialization in the plains (Baddi/Pantnagar) with tourism in the hills.

Currently, J&K relies too heavily on Central Grants. Our Own Tax Revenue (OTR) must increase. By localizing cement production (massive GST generator) and textile manufacturing (employment generator), we can benchmark our fiscal autonomy against Himachal by 2030.

Risks, Impacts & Outlook:

The Risks:

Ecological Imbalance: Industrializing the Baramulla-Kupwara belt or the limestone-rich areas of Jammu carries risks. The Chenab Valley is already landslide-prone. The budget must set aside a funded "Eco-Restoration Fund" specified by a cess on these very industries.

Regional Friction: Allocations must be transparent. If a Wool Park goes to Baramulla, a Biotech or Pharma Park should be incentivized in Kathua/Samba to maintain perception parity.

The Short-Term Measures (2026-27)

Immediate tax holidays for setting up the Wool and Cement units.

Fast-track clearance for land in North Kashmir and Chenab Valley for hotels/homestays.

Subsidies for pollution control equipment in existing cement plants.

The Long-Term Vision (2030+):

A J&K where the North is the Textile Hub, the South is the Craft Hub, Central Kashmir is the Processing Hub, the Chenab Valley is the Power & Cement Engine, and the Jammu Plains are the Logistics Gateway.

The 2026 Budget is not just about balancing books; it is about balancing regions. It is about acknowledging that the prosperity of Jammu is linked to the stability of Kashmir, and the development of Srinagar is incomplete without the rise of Kupwara and Kishtwar.

By focusing on the neglected North Kashmir and the rugged Chenab, by reviving Nanda in the Valley and Basohli art in the Hills, and by ensuring our dams are built with our own cement, we lay the foundation for a robust, unified Union Territory.

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Let us bring parenting back home

Children are shaped quietly inside homes long before they enter classrooms or society



Family

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As a teacher, I listen to these conversations carefully. And quietly, I ask myself a question that is rarely asked aloud: Who raised this generation? Children do not emerge from nowhere. They are shaped—slowly, silently—inside homes, long before they step into classrooms or society.

Our parents were simple people. Most of them were not highly educated. Many had never travelled beyond their districts. They did not speak the language of psychology or modern pedagogy. Yet they knew something precious—the fibre of parenting. Home mattered to them. Time mattered. After long and tiring days, they still sat with us, sometimes on a floor mat, sometimes

near a hearth, sometimes under a dim bulb. They asked us where we had been, what we had done, how we had behaved. These were not interrogations; they were moments of connection.

They taught us values without calling them values. Respect was not explained—it was practiced. We watched how elders were spoken to, how neighbours were treated, how guests were welcomed. When we made mistakes, we were corrected. Sometimes strictly, sometimes softly—but never indifferently. Punishment existed, yes, but it was accompanied by concern. We feared disappointing our parents more than facing punishment, because their presence mattered.

Culture was not taught; it was lived. Kashmiri language flowed naturally at home. Stories were told without books. Traditions were followed without explanation, yet their meanings stayed with us. Our identity was not something we had to search for; it surrounded us.

Today, parenting looks very different. Parents are more educated, more informed, more exposed. Yet many children feel unsettled. Homes are full of things, but emptier of conversations. Parents and children live together, yet drift emotionally apart.

Modern parenting often feels hurried. Parents are busy—not only with work, but with stress, phones, expectations, and comparisons. Children are provided with good schools, tuition classes, and gadgets. Everything is arranged—except time.

Slowly, parenting has been

replaced by management. Questions have become instructions. Listening has become lecturing. Many parents do not really know what their children are thinking, fearing, or struggling with. Silence fills the gaps.

One of the most troubling shifts I have observed is the belief that schools are responsible for everything. Parents trust schools with academics—and then with discipline, morals, behaviour, and even emotional wellbeing. When something goes wrong, teachers are questioned. But education was never meant to be a one-way road.

Modern parenting often feels hurried.

The teaching-learning process loses its meaning when parents push away their children for a few hours. Parents shape them every day. Schools can teach lessons, but homes teach life. Values are not memorised; they are absorbed. And children absorb what they see, not what they are told.

Another change is hesitation. Parents hesitate to question their children. They fear being called strict or old-fashioned. In the name of freedom, guidance is withdrawn. But freedom without direction does not create confidence; it creates confusion. Children need boundaries—not walls, but guiding lines.

Culture, too, is slowly slipping away from homes. Many parents

feel that speaking Kashmiri may hold their children back. Traditions are treated as burdens. In trying to prepare children for the future, parents often disconnect them from their roots. But a child without roots may grow tall, yet remain fragile.

Ironically, the same parents who worry about neglect of elders often forget that children learn by watching. They observe how grandparents are spoken to, how their opinions are valued—or ignored. Respect cannot be demanded later if it is not practised daily.

This reflection is not written to blame parents. Parenting today is genuinely difficult. Economic pressures, competition, and constant change weigh heavily. But responsibility cannot be avoided. Awareness is not accusation; it is a beginning.

Children do not need perfect parents. They need present ones. They need someone who listens, who understands their fears, and cares. Schools and teachers can support, guide, and nurture—but they cannot replace parents.

If we truly wish to heal society, we must stop blaming children and start rethinking parenting. The moral fibre of a society is woven quietly, inside homes. When parents slow down, reconnect, and reclaim their role, children will follow—naturally, not forcefully.

Parenting does not begin with complaints. It begins with reflection. And reflection, as always, must begin at home.

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Oped

A winter without snow

What rainfall and snow deficit means for Kashmir's ecological future

Altered Hydrology

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Kashmir has always been defined by its winters. Snowfall was not merely a seasonal phenomenon but it was the ecological heartbeat of the Valley. From recharging aquifers to sustaining rivers, glaciers, wetlands, and agriculture, winter snow formed the foundation of Kashmir's hydrological security. However, the winter of 2024-25 has once again sounded alarm bells. The visible and measurable deficit in snowfall and winter rainfall is not an isolated aberration but it is part of a deeply worrying climatic trend.

The Disappearing Winter
Traditionally, Kashmir received substantial snowfall between December and February, especially in upper reaches such as Gulmarg, Pahalgam, Sonamarg, and the Pir Panjal ranges. This snowpack acted as a natural water reservoir, releasing melt water gradually during spring and summer. This year, however, winter precipitation has been sporadic, erratic, and largely rainfall-dominated rather than snow-driven.

Rainfall replacing snowfall during winter months is a dangerous climatic substitution. Rain runs off quickly, causing soil erosion and flash floods while snow stays, stores, and sustains. The absence of snow cover has exposed fragile mountain soils, reduced moisture retention, and accelerated land degradation issues I have observed it closely since my early research on Karewas of Valley causing soil erosion in Kashmir.

Hydrological Stress: Rivers, Lakes, and Wetlands

The snow deficit has serious implications for Kashmir's river systems, particularly the Jhelum and its tributaries. Reduced snowmelt means lower base flows in



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summer, increasing the likelihood of drought-like conditions, even as extreme rainfall events cause sudden floods.

Wetlands and lakes like Dal Wular, Anchar, Hokersar are among the first casualties of altered hydrology. During my extensive work on Dal Lake, Wular Lake, Sulphur springs of Ananang and other water bodies, I consistently found that seasonal snowmelt played a critical role in maintaining water chemistry, nutrient balance, and ecological health. Reduced inflows concentrate pollutants, worsen eutrophication, and accelerate ecological decline.

Wular Lake, in particular, already under stress from

encroachment and sedimentation, faces further shrinkage risks due to insufficient winter recharge. Wetlands that once acted as flood buffers and biodiversity hubs are steadily losing resilience.

Agriculture and Livelihoods at Risk

Winter snowfall also serves as a protective blanket for crops, orchards, and soil microorganisms. Its absence exposes apple orchards, saffron fields, and winter crops to frost damage and moisture stress. The chilling hours required for apple productivity are declining, directly impacting yields and farmer incomes.

Rain-fed agriculture in Kashmir's uplands and kandi areas I

later addressed through climate-resilient agriculture initiatives under the State Action Plan on Climate Change will face increasing uncertainty if winter precipitation continues to fall.

Climate Change is no Longer a Projection

For decades, climate change was discussed as a future risk. In Kashmir, it has become a reality. Warmer winters, early snowmelt, shifting precipitation patterns, cloudbursts, hailstorms, and prolonged dry spells are now frequent.

During my work on the J&K State Action Plan on Climate Change (JKSAPOC), these risks were clearly identified under water resources, agriculture, disaster

management, and Himalayan ecosystems. What we are witnessing today is not policy failure, but policy urgency which needed to be addressed to fill the gap between planning and on-ground action.

Increased Disaster Vulnerability

Ironically, less snow does not mean fewer disasters. On the contrary, it increases hydro-meteorological extremes. Rain instead of snow events, cloudbursts, landslides, and flash floods become more likely when temperature and precipitation patterns destabilize.

The recent spate of cloudbursts and landslides across Jammu and Kashmir is closely linked to this changing winter regime. Snow

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once moderated these events and its absence now removes a critical buffering mechanism.

What Needs to be Done
Kashmir stands at a climatic crossroads. Addressing winter precipitation deficit requires a multi-pronged response:

1. Strengthening climate monitoring through dense meteorological and snow-gauge networks in upper catchments.
2. Protecting and restoring wetlands and floodplains, which serve as natural water regulators.
3. Reviving traditional water management systems and promoting snow-harvesting and groundwater recharge.
4. Climate-resilient agriculture, including crop diversification and soil moisture conservation.
5. Strict land-use regulation in ecologically sensitive zones to prevent erosion and runoff.
6. Mainstreaming climate risk into governance, infrastructure planning, tourism, and urban development.
7. Creating a web portal on critical environmental parameters.
8. Collection of all data at one platform.
9. Providing an Institutional mechanism to deliver.

A Call for Ecological Wisdom

Kashmir's snow is not merely a scenic attraction but it is a strategic ecological asset. Its loss signals deeper systemic imbalance. As someone who has spent over four decades working on Kashmir's environment, its waters, soils, policies, and people, I believe the crisis we face today is also an opportunity to rethink development, restore nature-based solutions, and place climate resilience at the heart of governance.

A winter without snow should not become Kashmir's new normal. The cost of inaction will be borne not just by ecosystems, but by generations to come.

The Venezuela Crisis

Assessing implications for India's economy



Shock Waves

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The U.S. strikes on Venezuela and the ongoing crisis there are unlikely to significantly influence India's energy security as India is heavily insulated from this shock. One of the main reasons India is unlikely to be heavily affected is the sharp decline in trade between the two countries over the past few years. The data cited by the Global Trade Research Initiative (GTRI) shows that India's total imports from Venezuela in 2024-25 stood at only about USD 364.5 million. Out of this, crude oil imports accounted for roughly USD 253.3 million. This was a steep drop of over 90% compared to the previous year, when India imported crude worth around USD 1.4 billion from Venezuela. India's exports to Venezuela are also quite small. In 2024-25, exports were valued at about USD 95.3 million, with pharmaceuticals forming the largest share. These modest numbers clearly indicate that Venezuela does not play a major role in India's trade ecosystem today. The data from the Ministry of Commerce and Industry also reveals that India imported \$253.3 million worth of oil from Venezuela in the current financial year up to November 2025, about 0.2% of its total oil import during this period. India was a major buyer of Venezuelan crude back in 2006 and 2010 like Indian firms such as ONGC Videsh held upstream stakes in the Orinoco belt. However, this bilateral engagement has weakened sharply since 2019 as India has been cutting its oil imports and commercial engagements with Venezuela in response to U.S. sanctions and threats of secondary sanctions, low trade volumes and large geographical distance. According to OPEC data, Venezuela accounts for about 3.5% of the OPEC's total oil exports, and about 1% of global oil supplies. This relatively low supply is due to the U.S. sanctions on Venezuela and the heavy nature of Venezuelan oil, which requires special refineries

that most countries do not have and due to which most of Venezuela's oil supply goes to China. However, even without direct supply dependence, any geopolitical crisis involving oil-producing regions can push up global crude prices through risk premiums. Since India imports more than four-fifths of its crude oil requirement, higher global prices can raise the import bill, affect inflation and exert indirect pressure on the rupee. The Indian rupee has faced pressure spell amid heightened global risk aversion following developments in Venezuela. In uncertain geopolitical conditions, investors typically move towards the US dollar, which is weighing heavily and dragging down emerging market currencies. The impact on the rupee so far appears driven more by sentiment than by any direct trade or financial linkage with Venezuela. But this impact on Indian rupee is largely seen by analysts short term and volatility driven rather than structural. Unless the crisis results in a sustained rise in crude oil prices or prolonged global risk aversion, the rupee's movement is expected to remain within a managed range, supported by India's macro fundamentals and central bank surveillance.

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However, Indian equity markets largely shrugged off risks linked to US strikes on Venezuela over the New Year's weekend, with benchmarks trading marginally higher as investors focused on domestic interest rate sensitivities rather than geopolitical headlines. The Nifty edged up slightly, with technology stocks down about 1 to 2%, while banking and auto stocks gained 1 to 2%. Most other sectors traded in a narrow band, reflecting a market that viewed the Venezuela developments as a risk-premium event rather than a trigger for a sustained macro shock. Market participants said Indian equities were diverging from the broader Asian rally, where AI and technology-heavy markets posted sharper gains on expectations of eventual US Federal Reserve rate cuts. In India, the dominant driver was optimism

around rate-sensitive sectors, particularly banks and autos. Given that the Venezuelan situation is unlikely to trigger a rapid change in oil supply or inflation dynamics, investors remained anchored to domestic interest-rate expectations. The absence of any immediate oil-price response helped keep inflation assumptions stable, allowing rate-sensitive sectors such as banks and autos to remain the primary drivers of Indian equity performance. The corporate exposure also remains limited. India's direct exposure to Venezuela remains modest. Companies with links include ONGC Videsh, Indian Oil, Oil India, Reliance Industries, Nityara Energy and MRPL, largely through minority stakes or historical import relationships. Sun Pharma and Glenmark Pharma operate locally, while Jindal Steel & Power manages iron-ore operations. As per, analysts these linkages are fragmented and not revenue-critical, limiting direct equity-market fallout. Gold is already off to a spectacular 2025, and this conflict gives it new momentum because whenever the geopolitical uncertainty spikes investors migrate their capital to safe haven assets. Analysts are expecting a gap-up opening in Gold with COMEX gold potentially reaching \$4,380 per ounce and the precious bullion may touch \$4,380 per ounce. In India, MCX Gold could get closer to the mark of Rs. 1,40,000 per 10 grams. Venezuela has the largest gold reserves (161 metric tonnes) in South America. Control over these assets by US-backed forces could change long-term global supply dynamics, but the immediate reaction is purely risk-off buying. While silver could be more volatile than gold, it is likely that silver can potentially move towards the \$75-\$78 range on COMEX, while on MCX, the silver prices could reach the levels of Rs 245,000 per kg. Concerns over shipping routes used by Peru and Chad silver exporters could further tighten the immediate supply.

The crisis in Venezuela is a major geopolitical event with global ramifications, but the direct impact on Indian markets appears to be limited due to minimal economic linkages between the two countries. While short-term volatility is inevitable, especially in commodities, currency markets, and sentiment-driven sectors, the structural drivers of India's economy are expected to remain stable.

Zubair Mushtaq, Research Scholar in
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Hip fractures in elderly

Prevent falls by ensuring adequate lighting, dry bathroom floors, clutter-free walking areas, and safe, non-slip footwear



Preventable Falls

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In the last ten days alone, I received three such calls, each reporting an elderly person unable to move after a fall, with severe pain on hip movement. On evaluation, all were diagnosed with hip fractures. One more was an acquaintance, active till few days back, now suddenly confined to a bed, staring at the ceiling, asking the same question again and again: “*Bas bathroom mein thoda phisla hi toe tha, hadi kaise tot gayi?*” That simple slip changed everything.

Falls in the elderly are not accidents. They are events waiting to happen, especially in winter. Winter is unforgiving to ageing bodies. Cold stiffens joints, slows reflexes, weakens muscles and dulls balance. Floors become slippery, bathrooms damp, carpets loose and footwear unreliable. Winter worsens as light reduces and eye fog sets in. Blood pressure fluctuates. Medicines behave differently in cold weather. What looks like a minor misstep to a young person becomes catastrophic for an older one.

A fall in elderly is often the beginning of a cascade. The most feared outcome is hip fracture. Unlike fractures in the young, an elderly hip fracture is not merely a bone injury; it is a life-altering event. Surgery may be required. Prolonged bed rest follows. Complications creep in silently, bed sores, chest infections, urinary infections, blood clots, worsened diabetes, uncontrolled blood pressure, depression and cogni-

tive decline. Many elderly people never regain their pre-fall independence. Some never walk again. For a few, the fall becomes the turning point from relative stability to irreversible decline. And many even die because of complications and clots.

Why do elderly people fall so easily?

The reasons are rarely singular. Ageing weakens muscles and reduces bone strength. Balance systems in the inner ear deteriorate. Vision problems like cataract, glaucoma, macular degeneration distort depth perception. Chronic diseases like diabetes damage nerves, leading to numbness in feet. Parkinson's disease slows movement. Arthritis restricts joint mobility. Then there are medicines like sleeping pills, anti-anxiety drugs, blood pressure medicines that can cause dizziness or sudden drops in blood pressure.

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If an elderly person suddenly cannot walk or has hip pain after a fall, seek medical evaluation immediately, early action can save mobility and life.

Winter adds another layer of risk. Dehydration is common because thirst reduces in cold weather. Dehydration lowers blood pressure and causes dizziness. People wake up at night to use the toilet, half-asleep, in cold rooms, on dark floors. One wrong step is enough.

Prevention
Prevention does not require sophisticated technology. It requires awareness, anticipation and small changes made in time.

The first step is recognising risk. Any elderly person who has fallen once is at high risk of falling again. Complaints of imbalance, dizziness, leg weakness, poor vision or fear of falling should

never be dismissed as “normal ageing.” They are warning signs.

Homes must be made elderly friendly, especially in winter. Adequate lighting, particularly at night, is essential. Loose rugs should be removed. Bathroom floors need to be kept dry, use anti-slip mats and grab bars. Footwear should have firm grip, not loose slippers. Frequently used items should be kept within easy reach to avoid climbing or stretching.

Health optimisation matters. Regular vision and hearing checks improve spatial awareness. Reviewing medications with a doctor can eliminate unnecessary drugs that increase fall risk. Managing blood pressure, sugar levels, and anaemia improves strength and balance. Vitamin D and calcium deficiency are common in seniors and must be corrected to improve bone health.

Movement, paradoxically, is protective. Fear of falling often makes elderly people restrict activity, leading to muscle loss and further imbalance. Simple, supervised exercises focusing on leg strength and balance walking, chair exercises, gentle stretching reduce fall risk significantly. Even 10-20 minutes daily can make a difference.

Winter-specific precautions are crucial. Encourage warm clothing to prevent muscle stiffness. Ensure adequate hydration even when thirst is low. Night-time pathways to the toilet should be clear and well-lit. If needed, a bedside walking stick or commode is not a sign of weakness; it is a tool of safety.

Perhaps the most overlooked aspect is conversation. Elderly people often hide falls out of fear of being labelled weak, fear of losing independence, fear of becoming a burden. If elderly at home suddenly is not able to move or has pain in hip, families must ask, gently and repeatedly: “*Koi phislan, chakkar, ya girne ka waqt to nahi hua?*” Listening can prevent the next fall. A fall is not fate. It is often the final message of a body that has been giving signals for months, signals we chose not to see.



Telangana Today
FOR LOCAL TO GLOBAL NEWS

06

VIEWPOINT

HYDERABAD, Friday, January 9, 2026



UDDHAV THACKERAY
Shiv Sena (UBT) chief

“I campaigned for Modi ji in 2014 and 2019. Even after helping him twice, he broke my party. I was saying he should be made the PM. Now, he is saying that I should be finished



UMANG SINGHAR
Congress leader

Indore has received the Cleanest City award 8 times. But if people are forced to drink sewage water, then this has no meaning. Cleanliness awards do not keep people alive, clean water is needed to survive



ABBAS ARAGHCHI
Iran's Foreign Minister

America and Israel have tested their attack on Iran and this attack and strategy faced extreme failure. We are ready for any choice. We don't desire a war but we are ready for it

Withdrawal symptoms

United States President Donald Trump continues to maintain a high level of outrage, shocking the world with one preposterous action after another. The decision to exit from 66 United Nations and international organisations, including major forums for cooperation on climate change, peace, and democracy, is the latest in a long list of maverick moves. Ostensibly, the Trump administration justified America's withdrawal from major treaties, organisations and conventions on the grounds that they are contrary to the country's interests. The sweeping changes would mean that the US would cease participation and also cut all funding to the affected entities. The list includes the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). The UNFCCC is the global treaty under which the UN conducts the annual Conference of the Parties (COP) climate talks. It forms the bedrock of international cooperation to deal with the climate crisis and has been agreed to by every country in the world since its inception 34 years ago. America becomes the first country to pull out of it. In a chilling irony, this would mean that the world's largest historical polluter withdraws completely from the global climate change mitigation agreement and scientific assessment of climate change. It also means the US will not contribute towards climate finance to developing countries' energy transition, mitigation and adaptation. From the beginning, Trump has routinely ridiculed climate science as a scam and a hoax, and has actively hobbled clean energy projects and other climate policies.

Trump's decision to exit from 66 international organisations, including the UNFCCC, marks a major setback for climate action

The Trump administration has been turning its back on the climate crisis since day one, removing the US from the Paris Agreement, dismantling America's scientific infrastructure, curbing access to greenhouse gas emissions data, and ending essential investments in the clean energy transition. While pulling out of the Paris Agreement already signalled Trump's intentions, exiting the UNFCCC will remove the US from the international climate governance architecture altogether. This is a self-defeating move as it will further hamper America's ability to compete with China, which is increasingly dominant in the world's burgeoning clean energy technology industries. While the Trump administration is abdicating the US' global leadership, the rest of the world continues to shift to cleaner power sources. The US ranks at the top of the lists of countries with the highest current annual emissions, per-capita emissions, and the greatest historical responsibility. According to the Global Carbon Project and other sources, US territorial CO₂ emissions in 2024 were about 4.9 billion tonnes, roughly 12.7% of the global CO₂ emissions that year. On a per-capita basis, US emissions were roughly 14.6 tonnes per person in 2024, much higher than the global average. It is also the largest cumulative emitter for CO₂, from fossil fuels and industry in most mainstream carbon accounting.

Job guarantees must remain demand-driven, flexible, and rooted in local decision-making; VB-G RAM G falls short



VIJAY KORRA

In the vast rural expanse of India, where more than 60% of the population continues to rely on agriculture and casual labour for survival, Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) has, since 2005, stood as a rare rights-based social contract. By guaranteeing 100 days of unskilled wage employment per year to every rural household willing to work, it offered not merely jobs but dignity, security, and a measure of resilience against shocks.

MGNREGA's design was revolutionary. Any adult in a rural household could demand work, and the state was legally bound to provide it within 15 days or pay unemployment allowances. This demand-driven structure ensured flexibility during crises such as droughts, floods, or economic downturns. By mandating that at least 60% of funds go toward wages, it created immediate income security while also building durable community assets — such as ponds, roads, and irrigation systems — that enhanced agricultural productivity.

Evidence of its impact is robust. Studies have shown that MGNREGA reduced poverty among beneficiaries by as much as 20%, boosted household earnings by 14%, and improved school attendance. Over the course of two decades, it generated billions of person-days of work, disproportionately benefiting women (over half of the participants) and Scheduled Castes and Tribes (around 40%). Water conservation structures, for instance, not only provided wages but also improved groundwater levels and reduced soil erosion, strengthening rural economies in the long run.

A Sudden Overhaul
In December 2025, however, the gov-

ernment replaced MGNREGA with Viksit Bharat-Guarantee for Rozgar and Aajeevika Mission (Gramin), or VB-G RAM G. While promising 125 days of employment and a focus on “transformative” assets, the new framework shifts the scheme from worker empowerment to centralised control. Unlike MGNREGA's demand-driven ethos, VB-G RAM G introduces a supply-driven model. The Centre now sets State-wise “normative allocations” based on opaque parameters, capping funding upfront and ignoring actual demand. Under MGNREGA, budgets could expand to meet needs; under VB-G RAM G, workers may simply be turned away once allocations are exhausted. This is not a minor administrative tweak but a fundamental departure from the guarantee principle. During the Covid pandemic, MGNREGA absorbed millions of returning migrants when private jobs vanished. In a capped system, such surges would likely result in rationing, leaving families without income at their most vulnerable moments.

Blackouts and Labour Rights
Equally troubling is the introduction of “blackout periods,” allowing States to suspend the programme for up to 60 days during peak agricultural seasons. Proponents argue this prevents MGNREGA from “cannibalising” farm labour. Yet critics see it as a direct assault on workers' rights. Rural India is already plagued by disguised unemployment and low farm wages. MGNREGA historically pushed up private sector pay by creating competition for labour, with studies showing wage gains in villages where implementation was strong.

Blackouts could reverse these gains, forcing workers back into exploitative agricultural jobs at below-market rates or into outright idleness. For the landless poor, who form a significant share of beneficiaries, this means denial of



employment, exacerbating hunger and debt. In States such as Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, where agricultural seasons overlap with monsoon-induced job scarcity, millions risk being trapped in cycles of deprivation.

Weakening Asset Creation
Asset creation was a cornerstone of MGNREGA's success. Gram sabhas prioritised works such as afforestation, water harvesting, and rural connectivity, ensuring that projects were locally relevant and sustainable. Several studies found that these assets improved agricultural land, regenerated water resources, and indirectly boosted household health and education. VB-G RAM G shifts focus to “climate-resilient” and “infrastructure-focused” assets aligned with the government's Viksit Bharat 2047 vision.

While progressive in rhetoric, the top-down allocation risks inefficiency. Centralised notifications of implementation areas mean the Centre can cherry-pick zones, potentially excluding high-poverty pockets not deemed “strategic.” If funding is capped and blackouts enforced, fewer person-days will translate into fewer assets built. This could convert a safety net into a state-led growth tool, prioritising macro goals over micro-level survival.

Unequal Implementation
The fiscal restructuring further burdens the States. Under MGNREGA, the Centre covered 100% of wages and 75% of

MGNREGA's imperfections — leakages, uneven asset quality, delayed payments — were real, but they did not negate its role as a floor against destitution

material costs, resulting in a 90:10 Centre-State ratio. VB-G RAM G shifts more responsibility to States, especially for materials, despite their already strained budgets. Poorer States such as Odisha or Jharkhand may be forced to cut corners, resulting in delayed payments or subpar assets. Delayed wages have long plagued MGNREGA, but the new caps could worsen this, pushing workers into distress borrowing from moneylenders at usurious rates.

The human cost is profound: families skipping meals, pulling children out of school, or migrating en masse to urban slums, thereby straining already fragile urban infrastructure. Women, who relied on MGNREGA for independent income, face heightened vulnerability to domestic exploitation. In climate-stressed regions such as drought-prone Maharashtra, reduced asset creation means diminished resilience, amplifying deprivation.

Narrative of ‘Modernisation’
Government defenders claim the changes modernise the scheme for a \$4-trillion economy, citing declining rural poverty from 25.7% in 2011-12 to 4.86% in 2023-24 and synergies with direct benefit transfers. Yet these claims ignore ground realities. Poverty metrics are contested, and cash transfers cannot replace the dignity of work or the community benefits of locally created assets.

Economists such as Jean Drèze have warned that dismantling MGNREGA is a “historic error,” eroding a global model that cushioned shocks and empowered the voiceless. VB-G RAM G does not evolve MGNREGA; it eviscerates it. By centralising control, imposing caps, and introducing blackouts, it denies employment to those who need it most, hampers meaningful asset creation, and condemns the rural poor to deeper poverty.

Rights-Based Guarantees
India's aspiration to achieve developed status by 2047 must not come at the cost of sacrificing its most vulnerable citizens on the altar of “efficiency.” MGNREGA's imperfections — leakages, uneven asset quality, delayed payments — were real, but they did not negate its role as a floor against destitution. In 2023, India's multidimensional poverty affected 235 million people, with another 269 million considered vulnerable. Weakening the guarantee risks swelling these numbers.

Restoring a true rights-based approach is essential to prevent a humanitarian rollback. Employment guarantees must remain demand-driven, flexible during crises, and rooted in local decision-making. The rural heartland, already bearing faintly under economic pressures, cannot afford this wound.

(The author is Associate Professor, Centre for Economic and Social Studies, Hyderabad)

Letters to the Editor

Soaring high

In 56 years of its journey, ISRO has evolved into one of the world's most respected space organisations. BlueBird Block-2, 6,100 kg payload, is the heaviest satellite launched from Sriharikota till date and another feather in ISRO's cap. It is noteworthy that satellites launched by ISRO have helped us immensely in the fields of disaster management, weather forecasting, agriculture, telecommunication and education. Without an iota of doubt India's Gaganyaan mission is on the right track.

BAL GOVIND, Noida

Ukraine's peace proposal

The issue of security guarantees raised by Ukraine as part of a peace proposal remains fundamentally incompatible with Russia's stated position. This raises a critical question: will the “emerging US-Ukraine agreement” on security guarantees directly contradict Russia's strategic demands, thereby entrenching confrontation and potentially leading to the imposition or continuation of sanctions against Russia in the future? Alternatively, does this agreement merely represent an interim arrangement, after which the United States may seek to reopen negotiations with Russia “specifically on the security dimension at a later stage”?

RITI DWIVEDI, Indore

Road safety

Road safety is life safety — nothing can be truer. Road safety is not just about speed restriction, curbing drunken driving and ensuring maintenance of regulations. There are other facets to it, hinging on overall supervision. It includes broader aspects like proper audits, state-of-the-art training and upkeep of technology. Fanning awareness and engaging citizens about crucial road rules are equally important. All these are the aims and objectives of the ‘National Road Safety Month’ in January, in vogue from 2021. Road design and accident audits, driver training and licensing methods, are particularly focused upon. Additionally, it aims to drive home the criticality of emergency services on roads, apart from the distinct identification of dark spots that cause mishaps. The United Nations hopes that by 2030, global road fatalities will be reduced by half.

GANAPATHI BHAT, Akola

Sovereign equality

The strike on Venezuela and the kidnapping of its leadership under the guise of “terrorist” charges represent a blatant disregard for the US Constitution and established international norms. This is not a pursuit of justice, but a strategic move to secure mineral wealth and oil reserves while checking the influence of Russia and China in the region. The unpredictability of such interventions cannot be overstated. The US has a documented track record of “self-brewed” failures in the Middle East and North Africa. By ignoring the lessons of Libya and Afghanistan, the current administration is gambling with regional peace. Instead of ushering in democracy, this aggression is likely to bolster popular resistance and invite intervention from local armed groups. With global powers like Russia, China, and Brazil already speaking out, India's silence is conspicuous. As the 2026 chair of BRICS, India has a moral and diplomatic obligation to uphold the principle of sovereign equality. We must not let strategic interests blind us to the consequences of illegal aggression.

S PADMANABHAN, Kozhikode

India in the hotspot

■ The Straits Times

Russian oil: Trump warns of higher tariffs on India

The United States could raise tariffs on India if New Delhi does not meet Washington's demand to curb purchases of Russian oil, US President Donald Trump said on Jan 4, escalating pressure on the South Asian country as trade talks remain inconclusive.

■ The Kathmandu Post

Uneasy neighbours

Recent events in Bangladesh have once again exposed the fragility of the country. The ongoing protests and ensuing disorder were triggered by the shooting of popular student leader Osman Hadi. The protest was not only about the loss of a popular leader; there was a significant amount of anger directed at India.

■ The Guardian

Indian football faces up to ‘global embarrassment’

World's biggest club network shrank from 13 to 12 in the last week of 2025 but few blame the City Football Group for walking away from Mumbai City and India after six years. The reason for divesting their shares which gave them 65% ownership was addressed, not that anyone needed enlightening in a statement.

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A growth uptick in testing times

The first advance estimates (FAEs) of gross domestic product (GDP) for Financial Year 2025-26, released by the National Statistics Office (NSO), are more optimistic than most projections, and are set at a 7.4% growth. The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) had projected a growth rate of 7.3% for the current year. While the economy grew 8% in the first half of the year, it is expected to slow down in the second half, possibly on account of a decline in government spending and the impact of the tariff hikes imposed by the United States. But the 7.4% growth estimate is impressive, and is much higher than last year's 6.5%. Low inflation and improved consumption may have partly driven this trend. But it should be noted that the nominal growth for the year is projected at 8%, which is less than the budget expectation of 10.1%. It would also be the second consecutive year with the nominal growth clocking under 10%. This sluggish growth will have its budgetary implications.

The services sector is expected to lead the growth with a sharp spike, from 7.2% in 2024-25 to 9.1% in 2025-26. But other sectors such as trade, hotels, transport and communication, finance, real estate, professional services, and public administration are all expected to show good gains. Trade has not been badly affected by the tariff hikes, but the situation may change in the coming months. The manufacturing sector is projected to improve, but construction and utilities are growing at a slower rate. Consumption and investment activities are likely to do better.

The GDP estimates are based on existing data, available till November, and have been compiled using the existing methodologies. The NSO has plans to release a new GDP series in February, with 2022-23 set as the base year. This is set to expand the data sources and is expected to reflect the state of the economy better. A new series for the consumer price index is expected to be released, along with a series on an index of industrial production. While the new methodologies will change the way the country's economy and its indicators are measured, the real improvement has to come from the ground. India's economy will face challenges mainly on the external front. It will be affected by the turbulence at the global level. There is concern over the implications of higher tariffs imposed by the US. The two trade agreements, which are being pursued, will be critical to ensuring stability on the trade front.

Prescient warnings of a people's scientist

The death of Madhav Gadgil at 83 marks an immense loss to India's environmental movement. The most fitting tribute to this people's scientist would not be ceremonial praise, but the political will to act on his most insightful warning: the Western Ghats are being pushed towards ecological collapse. The 2011 report by the Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel, chaired by Gadgil, was far ahead of its time. It opposed the reckless and unscientific exploitation of one of the world's oldest and most fragile mountain systems. Declaring the entire Ghats an Ecologically Sensitive Area was not idealism but ecological realism. Stretching over 1,600 kilometres and recognised as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, this mountain range sustains peninsular India's rivers, monsoons, biodiversity, and food security. To treat it as expendable real estate was, and remains, an act of collective self-harm.

Nearly 15 years later, Gadgil's warnings read like a post-mortem written in advance. Hills have been flattened for real estate, quarries gnaw relentlessly at the slopes, land conversions have fragmented forests, and over-tourism has strained landscapes. Mining, unregulated homestays, widening roads, and concrete-heavy projects have turned rainfall from a natural blessing into a recurring disaster. Landslides in Kodagu, Wayanad, Idukki, and parts of Maharashtra are no longer aberrations; they are annual reminders of systemic policy failure. The report's call to ban mining, polluting industries, and large dams in ecologically sensitive zones was not anti-development or anti-poor as portrayed by various political interests; it was a prescription for the long-term survival of the region. Gadgil also argued that conservation requires the involvement of gram panchayats, noting that local communities often prove better custodians than state governments prone to short-term economic pressures.

Political resistance, however, chose dilution. The subsequent Kasturirangan Committee reduced ecological protection to a fraction of what was recommended by Gadgil. Even this version remains largely unimplemented. Gadgil repeatedly warned that disasters in the Western Ghats were "man-made"; while climate change may intensify rainfall, it is human interference that transforms heavy rain into catastrophe. Ignoring this has cost lives, livelihoods, natural wealth, and public money. As Gadgil passes into history, the Western Ghats continue to die a slow, visible death. Honouring him demands more than obituaries. At the very least, the core principles of his report must be implemented. If the Gadgil Report is allowed to fade into archives, India will have lost not just a scientist, but a chance to save a mountain range that holds up the subcontinent.

Honouring Gadgil's legacy will require ensuring the safeguards he advocated for the Western Ghats

Can forest conservation make room for justice?

Adivasi assertion of land rights is a response to exclusionary conservation models and institutional failures

PRASHANTH N SRINIVAS

In Nagarhole in southern Karnataka, a quiet but determined reclamation is underway. In May 2025, 52 families of the Jenukuruba, one of the twelve forest-associated Adivasi communities of Karnataka, reclaimed their ancestral *haadi* of Karadikallu Aturu Kollu, inside the Nagarhole Tiger Reserve. Their elders had been evicted nearly four decades ago, when the area was first sealed off for conservation and later notified as a tiger reserve. The families built makeshift huts, set up shrines, and publicly declared that they were asserting rights guaranteed under the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 (FRA). In December 2025, further news stories indicated similar acts of land assertion among other Adivasi communities.

These were not new claims. They have filed applications since 2009-11, attended multiple rounds of surveys and committee hearings, and waited through years of bureaucratic delay. Yet, as they attempted to re-establish their settlement, they were repeatedly warned to leave. Citing wildlife laws, officials termed the return an "illegal occupation", even as community members stressed that they were not encroachers but rights-holders denied due process. A senior official in the Karnataka Forest Department, while calling the self-assertion in Nagarhole "illegal", suggested the Adivasis were "instigated". The National Tiger Conservation Authority, for instance, in its reports, including the 2024 report titled *Bringing the Gap: Unveiling the Effectiveness of India's Tiger Reserve Management*, identifies Soliga Adivasi villages inside the Biligiri Ranganatha Swamy Temple (BRIT) Tiger Reserve as a "threat", citing population growth and demands for infrastructure. This assessment sits uneasily with both history and evidence. The Soliga have lived in these forests for centuries, with written records dating back to the 19th century, and their coexistence with wildlife

among Adivasi communities. It lies in the tardy and obstructed implementation of the FRA, and in the persistence of a conservation mindset that continues to view Adivasis primarily as obstacles to ecological goals rather than as partners in sustaining forests. Notably, many conservation practitioners in India no longer support such exclusionary models, but the institutionalised style of the colonial, protectionist style of forest administration has been slow to change.

The idea that effective conservation requires people-free forests remains deeply embedded in India's wildlife discourse. While such thinking is often framed as necessary for ecological re-



covery, it has produced a perverse outcome: Adivasi communities, who have historically conserved biodiversity, bear the highest costs of conservation, even as cities and towns expand at the expense of biodiversity. Tigers they did not hunt, and forests they did not fell have become reasons to deny them roads, electricity, schools, and water; basic amenities that define equal citizenship.

A senior official in the Karnataka Forest Department, while calling the self-assertion in Nagarhole "illegal", suggested the Adivasis were "instigated". The National Tiger Conservation Authority, for instance, in its reports, including the 2024 report titled *Bringing the Gap: Unveiling the Effectiveness of India's Tiger Reserve Management*, identifies Soliga Adivasi villages inside the Biligiri Ranganatha Swamy Temple (BRIT) Tiger Reserve as a "threat", citing population growth and demands for infrastructure. This assessment sits uneasily with both history and evidence. The Soliga have lived in these forests for centuries, with written records dating back to the 19th century, and their coexistence with wildlife

is well documented. In Nagarhole, the Muzaffar Assadi Committee of the Karnataka government documented the eviction of Adivasis, many without rehabilitation.

The myth of the "innocent tribes"

The portrayal of Adivasis as "innocent people being instigated" is a familiar trope. It allows the State to simultaneously infantilise and criminalise them, and delegitimises democratic assertion. Does any citizen need "instigation" to demand roads, schools, and water in villages that are legally recognised under parliamentary law? In reality, such movements emerge from within communities that have exhausted every official route. The Jenukuruba filed claims, attended meetings of sub-divisional and district committees, and waited years for decisions that never arrived. Their return is an act of last resort grounded in legal entitlement and moral claim.

Across the country, forest departments resist the settlement of lawful claims under the FRA, turning a corrective statute into a site of continuous tension between forest departments and district administration. In Ramanagara, the Adivasi scholar KV Krishnamurthy recently wrote in *DH* about Irulivila villages without roads or basic amenities. In BRIT, several Soliga villages, such as Purani and Bedaguli, remain without electricity or piped water even after securing individual and community forest rights. In the nearby MM Hills, Soliga villages like Palar, Aalambaadi, and Mendare fear that the proposed MM Hills tiger reserve will once again push them into legal and developmental limbo. These are not isolated but institutional failures.

Forests do not need to be freed of people to thrive. Globally, evidence shows that biodiversity often flourishes where indigenous communities have secure tenure and stewardship. In an era of accelerating ecological crisis, it is unfair to expect Adivasis to shoulder the costs of biodiversity protection alone, especially when the benefits are shared by all of us. The Jenukuruba stand in Nagarhole is not an obstacle to conservation. It is a reminder that justice and ecology are inseparable, and that democracy must extend into the forest. Their message: "Our forests, our lands, our rule" is not defiance. It is the spirit of the FRA, asking to be taken seriously.

(The writer is a medical doctor and public health practitioner working on Adivasi health and development)

RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE

Ode to a fighter jet

The farewell to the MiG-21 was a testament to the bond between man and machine

HARI ARAYAMMAKUL

It was a farewell unlike any other; a ceremony so extraordinary that one may never quite see the same again. Chandiagarh Air Base stood in ceremonial splendour to bid goodbye to a legend: the MiG-21, sentinel of India's skies for more than six decades.

I arrived a day early, wandering and tracing old memories in Chandiagarh's orderly streets, not far from the western frontier, under heightened security. Two days earlier, the Air Force had dress-rehearsed the farewell in full, sans guests, and perhaps sans emotion.

That morning, the airfield shimmered under the autumn sun. The gathering was remarkable: generations of MiG pilots and technicians, war veterans, service chiefs, and the defence minister. Media cameras stood like sentries, tripods planted, lenses trained. Beneath sky-blue *shamianas*, specta-

tors waited in hushed anticipation. Then came the announcement: six MiG-21s, tails streaked in the tricolour, would take off for their final flight. A ripple of applause ran through the stands. The number was symbolic—six aircraft induced in 1963, six decades of service, and now six flying their last salute.

For nearly half an hour, the fighters carved patterns of farewell across the sky: combat formations, intercept drills, and mock fights. Even in twilight, the MiGs revealed the heart of warriors. When the aircraft touched down one by one, applause rose again, long and full. Like soldiers halting their march while the rhythm still holds, the MiG-21s chose to rest while their engines sang true.

Crash tenders lined the tarmac, arcing light onto a misty tribute. Sunlight broke into rainbows as the MiGs rolled beneath. Engines that once roared in battle fell silent—forever. Pilots stepped out, helmets cradled to their chests. Behind them stood the aircraft, motionless. A chapter had closed.

Inducted in 1963, the MiG-21 was India's first supersonic fighter—rugged,

reliable, simple to maintain, and ever ready. It was a soldier's aircraft: unpretentious, dependable, and unforgiving of weakness.

In battle, machines often transcend metal. Between a warrior and his weapon forms a silent fraternity. For a fighter pilot, that bond is absolute; once airborne, there is only sky, instinct, and truth.

To the uninitiated, such emotion for a machine may seem excessive. Yet in the history of warfare, weapons have never been mere tools. Arjuna's Gandiva, Bhima's mace, Achilles' spear, the samurai's *katana*, or the Gurkha's *kukri*—these were not just weapons but extensions of their wielder's spirit. Weapons embody the courage, endurance, and genius of their time. Over the years, the blood and pain fade, leaving only reverence and pride. In every era, weapons that once brought destruction later become heritage, preserved not for the wars they fought, but for the bravery they symbolised.

The farewell was the culmination of a relationship. Between man and machine, between memory and legacy. A parting between comrades.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Stray dogs on roads a cause for concern

I refer to 'Not just bites, dogs on roads pose hazards to motorists, says SC' (Jan 8). The Supreme Court's observation that stray dogs prowling the streets not only bite men, women, and children but also indulge in chapping vehicles, especially two-wheelers, all the while snapping at the feet of the riders, distracting them in the process and causing accidents, is pertinent. Dogs running after vehicles is a common sight in the streets of Bengaluru, and several accidents, some of them fatal, have been

caused because of them. Assiduous efforts are being undertaken by civic authorities in almost all cities to tackle the stray dog menace, but even neutering, sterilisation, etc., have met with limited success. Moving strays to shelters outside cities and towns is an expensive affair, as civic authorities will not only have to feed the animals, but look after their welfare, and attend to their medical needs, making the costs prohibitive. CV Aravind, Bengaluru

Fix gig economy

Appropos 'Risks without rights: India's gig economy imbalance' (Jan 7), it requires an immediate permanent solution. The gig economy is a result of the growth of the digital economy, which bridges the physical and cyber worlds. The Covid-19 pandemic accelerated this growth, leading to an increase in gig workers directly linked to the digital economy's expansion. The digital economy is driven by e-commerce, social

networking platforms, and increased remote work. As the digital economy grows, the number of gig workers is projected to rise from 12 million in FY 2024-25 to 23.5 million by 2030. The concerns and challenges of gig workers must be addressed. N Ramesh, Bengaluru

Safeguard forests

With reference to 'Tiger survey to count other carnivores, mega herbivores too' (Jan 6), it is a matter

of pride that Karnataka continues to be among the top states with the highest number of tigers in India. While the state has performed well in tiger conservation, it must also take proactive steps to curb deforestation and protect habitats. Anarhyia Garoo, Bengaluru

BEFORE YOU SAVE THE WORLD, MAKE SURE YOUR OWN HOUSE IS IN ORDER.

JD(S) wants to have a friendly fight with the BJP. This is to save their party. Please, don't have a friendly fight. Join them. A friendly fight will only create confusion among your party workers.

D K Shivakumar, Karnataka Dy CM

Before you save the world, make sure your own house is in order.

Charles F Glassman

TO BE PRECISE

Trump's 500% tariff threat



IN PERSPECTIVE

The crisis of sovereignty

Global powers use varied tools of dominance in an age increasingly distanced from the idea of absolute sovereignty

SUNDARAM RAJASIMMAN

The desire for governance at the global level is not new; the earliest documentation of global governance can be traced back to the 14th century. For example, in Dante Alighieri's *De Monarchia* (1311) and its 1949 translation, *On World Government*. It can be argued that some of the early attempts at global governance occurred in the domain of religion, where the universality of monotheistic religions sought influence over the entire mankind, but failed. Attempts at global governance through religious warfare came to a pause in the mid-17th century and led to the concept of sovereignty in the Westphalian region of Germany. This concept has been at the core of the international system as we know it today.

Sovereignty, as it originated in Europe, was primarily concerned with peace and security in Europe. In its purest interpretation, it implies that a sovereign must not intervene in the sovereignty of another sovereign. It was not until the 19th century that this concept came into full play and continued to define the in-vogue world order. Yet, the evolution in scientific knowledge has transformed the traditional understanding of this concept.

In its evolution, sovereignty, which was once located with God, transferred to the Pope, then to the King and the State, and finally, to the people. In our times, sovereignty is mostly popular as a social contract that allows the State to act on behalf of the people. In a globalised world, a moderate sovereignty is in practice, where a sovereign, by its own willingness, sets the limits of its sovereignty in relation to other sovereigns and hence, volunteers to make compromises to its absolute authority.

This rationale of popular sovereignty is in play in the United States' recent intervention of Venezuela and the arrest of President Nicolas Maduro and his wife. The US has justified its use of military force against another sovereign by locating the concept of sovereignty with the people of Venezuela. According to US President Donald Trump, "the people in Venezuela are free again". Furthermore, following his Angelus prayer at St Peter's Square, the first US pope told the crowd that "the welfare of the beloved Venezuelan people must prevail over all other considera-

tions". Starlink, a subsidiary of SpaceX, announced "free broadband service to the people of Venezuela through February 3, ensuring continued connectivity".

Governance requires technology that defines the objective of governance. For example, population as a governance concern came into being due to the advancement in the 'technology' of statistics, and environment as a governance concern due to climate change. Global governance, in this regard, requires technologies to work around the concept of sovereignty located at the level of the nation-state.

One goal, two methods

The two great powers with in the present international system, the US and China, employ two dissimilar approaches to pursue global governance. The US has banked on the concepts of freedom, justice, and human rights as tools of global governance, while China has used the concept of development, borrowed from Marxism, as a technology for global governance. Providing financial assistance to another nation and investing in railways, roads, or ports there can be seen as a violation of the idea of sovereignty.

The primary purpose for employing these technologies—human rights or development—in global governance is to address the concept of sovereignty, which contradicts the idea of global governance. The US's attack on Venezuela came hours after a Chinese special envoy met with Maduro to reaffirm Beijing's support for his regime. This underscores the clash between the approaches followed by two great powers, both seeking prominent roles in global governance. This case demonstrates some of the gaps in China's reliance on the development formula for global governance, and necessitates a careful analysis of the US's emphasis on human rights, which have been upgraded by its own willingness to set the limits of its sovereignty in relation to other sovereigns and hence, volunteers to make compromises to its absolute authority.

The world is nearing the end of the sovereign period in history, which began in the 17th century. Much of the churn we witness today in the international system can be traced to a transition from this period to one marked by post-sovereign interests. India's foreign policy must stand a march on this change, given the weakening sovereignty of its neighbours in South Asia. This is the time for India to establish an appropriate framework of regional governance and develop the requisite technologies to meet that objective. (The writer lectures at the Sichuan International Studies University, Chongqing, China)

Minority protection: When concern crosses borders but not streets

VISHAL R CHORADIYA

The recent protest outside the Bangladesh High Commission in New Delhi aimed to express moral outrage. Members of Hindu organisations, waving saffron flags and shouting slogans, even attempted to storm the diplomatic mission to protest the killing of Dipu Chandra Das, a Hindu garment worker in Bangladesh who was lynched by a mob following allegations of blasphemy.

The brutality of the crime is undeniable. According to police and media, Das was beaten to death, and his body was later set on fire. The killing warrants unequivocal condemnation, and concern for minority safety anywhere is both legitimate and necessary.

In India, the outrage manifested in widespread protests. Supporters of the Vishva Hindu Parishad and the Bajrang Dal broke barricades and clashed with police near the Bangladesh High Commission in New Delhi. Demonstrations were also reported in Bhopal, Kolkata, Hyderabad, and Jammu and Kashmir, with slogans demand-

ing "safety for Hindus in Bangladesh" and appeals to the prime minister to "bring Bangladeshi Hindus to India" or ensure their protection.

Yet the timing, tone and provenance of these protests render them deeply ironic and politically hollow.

In the same period that Hindu groups claimed guardianship over Hindu minorities abroad, their own affiliates and supporters were implicated in a wave of intimidation and violence against Christians across India, particularly around Christmas. This contradiction exposes a credibility crisis in politics that claims to speak for vulnerable communities while presiding over, or enabling, harassment of minorities at home.

What lends the recent protests a performative quality is the domestic record of the protesters themselves. For years, Muslims—India's largest minority—have borne the brunt of mob violence, lynchings and institutional discrimination at the hands of Hindu groups, often with little accountability from authorities.

More recently, violence against Chris-

tians has surged, particularly during the Christmas season, signalling that the threat has widened to include other minorities. Once a broadly shared public festival in much of India, Christmas now routinely coincides with reports of church disruptions, prayer meetings halted, and mobs entering private homes alleging illegal conversions. In 2025 alone, monitoring groups such as the United Christian Forum reported over 700 incidents of such attacks on Christians by November.

In Madhya Pradesh's Jabalpur, a Christmas feast organised for visually impaired children became the site of public assault. A BJP district vice president, Anju Bhargava, was filmed verbally abusing and striking a visually impaired woman, accusing organisers of conversion, even as a police officer looked on. Children present said the event involved only a meal.

In another Jabalpur church, men shouting "Jai Shri Ram" disrupted prayers with similar accusations. In Chhattisgarh, churches were burned and Christian homes destroyed following a dispute over the burial of a Hindu man whose son had

converted to Christianity. In Rajasthan's Dungarpur district, members of the RSS and Bajrang Dal disrupted a Sunday Mass at St. Joseph's Catholic Church, confronting clergy and worshippers with allegations of forced conversions.

In Odisha, vendors selling Santa costumes were threatened into closing their stalls, and delivery workers dressed as Santa Claus faced intimidation. In Bhubaneswar, a pastor and his pregnant wife were attacked inside their church and forced to trample on Bibles and chant the names of Hindu gods—an incident that went viral and sparked public outcry.

In Kerala's Palakkad, an RSS-affiliated man reportedly attacked children performing carols, destroying their musical instruments. In Delhi's Lajpat Nagar, women and children wearing Santa Claus hats were harassed in public by men allegedly linked to the Bajrang Dal. In Haridwar, Hindu organisations issued directives effectively banning Christmas celebrations in hotels and shops, prompting even a government-run hotel to cancel a planned event.

These incidents cannot be dismissed as spontaneous mob action. What connects them is organised ideological authority. They are emboldened by formal statements—including one from the VHP urging Hindus not to celebrate Christmas—framed as cultural "awakening". Shops and institutions are pressured to shun a festival that, for many Indians regardless of faith, has been part of the social calendar.

Broadly, this is justified in the language of opposing "conversion". India's Constitution guarantees the right to propagate religion while prohibiting forced conversion. Several states have enacted laws criminalising conversion by inducement. In practice, these laws have increasingly become instruments of vigilantism.

Against this backdrop, the prime minister participated in a Christmas morning service at the Cathedral Church of the Redemption in New Delhi and shared greetings for peace and harmony on social media. But they lacked an explicit denunciation of the attacks that unfolded across the country in the preceding days—and,

more importantly, there had been little evidence of sustained police action against those responsible. Recurring inaction can be read as tacit approval, undercutting official appeals for peace and harmony.

Moral authority in matters of minority rights is not established through protests outside foreign embassies. It is built through consistent conduct at home. When expressions of solidarity are extended only to those who share a particular faith, they risk shifting from a defence of human rights to an instrument of communal mobilisation.

Protesting violence against Hindus in Bangladesh while tolerating—or even encouraging—the intimidation of Muslims and Christians in India does little to advance the cause of minority protection. Instead, it undermines credibility, deepens distrust, and fuels a cycle of grievance and retaliation that further endangers minorities across the border.

(The writer is assistant professor at the Department of Professional Studies - School of Commerce, Finance and Accountancy, Christ Deemed to be University)

The Marinera, which was seized by the US, isn't the only ship from the 'shadow fleet' of oil tankers to switch lately to a Russian identity, seeking protection

PAUL SONNE AND MICHAEL SCHWIRTZ

The shadow fleet is stepping out of the shadows.

As the US military chased a dilapidated oil tanker away from Venezuela and across the Atlantic Ocean in recent days, the fugitive ship changed its identity. Previously known as the Bella I, the vessel rebranded as the Marinera. It no longer claimed to come from Guyana. Its new flag, painted hastily on the hull by the crew in the middle of the chase, was the Russian tricolor.

The ship's hurried assumption of a Russian identity was probably intended to deter the United States from pursuing the vessel and to raise the spectre of a Russian response to any seizure, according to maritime experts. The US military proceeded anyway and intercepted the ship Wednesday in the waters between Iceland and Scotland. Russia has not mounted a significant response.

Still, the ship's embrace of the Russian flag is part of a broader trend in which so-called shadow tanker vessels have sought the imprimatur of Russian protection as Western nations have stepped up enforcement against the illicit oil trade around the globe.

Five tankers that have operated recently in Venezuelan waters, including the Marinera, have switched their flags to Russia in recent days, according to a New York Times analysis. All of the vessels have been subjected to US sanctions for shipping either Iranian or Russian oil.

Last month, 17 shadow fleet tankers took on the Russian flag, according to Lloyd's List, a maritime intelligence and data firm, and more than 40 have done so since June. In one incident last year, the Russian military directly intervened, sending a fighter jet as a shot across the bow to Estonia when it stopped one of the tankers.

"Essentially, there is a flight to security here," said Richard Meade, the editor-in-chief of Lloyd's List. "Having cycled through four or five fake flags, we are seeing ships now essentially register to Russia."

For years, aged shadow vessels, like the Marinera, have provided a lifeline to states such as Venezuela, Iran and Russia, as well as to nonstate actors such as drug cartels, allowing them to evade sanctions by covertly shipping oil around the world. The ships often fly flags of convenience from places like the Cook Islands, or no flag at all, masking the involvement of the countries employing them.

"The whole point of the shadow fleet previously—there was this element of plausible deniability for the Russians," Meade said. "It was opaquely owned out of a shell company in Dubai. It was registered to a Seychelles trust. It said it had insurance, but nobody saw any real paperwork. These were not things Russia wanted to say were our ships."

Such a scheme, though, also made the ships vulnerable.

US officials said the Guyana flag that the Bella I was registered under was fake. That made it a stateless vessel susceptible to boarding under international law when the Coast Guard approached the ship in

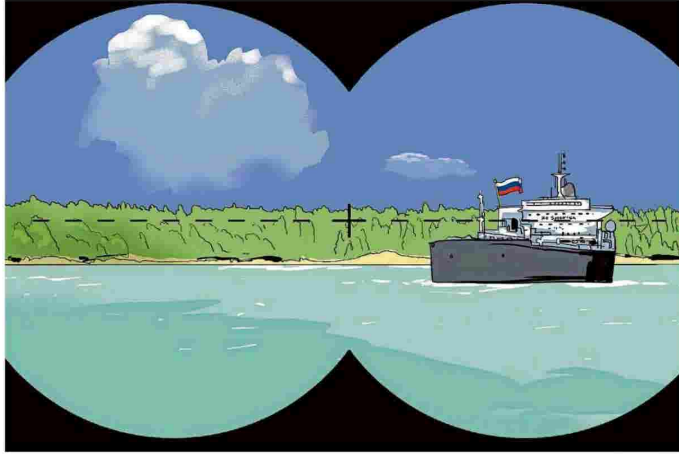


ILLUSTRATION: DEEPAK HARICHANDAN

With Russian flags, 'shadow fleet' edges into the light

the Caribbean Sea late on Dec. 20. The vessel is believed to have been heading to pick up oil in Venezuela before it turned around and fled.

As the Coast Guard gave chase, the ship was added to the Russian Maritime Register of Shipping. Russia then made a formal diplomatic request that the United States stop its pursuit.

"The risk if you board a vessel flagged in the Cook Islands is minuscule because the Cook Islands are just not going to retaliate in any way," said Elisabeth Braw, a senior fellow at the Atlantic Council who has written about shadow fleets. "But if you board a Russia-flagged vessel, you should have thought about it before going ahead," because the risk of retaliation is much higher.

The deterrence, this time, didn't work. Moscow dispatched a Russian naval vessel, presumably to provide an escort. But the U.S. military boarded the tanker anyway Wednesday, as American forces intercepted the ship before any Russian vessels arrived.

What Russia might do next is unclear. The Russian government's initial response was muted, with terse statements put out by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Transport.

The tepid reaction comes as Russia invests in improving relations with President Donald Trump, who has been leading an effort to broker an end to the war in Ukraine and has at times sided with Rus-

sia's demands. In recent months, Russia has deliberately played down matters of controversy between Russia and the United States, looking to avoid spoiling the rapprochement.

For years, the Kremlin has denied using shadow vessels to transport energy products, even as experts have identified hundreds of ships employed by Russia to do just that. An analysis published two years into the war against Ukraine by the Kyiv School of Economics found that nearly 70% of Russia's oil was being transported by shadow tankers, a phenomenon that began in 2022 as a response to Western sanctions.

By putting its flags on ships, Russia is now "saying we are connected to the shadow fleet," Braw said.

The Marinera had been subjected to sanctions by the United States for transporting Iranian oil, and the ship is not known to have carried Russian oil in recent years, according to data from Kpler and TankerTrackers.com, two companies that monitor global oil shipments.

While the United States seized that vessel without incident, Russia has been more aggressive about protecting shadow fleet ships that are closer to its shores.

Last May, Estonian authorities attempted to stop a tanker called the Jaguar, which was in the Baltic Sea and which Estonia had deemed stateless. Russia sent a fighter jet as a show of force to protect the ship, which had previously loaded Russian

oil and sailed to India. The Estonian navy escorted the ship to Russian waters.

"There has been a lot of contention in Europe about what to do with these tankers," said Gonzalo Ruiz Bransquin, a research fellow at the Royal United Services Institute, a defence and security think tank in Britain. "They have never taken such a hard step."

The European Union and Britain have imposed sanctions on nearly 600 shadow vessels linked to Russia's illicit oil trade. After a series of episodes in which shadow vessels were linked to damage inflicted on undersea cables, countries have also begun to resort to military action.

In December 2024, Finnish commandos commandeered an oil tanker suspected of severing several cables, and last October the French navy boarded a suspected shadow oil tanker.

Braw said the U.S. action to take control of the Marinera, while probably legal, could have unintended consequences, including potentially putting American ships in danger.

"On the oceans what is clear is that what is legal was not always wise," she said. "What it does is send a message to every other country in the world, especially countries less law-abiding than, say, Scandinavia, that they can take action against vessels on the high seas, and who is going to stop them?"

The New York Times

Who really benefits from the gig economy?

MOUSUMI ROY

Gig economy, sharing economy, passion economy, or as some prefer to call it, the hustle economy. All the latest technology-powered "disruptions" of 21st-century capitalism share a principle that, ironically enough, was first espoused by Karl Marx, the arch-enemy of everything capitalist.

As Marx put it, "Only liberated workers with control of production can soak up the full spiritual and financial benefits of their labour."

This idea underpins a host of new-age businesses such as Uber, Patreon, Airbnb, and local delivery apps, too numerous to name. Their grand promise was seductive and straightforward: you could control who you wanted to be, what you wanted to produce and deliver, how much you wanted to work, and even who you wanted to sell to.

Turn two spare rooms into a guest house and become a hotelier. Teach cooking via Patreon or Etsy. Put a car lying idle to work through Uber. Ride a motorbike and deliver pizzas. These are undeniably clever ideas, capable of creating work for someone who does not know what else to do. But can they replace old-fashioned employment or entrepreneurship, and I use that much-maligned word in its older sense, meaning self-employment, even something as basic as running a *paan-bhaji* shop as a way of earning a stable and reasonably predictable income on which a family can be supported through its life?

A decade or more after the euphoria created by Uber and Airbnb, it remains unclear whether this "new" economy represents a triumph of technology and human creativity or a failure of society to produce enough conventional employment.

What is clear is that it has dismantled many traditional businesses that once provided regular employment, such as taxi companies and neighbourhood shops, for instance, often by offering mouth-watering prices to consumers. The more complex questions is what this has done to those who produce or deliver what is being consumed.

Is the platform a tool that allows the worker to liberate herself, or is the worker the tool used by the tech executives who build these platforms? Has the rise of gig and contract

work been driven by worker preference or by venture capital chasing returns in a world awash with cheap money? In other words, is Uber a symptom of a deeper malaise or the beginning of a new dawn?

The question becomes sharper during crises, such as the recent global shutdown. During such times, the gig economy has undeniably provided a means of basic survival for many. But when the economy reopens, will it offer a decent living to those dispossessed of traditional employment, and to how many?

We now live in what is often called the gig economy, where people stitch together livelihoods from multiple part-time jobs. Sometimes this is by choice; usually it is not. The labour market increasingly favours short-term contracts and freelance work over permanent employment.

Crucially, the gig economy is designed to shift risk from the enterprise to the service provider. By doing so, it reduces business costs and increases profitability. Labour costs, such as healthcare, retirement benefits, and statutory contributions, quietly disappear. Wealth is siphoned upwards.

The most unsettling aspect of this model is how successfully companies have recast themselves as heroes. Uber, in particular, cloaks itself in the language of "consumer choice" and "flexibility" while developing autonomous vehicles that will one day make its own drivers redundant. Those same "independent contractors" will then discover the second shock of gig life, the absence of any real safety net.

The gig economy does not create economic security; it erodes it. It is not designed to expand choice but to minimise costs. It does not grant workers autonomy; it transfers uncertainty to them. Over time, its net effect will be a drain on economic activity, a reality that will become apparent soon enough.

Workers in the gig economy are not soaking up the benefits. Contrarily, they have lost all the benefits of a stable job (people see in the bastion of capitalism, the US). They don't have a high income, vacation, sick leave, or any retirement benefits. Moreover, not everyone can manage their retirement accounts and will thus be at the mercy of their brokers or financial advisers.

(The author writes about politics, material culture, and economic history)

OUR PAGES OF HISTORY

50 YEARS AGO: JANUARY 1976

'No more right to move courts'

New Delhi, January 8
Former Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed today issued an order under Clause (1) of Article 359 of the Constitution, suspending the right of any person to move any court for the enforcement of the fundamental rights enshrined in Articles 32 and 226. The order also stipulated that all proceedings pending in any court for the enforcement of the rights shall remain suspended for the period of the Emergency. On June 27, 1975, the President had issued a notification under which the rights conferred by Articles 14, 21 and 22 had been suspended.

25 YEARS AGO: JANUARY 2001

George denies Samata split

Mysore, Jan 8
The Samata Party leader and Union Defence Minister George Fernandes today denied that the party was heading for a split. Delivering the inaugural address at the two-day plenary session of the Samata Party, which began here today, Mr Fernandes said the six MPs led by Bihar state unit chief Raghunath Jha, who had earlier chosen to keep away from the meet, were on their way to the City to participate in the plenary session. Mr Fernandes said he had spoken to the six MPs and had convinced them to attend the session.

Learning to guard the mind's door

OASIS | ROHINI S MURTHY

As a kid, I had taken the literal meaning of the proverb grass is greener on the other side, by often peeping into my neighbour's compound and admiring their manicured lawn. When my mother caught me doing this, I innocently replied, "We need to hire a gardener to make our grass as green as theirs." She smiled at my childish banter. But life had a way of showing me the true meaning of this adage when a chance meeting with a former colleague paved the way to friendship. As weeks rolled by, the envious side of my new friend surfaced: "Oh, you are so lucky to have a good husband and understanding people around you. Look at my life; it

didn't turn out the way I planned." Our conversation, or rather her tirade of self-pity, intensified over time. From a friend, I soon turned into a punching bag and an agony aunt to her. I repeatedly pleaded with her to let go of her perception bias. But my requests fell on deaf ears as she continued to begrudge others instead of being grateful for life's little blessings. Listening to her long list of complaints would drain my mental energy, and soon enough her pessimism started rubbing off on me. Yes! Just like positive people in our lives can rouse

the best traits in us, interacting with negative people can wear down our emotions, leading to frustration, anger, and sadness. Thankfully, my astute husband noticed the changes in me and gently admonished, "Despite your best intentions, you are trying to change your friend's mindset; instead, you are letting her turbulent thoughts rob your peace of mind." That moment, I realised that I had failed miserably in setting boundaries and stepping back from this one-sided friendship. Constant comparison, regret over past choices, and displeasure with

minor setbacks can be glaring signs of the 'grass is always greener on the other side' mindset. This is not an irreversible syndrome. Daily practice of gratitude, mindfulness and setting realistic goals is known to be beneficial. Unfortunately, my (former) friend remained obstinate in her quest for a perfect life or, worse, her illusion of perfection. Though I severed ties with her in the nick of time, this relationship taught me to value my mind as a sacred space and be cautious about who I spend my time with—this life lesson is beautifully summed in Mahatma Gandhi's quote, "I will not let anyone walk through my mind with dirty feet."





CONTRAPUNTO

The point at which a tax deduction becomes a 'loophole' or a tax incentive a 'subsidy for special interests' is one of the great mysteries of politics

— JOHN SUNUNU

Thalaivars All

Tamil Nadu's elections are so much like its blockbuster movies: loud, colourful, sharp messaging & Alpha stars

It is no exaggeration to call TN's political parties – across ideological spectrum, and all fiercely Tamil – an alphabet soup with Alpha Inc running the show. There is no other state where political actors are as larger-than-life. This is not because many of the parties were founded by movie stars – Vijay the latest – but because cinema has been a major vehicle to carry political ideas to the people. There is no other state either where political ideology is so distinctly defined, where the Left-Right spectrum is an accompaniment to the state's politics of social justice defined in terms of caste hierarchy, getting sharper with the re-emergence of upper caste politics.

Stirrings of caste, is it worsening or is it flattening, will make the upcoming election to the 234-seat legislature especially interesting given the close multi-cornered fights that mark TN elections. A new this time is that Thol Thirumavalavan's VCK heads into the election as a recognised state party, a rare feat for a Dalit party, and a first

such for TN. VCK won two LS seats in 2024 with 2% votes. As alliances are hammered out, alphas in contest so far: DMK (Stalin), VCK (Thol Thirumavalavan), MDMK (Vaiko), Left and Congress vs main opposition ADMK (EPS), PMK (Ramadoss), BJP (Annamalai). BJP wants AMMK (Dhinakaran) and DMKD (late actor Vijayakanth's party) to return to NDA. EPS is seemingly still mired in an EC-contested symbol battle

(two leaves) with rival OPS who was expelled from the party. BJP now wants OPS back – that's not so palatable to EPS. Annamalai is vocally critical of EPS, so there's a nudge here for OPS's return.

But it's all eyes on the incumbent. Stalin led his party to win 133 of 175 seats DMK contested in the 2021 election, held in the shadow of Covid's terrifying Delta wave. He stamped his leadership, 2021 being the first election held after patriarch Karunanidhi died. Can he repeat the feat? Stalin is no actor but has emerged a larger-than-life chief minister like all his predecessors till Jayalalitha, even bringing newbie Kamal Haasan's party into the DMK-led coalition. Parties launch manifestos, DMK launched a manifesto portal inviting suggestions.

But, end of the day, what's a TN poll without a superstar in the fray? A stampee may have upset Vijay's party TVK's rally, but he's still the centre of all alliances' attention – having pitched his politics as "BJP: ideological enemy, DMK: political opponent". Dialogue, dialogue, as they say. Now for the action.

Unplug EV Subsidy

There are better uses for public money than subsidising electric cars for the rich. Govt should let market work freely

Last year, India bought 1.8L electric cars, 77% over 2024. But in terms of overall car sales this amounted to just 3.8%. Clearly, 10 years of govt incentives and subsidies haven't convinced buyers of the advantages of going electric. Two reasons are obvious: range anxiety + inadequate charging infra, and high prices + limited choice at the lower end. Low sales, by global standards, aren't allowing the Indian EV ecosystem to mature. Which explains why Indian carmakers' dread of cheap Chinese EVs slipping in via EU after an FTA. But there's a counterweight. Let EVs of every ilk come in freely and cheaply. Growing EV popularity will automatically spur growth of charging and servicing infra, which means more jobs. After all, countries that don't make any cars at all, like Australia, also have well-developed fuelling and charging networks. This infra boost will serve domestic carmakers too if they raise their technology game with R&D, like China did.



But to go on pushing domestic EV sales with subsidies and mandates is pointless. For example, what will Telangana's plan to make schools induct 25-50% EVs in their vehicle fleets lead to? Greater burden on parents. Electric buses cost far more than those running on diesel or gas, and because school buses run for only a couple of hours daily, gains on the air quality front will be minimal. Far better to focus on city bus fleets that run from morning to night.

EV subsidies, like Delhi's ₹1L benefit for 27,000 electric cars priced up to ₹5L, are questionable on several counts. Who gains from them? The rich. Who's hurt by the revenue loss? The poor. Those who are better used to ensure potable water and sewage don't mix, right? A Harvard Law School study found subsidies only encourage the rich to buy EVs as their non-primary vehicles, worsening urban congestion and pollution. Other studies have shown that when govt subsidises electric cars, manufacturers have no incentive to lower prices. Without subsidies, they would have to raise prices of their ICE cars to discount EVs themselves. Let the market work, and save public funds for the public.

Multiple mediators

More and more countries claim to have helped end the Indo-Pak conflict



Jug Suraiya

Following Donald Trump's repeated claims that he intervened to end the Indo-Pak hostilities, China has declared that Beijing also played a hand in brokering peace between the adversaries. As it had done with Trump's reiterated assertions, Islamabad has endorsed the Chinese claim as well. This could set off a chain reaction of competitive mediation, with more claimants jumping onto the peace brokering bandwagon.

Trump, who by the last count had proclaimed himself the subcontractor's peacekeeper on over 70 occasions, might ought to himself by declaring that he would repeat his claim a further 70 times, and do so in as many hours.

If asked by interlocutors, how he would like to end this while also attending to his other presidential chores, like deporting thousands of illegal migrants, not to mention a few bona fide US citizens, and also kidnapping the Venezuelan president and his wife and taking over the entire country lock, stock, and oil barrels, the White House supremo could retort that being a maestro of multitasking, he had mastered the art of somnolence or sleep-talking, and would restate his peacekeeper role while deep in slumber.

Meanwhile, social media is abuzz with speculation that several other countries are preparing to throw their metaphorical hats into the ring and claim to have had a role in getting Delhi and Islamabad to bid a farewell to arms.

Heading the list of such countries is Tuvalu, closely followed by Bougainville. In a display of impressive alacrity, Pakistan's foreign ministry hastened to back the claims of both, unfazed by the fact that it hadn't a clue as to what and where they were.

A quick look at the map revealed that Tuvalu is a 25 sq km island between Hawaii and Australia (population 11,500) and Bougainville is, in fact, still not quite a country but an Autonomous Region of Papua New Guinea from which it's expected to formally secede by 2027.

However, as Islamabad pointed out, it's the mediatory thought that counts and the more the merrier, despite Delhi's summary dismissal of all such submissions as being pure peace-pipe dreams.

Shankar.Raghuraman@timesofindia.com



The much overdue Census will finally get off the blocks come April 1, with lakhs of enumerators fanning out, going house to house to collect data on things like living conditions and access to amenities. The sheer scale of the exercise makes it, even at the best of times, daunting.

But there are, apart from usual challenges, some that do not normally exist. These are partly procedural and partly arising from the context in which Census 2027 (as it is formally known because the headcount phase will happen next year) is taking place.

Let's consider the procedural aspects first. This Census is to be the first to be conducted entirely digitally with enumerators using mobile apps to record the data. This has obvious advantages like ruling out errors while the data is entered from the physical form. However, it means training about 30L people – the estimated number of enumerators, supervisors, master trainers, charge officers and principal district census officers that will be involved in the exercise – in the correct use of the app.

In a normal Census, the training burden is to some extent reduced because a substantial chunk of enumerators, the bulk of whom would be schoolteachers, would have been part of the previous Census and thus know the ropes. This time, there will be fewer such people, because the gap between this and the last Census is 16 years, not 10, and even those who have previous experience will need to learn how to use the app.

App-based enumeration also depends crucially on whether the app functions reliably, not just in test conditions but in the field. App malfunctioning during the ongoing SIR conducted by EC, for instance, shows that ensuring error-free performance is far from easy.

Another possible issue could be that the Census enumeration is to be conducted essentially by the same field force as the one conducting the SIR. While in some states and UTs, SIR has been completed or is nearing completion, most states still have not gone through it.

Presumably, further phases of the SIR process will be put on hold while the Census houselisting

phase is on between April 1 and Sept 30. But that would still mean that the same people will be asked to do one exercise after the other. True, govt has made it clear that enumerators will be compensated for Census work, since it is in addition to their normal duties. But getting compensated does not reduce the workload. And except when are teachers supposed to focus on their key role, teaching?

There is also the self-enumeration option. But this is likely to be opted for by a minuscule minority. And the data they input will nevertheless be checked



Image: AI

by an enumerator visiting their house. So, it doesn't really matter how well that works.

Tough as these logistical or procedural challenges are, they are not insurmountable. But there are other challenges that may prove tougher.

The first of these is to do with accuracy of data. Remember that the Census faithfully records whatever you tell the enumerator, without questioning whether the information is correct. Normally, the incentive to

lie or mislead is lessened by the fact that Census data has no bearing on you personally. It is an exercise in anonymised data collection and largely seen as such. Will that be true in today's context as well?

Consider the questions on where you were born, where your last place of residence was and how long it has been since you moved from that place to the one where you currently are.

At a time the charge of being a "ghuspathiya" is being hurled every day, how likely is it that someone born in, say, Bangladesh, will admit to that fact? Why, Bangladesh, there might be a reluctance to even admit that you are not a "son of the soil" and have migrated from some other state.

You could argue, of course, that it is debatable how accurately the question was answered even in the past. But surely the incentive to lie is greater in the current climate of hostility to migrants (both within India and from outside it) than it ever was.

The caste question will be another huge challenge to surmount. Not because of misleading answers but because people within the same community refer to themselves using different labels.

To give just one example, the Bihar caste census treated as Yadav all those who called themselves either that or Gwala, Ahir, Gora, Ghosi, Sadgop or Lakshmi Narayan Gola. Similar examples abound across the caste spectrum. Each respondent is likely to use any one of these multiple labels. It will then be up to the enumerator or those collating the data to fit the labels into pre-determined categories.

For all its problems though, the Census will finally give us some sense of how much this country has changed – in quantitative terms – over the last decade and a half. And that is important to know for many reasons.

One primary reason is to identify areas earlier classified as rural that have turned urban. Urban areas are defined as habitations with over 5,000 population, a population density of 400 per sq km or more and with 75% or more of the male population engaged in non-agricultural work. New urban areas, once identified, will need the infra typical of such spaces, like sewage, roads and zoning.

The wait to get an updated sense of India has been long. But the results, hopefully, will be worth the wait.

Trump's Maduro Grab May Get MAGA Thumbs Down

Repeated projection of strength overseas is now the White House mantra. This is seen as a vote winner in US midterm polls. But Republican voters are deeply divided over this course. President's party may suffer

Patrick Basham



Columnist based in Washington DC

"If you want to make God laugh, tell him your plans," advises Woody Allen, the filmmaker and comedian. Trump would have been better served listening to Allen on Venezuela policy than his neoconservative secretary of state Rubio.

Trump's plan to overthrow Maduro's despotic regime and replace it with a pro-American govt presumed patriotic Republican gains at home. God may chuckle to himself over such a miscalculation. Trump's explicitly non-interventionist America First platform of domestic priorities and policies, so crucial to his election, has morphed into an interventionist 'neo-imperial America' platform. The latter prolongs or initiates American involvement in myriad foreign wars and conflicts.

Venezuela is the latest overseas entanglement diverting Trump's time, energy and political capital from more pressing domestic concerns with greater electoral resonance. Trump wants America respected globally. His longstanding view of a strong economy, secure borders, and a first-rate military serves as a role model to allies and a deterrent to enemies. In an astonishing about-face, Trump now deems these characteristics necessary but insufficient to the task.

A hastily rewritten Trump Doctrine now concludes the projection of American power requires regular, tangible demonstrations of American strength overseas. These may be in the guise of economic sanctions disguised as tariffs or displays of military prowess, as witnessed in Iran and now in Venezuela. Trump apparently views a neo-imperial America platform as a vote winner for his Republican party in this year's midterm elections, where his party defends slim congressional majorities.

Trump's superb political instincts mostly serve him well. He knows his party's MAGA base is deeply patriotic and nationalist. It prioritises secure borders over most things. It abhors drug cartels and leftist dictators in equal measure. When assigning blame for foreign

woes or suggesting nefarious connections abroad, China and Russia are interchangeable geopolitical catnip to Trump's more traditional conservative supporters.

Cue the superficially savvy electoral plan to make America more secure by ridding the hemisphere of a communist dictatorship abhorred by its domestic and expatriate populations; one that is also beholden to Putin and does Beijing's evil bidding, while playing a central role in drowning the American heartland in illegal drugs.

What could possibly go wrong? An appreciation of historical polling data would have warned Trump that the electoral politics part of Venezuelan regime change could go, and most



probably would go, horribly wrong.

Almost every foreign entanglement or military intervention in modern American history was greeted with an initial eruption of bipartisan public support. Both Republican and Democratic presidents have benefited from this well-documented "rally round the flag" effect.

But the effect does not last. Slowly but surely, public support ebbs away as regime change and foreign occupation's enormous cost in blood and treasure takes its toll on the body politic.

Today, 48% of American voters oppose Maduro's capture by US military according to a new Democracy

Institute poll conducted earlier this week. Only 43% support Maduro's capture, which is likely the high watermark of public support given America's disastrous regime change record.

Republican voters are irrevocably divided over events in Venezuela. Maduro's capture is supported by 47%, but opposed by 48%. Only 43% think Maduro's regime was a threat to US, while 48% do not. A plurality of Republican voters do not want US military in Venezuela until a pro-US govt is installed, while 55% think Trump's Venezuelan regime change project contradicts his campaign promise to be the peace president.

American midterm elections are (comparatively) low turnout battles between the parties' grassroots organisations, rather than policy-centred contests. The winning party is the one that gets its most loyal, enthusiastic, and reliable voters to the polls. Today's electoral arithmetic favours Democrats, even more so since Maduro was airlifted to New York. In contrast to the past, where Trump-era Democrats are blessed with significantly more 'high propensity' voters. They are wealthier, more white, more educated, more urban, and more professional. They always vote.

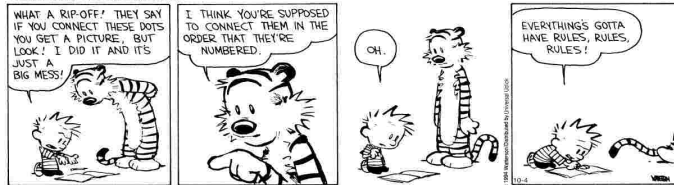
Today's Republican (and especially MAGA) voters are younger, less educated, less urban, more female, less white, more working class, and more politically independent than in the past. Crucially, a disproportionate number comprises 'low propensity' voters who simply lack the voting habit. They have to be highly motivated to show up, especially when Trump himself is not on the ballot.

Such MAGA voters are America Firsters and foreign policy non-interventionists. A significant slice is fervently anti-war and libertarian-minded. They are often ex-Robert F Kennedy Jr supporters who took a leap of faith on a peace-promising candidate Trump. Above all, they possess no fealty to the Republican brand.

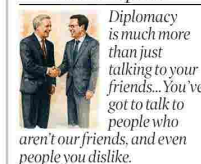
And they form the bulk of Republican opposition to regime change in Venezuela. So, Trump's party's electoral prospects rest upon the ballots of occasional voters disproportionately opposed to the president's foreign policy.

God may laugh. But Republicans soon may be crying. The writer is director of Democracy Institute, US.

Calvin & Hobbes



Sacredspace



Richard Armitage

Tantrumps: A Wolf & An Epiphany Of Lambs

Vithal C Nadkarni

A few weeks prior to President Donald Trump's 'Ugly America' misadventure in Venezuela, a prominent American weekly wrote about "finding White House staffed in part with former executives from computer companies pushing for a software-driven reindustrialisation" of the defense industry at the same time as Trump relentlessly cut federal spending on scientific research.

Nothing was said about conflict of interest. It was all about conflict of interest and more conflict with a 'Capitol C' (pun intended). This was indeed what one of Trump's illustrious predecessors, a much decorated military man, had warned the entire world long ago.

In his farewell speech in 1961, President Eisenhower had raised red flags against what he called "the significant influence of the military-industrial complex (MIC)". This had also been the occasion when the

phrase 'MIC' was used for the first time anywhere in the world.

The outgoing president had regretted that the combination of a large military establishment and the arms industry was the "new American experience" whose influence had sneaked up to "every level of govt and society", thereby ramping up exponentially the potential for "a disastrous rise of misplaced power".

Only an alert and knowledgeable citizenry could compel the proper meshing of MIC's machinery. Eisenhower added, with peaceful goals to protect liberties and democratic processes. In hindsight, "meshing of peaceful goals" would seem to be a far more accurate phrase to describe goals of MIC's machinery.

Another military general, John Frederick Maurice, confessed ruefully "I went into the Army believing that if you want peace you must prepare for war...I now believe that if you prepare thoroughly for war you will get it." Incidentally, Major General Maurice was educated at Royal India Military College in Addiscombe. Nowhere is such dishwashing of war more palpable than in Mahabharat.

arguably the most martial of India's *itihasa*, histories. In Anushasan Parva, for example, the mortally wounded grandsire Bhishma gets questioned about Supreme Dharma and the ethics of statecraft by the deider 'Pandav' "Ahimsa Paramo Dharma" – nonviolence is the highest

topmost duty that supercedes all other duties. "Is Pitamaha's unequivocally pithy response, stated by the deider 'Pandav' in Panchatantra, a treatise on statecraft in barely disguised animal stories. "Doing good to others is the greatest merit. And doing harm to others is

the most heinous of sins. That indeed is the essence of all the 18 Puranas, as Sage Ved Vyas declared."

Later, the whole world succumbed to the Circe-like spell of Panchatantra tales. They got re-embodied in different lands as one of the most widely translated secular literary works even as the Indics, with over 200 versions in more than 50 languages around the globe.

But the most question today is how or whether their essentially pacifist core was lost or was it deliberately rejected by rest of humanity even as the Indics continued to mope and modulate other works such as Aeschylus's *Fables*, *Arabian Nights*, and the fables of Jean de La Fontaine. Not really, says a newly minted Theory of Human Evolution branded as 'Survival of the Kindest'.

So how does one account for the Tantrumps? Is he the refractory wolf that "proves" the rules of raniyahni which govern the rest of us in the flock?

THE GOAN EVERYDAY

Even a stopped clock is right twice a day
Joseph Addison

Justice Shinde sparks hope as Lokayukta, but questions remain

The appointment of Justice Sandeep Shinde as the new Lokayukta of Goa marks a milestone in the State's efforts to strengthen its anti-corruption machinery and restore public faith in governance. It brings new hope, especially since there was a vacuum at this crucial position for more than a year.

With a seasoned jurist at the helm of this ombudsman institution, Justice Shinde is expected to play a pivotal role in addressing the endemic issues of corruption and administrative accountability, the two key issues that have been constantly surfacing in public discourse. We say Justice Shinde presents a ray of hope of fairness, transparency and justice, given his distinguished career and landmark judgements in the past.

Justice Shinde is a retired judge of the Bombay High Court's Goa Bench and holds an undisputed reputation for his bold and decisive judgments, most notably his October 2022 order directing the erstwhile mining leaseholders to vacate their leases within a month. This ruling, subsequently upheld by the Supreme Court, paved the way for a transparent e-auction process for mineral blocks. Earlier, Justice Shinde had served as Chief Public Prosecutor for Mumbai in 2015, showcasing his formidable legal expertise and experience in criminal law and prosecution.

The absence of an anti-corruption watchdog does not speak well of a system that has been marred by corruption. Ironically, the recent Birch fire has let out the skeletons in the cupboard, with fingers being pointed towards top government officials,

and even the ministerial inquiry report pointing to a collusion of several departments. In such a scenario, keeping the post vacant since December 2024, speaks poorly of the government's urgency in tackling corruption within the system. The recent circulars of not allowing government employees to carry out celebrations in places of work or engage in secondary

or part-time jobs are welcome, but corruption in government offices have been let off. Graft was left virtually unchallenged.

Given the credentials of Justice Shinde, there is a huge wave of expectation from civil society. But having an upright Lokayukta is not entirely enough. The government too plays a crucial role in executing the decision of the Ombudsman. For example, Justice Prafulla Kumar Misra, who was sworn in as the Goa Lokayukta on April 28, 2016 and served his full term till September 2020, had then slammed the state government for failing to act on his 21 reports recommending disciplinary action or criminal probes. Such a response defeats the very purpose of installing a Lokayukta.

The people of Goa look forward to Justice Shinde, despite the fact that nothing substantial has been achieved through this channel in the past. It remains to be seen if Justice Shinde will foster a culture of accountability leading to ethical public service. It is to be seen whether, in a dominating political scenario, Justice Shinde will act as a moral compass and guard the rights of citizens, and whether he will cut past all vested interests. Let us not forget, at least on paper, Lokayukta is a key component and referee overseeing the good governance of the State.

The current dispensation is in its last lap of tenure; nonetheless, by appointing a Lokayukta, it has extended a positive sign that it is serious about tackling corruption. Time will tell whether this was a genuine effort to cleanse the system or a decision to make a statement and momentarily placate voices in the Opposition.

OPEN SPACE >>

Resignations and defections

The recent resignations of key leaders from the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) have created a lot of noise, but their impact is limited. After AAP's heavy defeat in Delhi, Arvind Kejriwal seems to have lost much of his political appeal. In Goa, the party's brief rise was mainly due to public anger against the traditional national parties, rather than strong belief in AAP's ideas. In politics, many people leave a party when they feel it no longer serves their interests. Most defections are driven by personal ambition such as career growth, better chances of winning, and the need to stay politically relevant. The frequent movement of Congress MLAs to the BJP is a clear example of this trend. The shift of some Congress MLAs to the TMC was also troubling, especially as many of them had earlier been supported and promoted by the Congress. It is often said that politics has no permanent friends or enemies, only permanent interests. Sadly, these interests are mostly selfish. Large national parties of ten benefit from defections, which are sometimes encouraged through promises of power and other advantages. Given the present situation, the future of AAP in Goa looks uncertain, and the party may soon be struggling just to survive.

NELSON LOPES, Chinchinim

UN a spent force, time to end veto system

What's needed is a fundamental redesign to reflect the geopolitical, economic, and social challenges of a globalised, multipolar world



BHAVDEEP KANG

>The writer is a senior journalist

The United States' reprisal of its 'global cop' role in Venezuela validates, for the hundredth time, the United Nations' irrelevance. The excruciating irony of the UN Security Council largely condemning the US action five km from the federal court where deposed Venezuelan leader Nicolas Maduro was produced to face drug trafficking charges was not lost on the world. The UN go from hero to zero.

US ambassador Mike Waltz went so far as to issue a veiled threat: "If the UN in this body confers legitimacy on an illegitimate narco-terrorist and the same treatment in this charter on a democratically elected president or head of state, what kind of organisation is this?" UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres seemed to agree with Waltz' contention that the legitimacy of Maduro's re-election in 2024 was doubtful and admitted that the UN had been concerned about human rights violations by the Maduro regime.

But the question of what the UN had done to address its concerns vis-a-vis Maduro remained unasked. The eight million Venezuelans who fled the country and the families of the thousands who were illegally jailed, tortured, raped and killed from 2014 onwards might want to know. In fact, the UN human rights agency was kicked out of Venezuela in 2024. The world looked on silently as Venezuela spiralled into chaos. Only now, when the undemocratic Maduro has been trumped, have nations called for a restoration of democracy.

The manifest decline in the UN's political clout has accelerated post-Covid. Its condemnation of Russia's assault on Ukraine and Israel's aggression in Gaza achieved absolutely nothing. In 2022, the EU ambassador to the UN famously declared that "the world has spoken", but as a result, Russia stood isolated from the international community. Clearly, the world failed to get the memo, and Russia has not been ostracised. Likewise, the dozens of resolutions against Israel by various UN bodies have had as much impact as a feather duster.

In the Sudan civil war and the Thailand-Cambodia border clashes, it has been a helpless bystander. When Pakistan threatened a nuclear attack on India, it was silent. And these are recent conflicts. From the 1950s, millions have

The manifest decline in the UN's political clout has accelerated post-Covid. Its condemnation of Russia's assault on Ukraine and Israel's aggression in Gaza achieved absolutely nothing



died in the Korean and Vietnam wars, the two Gulf wars, and the genocides in Rwanda and Bosnia. Perhaps the greatest testimony to the UN's ineffectiveness was the massacre of 8,000 people in a UN-protected zone in Srebrenica.

UN interventions in international conflicts, climate change, pandemics and humanitarian crises are proving to be little more than expensive band-aids. It was Guterres who admitted during the Covid-19 crisis that the pandemic was a clear test of international cooperation — a test we have essentially failed. Add to that the spectacular inadequacy of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change in addressing the global ecological crisis or in ensuring the Global North meets their commitment under the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) agreement.

Large countries have always privileged sovereignty over the UN Charter. A major reason is that no effective framework exists for addressing transnational issues like human trafficking, narcotics smuggling, illegal migration and cross-border terrorism. Worse, the UN has always had blind spots and expresses selective outrage over violations of human rights or international peace. It took years to respond to the egregious Uyghur concentration camps while ticking India off for refusing to accept Rohingya refugees. Given that the US is the UN's largest funder, the laundry list of its interventions in Latin America and the Middle East has been met with little more than tut-tutting.

The roles of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and the International Criminal Court (ICC) have been steadily eroded. Israel dismissed the ICC decision to allow a probe into alleged excesses in Gaza as "politics in the guise of international law". China rejected the Hague's ruling in favour of the Philippines on the South China Sea case. Nor is India likely to accept the international tribunals' intervention in the Indus Waters Treaty.

What's more, the UN has had more than its fair share of scandals. Reports of

sexual misconduct, including child sexual abuse, by UN forces in various parts of the world dented its reputation. Allegations of corruption, such as the Iraq oil-for-food scandal, raised questions about lack of transparency and accountability. Is the UN worth its 2024 budget of 66 billion dollars? Is it merely a sinecure for bureaucrats? As a 2016 research paper pointed out, taxpayers fund the UN, but it is run by unelected, unaccountable, undisciplined and incompetent bureaucrats. It has been described as a mere "talking shop", or as "toothless and clueless". In other words, it plays a largely symbolic role as a forum for global cooperation.

The UNSC suffers from what has been dubbed "veto paralysis". The US will always back Israel, Russia will always back itself, and China will always oppose India. So the big five — China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom and the US — are basically immune. This renders the UNSC dysfunctional. Where is the logic in keeping the world's fourth-largest economy and most populous country out of the UNSC? Why are Africa and Latin America under-represented? Why is Europe over-represented?

That said, if the UN were wound up today, a similar agency would have to be set up tomorrow, as several experts have pointed out. Certain organs, like the WHO and the FAO, are essential. The WHO's Global Influenza Surveillance and Response System provided medical assistance to least developed countries at war during the global health emergency. Likewise, the FAO has made seminal strides in addressing global hunger, while UNICEF has forcibly displaced has saved thousands of lives. Above all, the UN has "convening power". It can bring together heads of state and other platforms to NGOs and civil society organisations. What's needed is a fundamental redesign to reflect the geopolitical, economic and social challenges of a globalised, multipolar world, with greater representation of the Global South and an end to the veto system.

— FPI

THE INBOX >>

Trees, fields pay the price for Western Bypass widening

Driving along the Western Bypass, it is painful to see many large, old trees marked for cutting for road widening. Nearby fields are also being filled for the same purpose. The Goa BJP government often speaks about protecting the environment and promoting agriculture, but its actions show the opposite. There is no real need to widen this road when the parallel NH66 already has two additional lanes. It is disappointing that BJP ministers appear unconcerned, and equally worrying that opposition MLAs remain silent. At a time when Goa is facing climate change and poor air quality, it is sad to see senior ministers approving the cutting of trees for such projects across the State. Goa is a small State and cannot simply copy highway designs used in much larger States. It appears the State government is following instructions from the Centre without considering Goa's special needs or pushing for exceptions. Many feel that development should be sensible and necessary, not wasteful. Goans and residents must come together to oppose these harmful policies, or we risk turning Goa into a polluted State.

ARWIN MESQUITA, Colva

Rejuvenate the non-working Eldeline

The toll-free number 14567, called "Eldeline", was launched on October 1, 2024, to assist senior citizens who are abandoned, face abuse, or have health issues and medical emergencies. Due to logistical and operational reasons, the Eldeline functioned erratically. It restarted in April 2025 and was again shut down. Senior citizens call the helpline between 8 am and 8 pm to seek information regarding pensions, legal advice, govern-

Action speaks louder than words

India is a deeply polarised nation with slogans like 'Sabka Saath' repeated daily, which is contrary to the ground reality of a majoritarian government imposing its will. So when our CM says "Lokank tachi tachi ami kortole" after the massive public turnout cutting across party lines to former Chief Justice of the Allahabad High Court Justice Ferdinand Rebello's call to submit a 10-point people's charter to try to save what is left of a paradise turning fast into a polluted concrete jungle, democracy and constitutional law and order had alarmingly deteriorated. The ten points are widely articulated by the media and committees formed around the fulcrum of the CJ, as he likes to describe himself in this movement, composed of non-party individuals like intellectuals, activists, NGOs and youth. Religion was not meant to divide people. Bharat's strength and beauty is unity in its beautiful multifarious diversity. Every action of the government will now speak louder than words!

JOHN ERIC GOMES, Panvorim

ment schemes, and obtain emotional support. Initially, the calls were routed through Maharashtra and later through Uttar Pradesh. In the last two months, the Eldeline has ceased to function, with no clarifications from the government. Senior citizens feel lost and are left high and dry, as the helpline was a solace, especially for those who reside alone. The government could ask local business houses to reactivate the Eldeline as part of their corporate social responsibility. It could be managed by volunteers who could be paid remuneration for their efforts. Such a social welfare measure would be much appreciated.

SRIDHAR DUYER, Canacona

Still hand-written receipts

In this age of modern technology, only BSNL annual utility services appears to be totally paperless in issuing bills and receipts. The Electricity Dept has not achieved this, as cash or cheque payments made at banks get acknowledged

ment on the printed bill, while payments at office counters receive handwritten receipts. In the Water Supply Dept, cash is paid at designated banks and stamped on the bill, but cheque payments must be made at office counters, which again issue handwritten receipts. This manual system wastes manpower and causes inconvenience to consumers. The concerned Minister/Dept should take cognisance and make payments hassle-free by acknowledging cheques on the bill copy.

BHALCHANDRA VS PRIOLKAR, Margao

Maintaining traditional wells is very important

Maintaining traditional wells is vital for Goa as they help recharge groundwater, provide water throughout the year, and protect cultural heritage. Rapid urban growth and dependence on piped water and borewells have led to the neglect of many wells, adding to local water shortages. No construction should be allowed within a 50-metre radius of potable wells. If properly cleaned and protected from pollution, wells can supply a steady and often healthier source of water than treated tap water, especially during dry months. Wells are closely linked with Goan social life. In the past they were gathering points for women, often called the "women's parliament". They are also part of festivals like São João, where jumping into wells is a popular tradition. These traditional systems reflect local knowledge of sustainable water use. Relying on them reduces excessive borewell drilling, which can cause saline water to enter coastal wells. Sadly, many wells are now abandoned or polluted by waste and sewage. Regular cleaning, desilting and disinfection, along with local monitoring groups and awareness drives, can help villagers protect these shared water sources and secure Goa's water future.

RAJESH BANALIKAR, Apra



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

Expenditure review

Development needs a wider role of states

The Union Ministry of Finance (MoF) is reported to have asked all government departments and ministries to rationalise centrally sponsored schemes (CSS) and central sector schemes. The idea is to merge overlapping schemes and improve efficiency in implementation. The government runs 54 CSS and about 260 central sector schemes. While the merits of individual schemes may be debatable, it is reasonable to argue that the Union government runs too many schemes, which may be affecting outcomes. Therefore, a periodic review of schemes is necessary. As announced in the 2016 Budget speech, schemes have been aligned with the Finance-Commission cycle and their continuance is based on evaluation. Given that the exercise is being undertaken now, the government, particularly the MoF, would be well advised to examine each one of them carefully.

There are several arguments in favour of a close review, particularly in the case of CSS. One of the criticisms of the recent change in the rural employment guarantee programme under the new Viksit Bharat — Guarantee for Kozgar and Ajevika Mission (Gramin) Act, 2025, which is a CSS, is that it puts an additional fiscal burden on states. State governments will need to shoulder 40 per cent of the expenditure. The previous scheme was a central sector scheme and largely financed by the Union government. Several states may not be in a position to increase expenditure. So, while CSS are designed by the Union, they are partly funded by state governments, and this curtails their fiscal freedom. As a result, states may not be able to spend on programmes they wish to pursue. This was also highlighted by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) in its study of state finances. An observation in the December 2024 RBI study is worth quoting here: "... too many Central government schemes reduce flexibility of State government spending and dilute the spirit of cooperative fiscal federalism".

Thus, the rationalisation of CSS could improve the fiscal space, both at Union and state levels. This can increase overall expenditure efficiency. Further, Indian states are at different levels of development with varying requirements. What, for instance, needs to be done in the education sector may be very different in northern Indian states than in southern states. State governments are better equipped to deal with state-level challenges. Besides, there is often an unwarranted political tussle for credit in such schemes. Preferably, for better outcomes, most of the developmental and social-sector schemes must be designed and run by state governments because they are better-positioned to do so. Thus, there is a case for greater fiscal empowerment of states. State governments, in turn, should empower local bodies. However, as highlighted in this space earlier this week, this is not the case. It would be interesting to see how the Sixteenth Finance Commission has approached this issue.

At a broader policy level, it is worth debating whether India should reconsider the allocation of fiscal resources to achieve faster growth and development. In this context, it is also necessary to discuss how state governments manage their finances. Several states have high levels of debt stock, but this is not stopping them from launching populist schemes. As a recent study showed, in some states, interest payments are growing faster than revenue. This is not a sustainable position. However, this should not be taken as a reason for not empowering states. What is needed instead are hard fiscal rules and transparent accounting of state finances. It is time for a wider expenditure review.

A sweeping exit

The US is dismantling global governance

American President Donald Trump has made no secret of the fact that he thinks all forms of multilateral engagement necessarily reduce the United States' (US') sovereignty and directly conflict with his supposed "make America great again" agenda. This has led, this week, to his decision to exit dozens of international organisations, many of them within the United Nations (UN) system. While his administration in the past has withdrawn the US from such frameworks as the Paris Agreement on climate change, has held back international duties, including those to the UN, and has effectively hamstrung the World Trade Organization, this latest action goes even further.

It should be noted, first, that the US has always been a relatively reluctant participant in several multilateral fora. There has been a deep anti-UN streak in populist politics in America, with baseless rumours of "black helicopters" carrying UN troops to attack hapless rural Americans, a staple of the conspiratorial world that has given rise to Mr Trump's movement. Even otherwise, mainstream US politicians have been wary of joining such supranational organisations as the International Court of Justice, believing that this would be unconstitutional in the US or usurp its sovereign rights. From that perspective, Mr Trump is just taking an existing strand in US politics a step further. It should be noted that while President Joe Biden did re-enter the Paris Agreement, he stopped short of reversing his predecessor's damage to the WTO, for example.

Thus, this latest shakeup needs to be analysed as emanating from something more than just Mr Trump's obvious disdain for foreigners. While there are on this list some organisations that might well be considered to be defunct or relatively pointless, others certainly are not. For example, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change is the fundamental building block for cooperation on climate action internationally. Complete withdrawal from that as well as from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, which produces the summary report on the real effects of global warming as scientists see it, is a significant setback to global efforts to keep the average temperature rise below 2 degrees Centigrade. Some smaller organisations that work, for example, on female and child health, might find themselves completely without funding as a consequence of this decision by Mr Trump. A greater burden will fall on the European Union and other first-world nations to make up for the lost capacity and funding faced by these institutions.

The deeper question is whether the US' withdrawal will also affect the legitimacy of these organisations and the international system they represent. At the moment, this does not seem to be the case. Mr Trump might seek to reshape and restructure the international system to maintain US primacy more directly. But, so far, his actions have been purely destructive. They may undermine global governance, but they do not erode existing systems' legitimacy. If he is a genuine radical then he will have to offer a compelling alternative narrative — with the funding and other commitment to match. This does not seem on offer. The obvious consequence, over time, is that China will step up to fill the role that the US has abdicated. In other words, Mr Trump is not restoring US sovereignty so much as giving away its primacy to its greatest strategic rival.

Enforcement: The real reform

In the financial sector, replacing existing regulations with new ones often adds costs without improving outcome



ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

No one would disagree that law enforcement in the country's financial sector needs significant improvement. What is not adequately appreciated is that effective, timely enforcement action with a deterrent effect against wrongdoers could, at times, obviate the need for regulators to mandate additional regulations and disclosure requirements. Meeting such additional regulatory mandates, which willy-nilly become uniformly applicable to all market participants, imposes costs on law-abiding market players and may not even improve enforcement.

Typically, a regulator handles several functions, regulatory and developmental — some mandated by law and some of its own creation. There could be varying views as to how to prioritise activities, given the capacity and resource constraints of the regulator. However, generally speaking, and in normal circumstances, the developmental roles take precedence. This encourages innovation and new initiatives in market development. Importantly, this also gives better visibility to the regulator, and sends out positive signals about its functioning.

As against this, the regulatory functions, viz, monitoring, inspection, investigation, adjudication and enforcement, are viewed as routine and mundane. What is lost sight of is that without having a robust and deterrent regulatory architecture in place, the developmental activities are of little use, and may, in fact, prove to be counter-productive at times. Before introducing any new initiative, the regulator ought to be sure of, and see through, how the concomitant enforcement requirements would be met.

First, to get an idea of the lack of adequate enforcement actions by the regulators, take the example of the securities market regulator. At any given time, the number of matters pending before itself, the tribunal, and the courts is mind-boggling. For instance, as at the

end of FY25, the total number of cases involving the regulator pending before the Supreme Court and High Courts was about 500 and 850, respectively. Out of these, the cases pending for over three years in these courts were over 300 and 600. In addition, 450-odd cases were pending before the Securities Appellate Tribunal (SAT).

Even in cases that reach finality, the required follow-up action is missing. For instance, the recovery of imposed penalties is meagre — maybe only around 5 per cent annually of the total outstanding amount. As for criminal cases, forget about convictions, there are hardly any prosecution cases filed by the regulator. The enforcement department's resources are thinly spread over a large spread of cases. Resultantly, attention isn't paid to separating and prioritising important cases with wider ramifications from amongst all cases. No wonder the regulator's actions lack deterrence.

But then why single out the market regulator? The position of other regulators is likely to be no different. In the case of the central bank, it doesn't even bother to pass speaking orders in most of the cases, including the contentious ones. Further, the Reserve Bank of India's (RBI's) decisions aren't appealable before any tribunal or special court. Some are challenged as writ petitions before the high courts and the Supreme Court, which, besides delaying the final outcomes, only adds to these courts' case burden.

The discussions on the need to streamline and simplify financial sector regulations are never-ending. Even the 2024-25 Budget talked of a light-touch regulatory framework based on principles and trust. To have a better appreciation of the actual situation, it may be useful to get a sense of the environment in which a regulator operates, and how it typically

behaves in emergent situations.

Greed and fear drive the financial markets. Human ingenuity has no limits. The meek enforcement record encourages risk-taking by some, who also misuse technological advancements. The antics of market participants keep the regulator on its toes. In such a scenario, firefighting various situations remains the major activity. Lo and behold, if any episodic event affecting a large number of stakeholders happens, hell breaks loose. The regulator comes under fire from all quarters, including the media, government, and the courts. Knee-jerk solutions become the flavour of the day. The result is more regulations. The risk-based supervisory principle goes out of the window. Oversight gets tightened, and all regulated entities, irrespective of their size or differentiation, get saddled with additional disclosure and regulatory requirements. The possible downside of such actions, including that they may go against the "ease of doing business", gets overlooked.

The financial sector regulators rely a lot on the disclosures made by market participants in discharging their regulatory functions. This is premised on the "caveat emptor" principle, i.e., let the purchaser beware. This argument also suits the regulators. Often, mandating more and more disclosures gives them a sense of a job well done. The regulatory impact assessment or cost-benefit analysis remains more on paper. Of course, more disclosures do not automatically imply better enforcement!

The answer to many of these problems lies in effective enforcement of the existing regulations, creating a deterrent impact. Passing a quasi-judicial order is not an end in itself. It must pass through the tests of the tribunals and courts, and be implemented. Typically, the statute constituting a regulator prescribes both civil and criminal penalties. The criminal prosecution of offenders in a court of law requires a lot of effort on the part of the investigation wing of the regulator, as the case there needs to be proved beyond "reasonable doubt", as against the principle of "preponderance of evidence" in civil proceedings. No wonder then, the performance of regulators in successfully prosecuting offenders is simply dismal. De-criminalisation of corporate laws is a step in the right direction. But what about serious offences for which criminal prosecution is the right course of action to deter and prevent recurrence?

Take the case of insider trading in the securities market. There hasn't been any conviction to date in any insider trading case in the country. Anyone who believes that there aren't serious enough insider trading cases deserving criminal action is living in denial.

While writing a regulation, examining its relevance over time, and substituting it with other regulations is an obvious and continuous activity, this job needs to be taken very seriously. At times, the cause of the ineffectiveness of a regulation may lie in its poor implementation. In such a case, substituting the existing regulation with a newer one may be of no use. The right way is to delineate serious law infringement cases, and ensure timely and effective action against the offenders. Prescribing additional or new regulations may be an easier option for the regulator, but may not address the problem.

The author is a former chairman of Sebi. The views are personal



AJAY TYAGI

The Netflix effect

Beau Willimon's *House of Cards* (Netflix, 2013) begins with an angry Kevin Spacey. He plays Congressman Frank Underwood who has just been thwarted for the position of secretary of state by the newly elected president. Underwood and his wife Claire, played superbly by Robin Wright, are ruthless in their pursuit of power. Manipulation, lies, betrayal and killing are the means through which he rises to vice-president and then president. *House of Cards* (6 seasons) made for a fascinating watch, winning several Emmys and Golden Globes along the way. It was the first original Netflix dropped. It is also the best way to describe the effect Netflix has had on the world of media and entertainment. The first ever pay-streaming service has been the catalyst that sent the entire global media order collapsing, like a house of cards.

This week Netflix completes 10 years in India. It is a great time then to revisit the collapse and subsequent redrawing of the media map — globally and in India.

Netflix was renting out DVDs in the 1990s. It began streaming in 2010, five years after YouTube. However, commissioning the *House of Cards* changed things. The first two seasons of 26 episodes cost \$100 million — the budget for a full-length film — to produce. All the episodes in a season were released together, and the service was priced at \$8 to \$12 a month, compared to \$50 or more for cable TV. It was, by far, the biggest disruption in entertainment since compression technologies like MP3 devastated the music business in the late 90s.

Netflix showcased the possibilities of on-demand, pay-driven streaming that could replace linear television, theatrical releases, news channels all at the same time. And it realised that potential too. At \$39 billion

in revenues and over 300 million subscribers, it is the largest pay-streaming service in the world.

These were audiences others were hankering after too. Whether it was to sell more products (Amazon) or to get people to search more (Google), many of the big tech-majors needed huge audiences across geographies, technologies and devices. Most of them, such as Amazon and Apple, along with the legacy media firms like Fox, Disney, Warner, had been taking stabs at video streaming. But after Netflix, streaming became serious with Amazon Prime Video, Apple, and a whole host of others upping their game. Soon, it became evident that the players with the biggest pockets and platforms would have the best negotiating power.

The tech-media majors are anywhere from \$60 to \$600 billion in top line. The biggest legacy studios would be between \$30 billion and \$80 billion. That is why, in 2017, Rupert Murdoch chose to sell Twenty-First Century Fox's entertainment assets, including Star India to The Walt Disney Company. Around the same time, Zee went through a promoter-triggered debt crisis and decided to sell out. The Sony-Zee merger did not happen but others, such as PVR-Inox and JioStar (Star India plus Viacom18) did. Just as the global map was redrawn, the Indian one was as well. That consolidation continues — globally and in India.

That is the business story. Watch a bit of Netflix to understand the consumer end.

Baltasar Kormákur's *Trapped* on Netflix begins with the discovery of a torso in a small town north of Reykjavik, Iceland. As the bodies pile up and a snow storm cuts off the town, it falls to the bulky, gentle police chief, Andri Ólafsson, and his deputies, Hinrika

and Ásgeir, to figure things out. The biting cold winds, snowfall, an avalanche, a shipload of stranded passengers, a blackout, everything adds to the feeling of being trapped. As this Icelandic drama sucks you into its world, you learn to read a look and long silences and not shirk from a relentlessly honest camera. Twenty episodes and two seasons later, I was hooked to "Nordic noir" as the critics call it.

Ten years ago, what was the possibility of finding an Icelandic show, enjoying it and looking for more? The rich haul of stories that streaming video or OTT offers from around the world is extraordinary and Netflix introduced us to these. Others followed.

Just as you and I are discovering Columbian, Spanish, German, Turkish or Korean shows and films, millions of people across the world are discovering Indian ones like *Kohrra*, *Paatal Lok*, *Mirzapur*, *Family Man*, or *Dekh De*. These are local stories, told by Indian storytellers in Indian languages. Putting them on streaming is taking them global in a way we couldn't have imagined. Every Indian show released on Netflix or Amazon Prime Video is available in 200 countries. Many of them are reviewed in some of the leading newspapers, magazines and TV stations across the world. Some of the biggest Indian releases overseas — Fox Studios' *My Name Is Khan* (2010) or Disney's *Dangal* (2016) — did not get that.

After decades of talking about the "crossover film", Indian stories are finally crossing over. They are routinely nominated for International Emmys. In 2020, *Delhi Crime* and in 2023 *Vir Das's Landing*, won. Both were on Netflix. The world's largest film-producing industry is now showcasing its storytelling chops to the world. That is one of the best things that 10 years of Netflix (and streaming) have brought to India.

X @vanitakohlil

Journeys in the Chinese imperium



GUNJAN SINGH

In *The Edge of the Empire: A Family's Reckoning with China* Edward Wong, journalist with *The New York Times*, writes about his and his father's journeys in and away from China and how they shaped their understanding of the country as well as each other. "We made separate journeys, but his came to inform mine. I write here of them. Or rather, I write how we have remembered moments in those journeys," he explains at the start.

The book does more than navigate

their personal journeys; it also documents China's journey since the Sino-Japanese War till the end of the Covid-19 lockdowns. It is an insightful attempt to juxtapose the personal lives of Chinese people and the political system, providing an invaluable window on how the policies and programmes implemented by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) have impacted China's citizens.

One of the fundamental observations Wong makes is that Mao Zedong remains the central figure in Chinese politics even today. One cannot ignore the fact that Mao's "... presence had consumed China ... and his shadow still fell over so many aspects of politics and society in the country," he says.

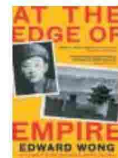
For Wong, the personal and political have been strongly tangled in China. This has been expressed through a conversation between his father and his friends. The author

writes, "They referenced the significant events of the last century, the movements and politics and personalities that had shaped the nation, parsing their own lives against the backdrop of epochal transformations."

The CCP's inherent suspicion towards its own people had a strong impact on the fortunes of the Wong family. The fact that a family member was studying in the United States became an impediment in Wong's father's attempt to gain the trust of the party and his desire for party membership. His dedication and commitment paved before his family's history. As the author concludes, "Father realised that the party's leaders had developed their own system of levelling judgement. This was a new ordering, a new form of social control, a new way of distributing power. But at its heart, it had elements of the old feudal hierarchy. A person couldn't trans-

send their past and their family history". This fact holds true even today.

Another aspect of the CCP that the author dwells on is the inherent insecurities of the party. One of the prominent challenges that China faced under Mao was "the conspiratorial thinking, the poisonous mentality that led to a hunt for enemies everywhere, was rooted in the nature of the party, in its secretive, Leninist structure that had been set up to carry out a revolution. But a fundamental part of the problem lay in the concentration of power in a single man." That observation resonates even today. Under Xi Jinping, the abolition of the term limit, the anti-corruption storm that has engulfed the political and business system highlights the challenges which come with autocratic governments. The author asserts, "Years later, after wit-



At the Edge of the Empire: A Family's Reckoning with China by Edward Wong
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461 pages ₹699

nessing Xi Jinping's rule, I understood the nationalism. He was fuelling was a continuation of the direction that the party leaders had been taking China since the 1990s rather than a new phenomenon. The paradigm had been built over decades, and not by one man".

The book is an interesting addition to the existing literature on the Chinese society, politics and geopolitics. Though written in the form of a personal story, it evocatively portrays the developments in the People's Republic of China (PRC) under the CCP. It is easy to read and simple to comprehend. It provides perspectives on a wide range of issues and deftly weaves the social and political in China, driving home the argument that under CCP and Xi Jinping the primary driver is full commitment to the party and its rules. Today the party dictates every aspect of the Chinese society, media, cul-

ture and continues to decide what being Chinese means.

The book is an interesting reference to the fact that the CCP and its policies have not wavered much from the Qing empire and how the primary driver is to control the empire/nation. The author writes that the Qing had, "... built a new type of empire from their Qing court in Beijing, one more sprawling than any assembled by a Chinese ruler. The Nationalists and the Communists became their heirs". He adds, "The Communist would model many of their strategies of control in Xinjiang after those of the late Qing imperium. And all the major ethnic and territorial issues would grapple with — Xinjiang, Tibet, Hong Kong, and Taiwan — have roots in the Qing era". Today the desire to control and expand this "empire" is stronger than ever within the CCP and Xi Jinping, and is projected through the slogan of "rejuvenation of the Chinese nation".

The reviewer is associate professor, O P Jindal Global University



Nothing ruffles more in the human heart than a brooding sense of injustice. Illness we can put up with. But injustice we want to pull things down

Justice William Brennan

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

—Rammath Goenka

POLICING CANNOT BE A UNIVERSITY'S FIRST RESPONSE TO PROTEST

ONCE again, Jawaharlal Nehru University has found itself in the middle of a political storm. The script feels painfully familiar—a student protest, slogans caught on video, police complaints, followed by threats of suspension and expulsion. From the 2016 Afzal Guru controversy and the January 2020 violence to the latest protest, JNU continues to be treated less as a university and more as a battleground. The issue this time was sloganeering against the prime minister and the home minister. The university administration called the slogans objectionable and anti-national, filed a police complaint, and warned of strict punishment. Political parties jumped in, each reading the protest through their own lens—frustration, conspiracy or sedition. But the larger question is not about a set of slogans. It is about why student dissent today is viewed with such deep suspicion.

Indian politics is full of leaders who came up through student movements. The J P movement of the 1970s, campus politics in the 1980s, and the Mandal-era protests of the 1990s have shaped the country's democratic journey. Those movements were loud, angry and often uncomfortable. Yet, they were recognised as political expressions, not treated automatically as crimes. What has changed is not the nature of student protest, but how the State responds to it. Today, dissent is quickly pushed into the category of law and order or national security. Students are no longer seen as young citizens testing ideas and authority, but as troublemakers who need to be disciplined.

This shift has an ideological edge. The current ruling class has positioned itself against left and liberal politics, and campuses like JNU are seen as their natural enemy. In this framing, protest is not disagreement—it is disloyalty. Once that line is crossed, dialogue becomes impossible and punishment becomes the default response. History offers a warning. Suppressing dissent does not eliminate anger; it drives it underground. Universities become spaces of dread rather than debate. Students are taught silence instead of citizenship. A democracy that cannot tolerate student protests risks producing leaders who know how to rule, but not how to listen. India's strength has always come from its noisy arguments, not enforced calm. Treating every protest as a threat may offer short-term control, but in the long run, it weakens the very foundations of democratic life.

PUT BENGALURU CITIZENS' INTEREST OVER REALTORS'

BENGALURU is set for a fresh layer of development, with tweaked building bylaws kicking in. Despite the Supreme Court advising the state government to rethink its civic policy on vertical development and its effect on the city's severely strained infrastructure, the Greater Bengaluru Authority (GBA) appears to be steaming ahead, brushing aside citizens' concerns. In a deal that helps the GBA, land owners and real estate developers, the government has come up with the concept of premium floor area ratio (FAR), which allows owners to buy additional building rights of up to 40 percent of the original FAR. A plump 'premium fee', calculated at 28 percent of the land guidance value, is to be paid to the GBA. Another 20 percent of the basic FAR could be added through transferable development rights, giving owners 60 percent extra FAR. Fearing it would lead to large-scale construction, congestion, and scarcity of water and other resources, citizens had approached the Karnataka High Court, which upheld the implementation of premium FAR. While conditions have been imposed on the plot size, road width and parking space, it remains to be seen if these factors are adhered to.

By further freeing up building norms, the GBA has reduced some restrictions for small residential plots, allowing owners to make maximum use of space. By doing away with occupation certificates for small plots, it has paved the way for regularising violations to the SC-mandated check that was seen as a hurdle to issuing e-khatas and registrations, and consequently, revenue generation. The GBA has started regularising almost 7 lakh B-khata properties into A-khata, which helps owners avail of loans and utilities. Premium FAR is expected to generate ₹2,000 crore annually, which the GBA plans to plough into urban infrastructure.

This 'ease of building' has raised concerns among old Bengalureans that taller buildings would mean higher population—both human and vehicular—and whether the city's infrastructure would hold up. IT City's notorious traffic and monsoon flooding are well documented. The government should pay heed to the SC's wisdom that citizens' interests are more important than that of realtors and builders. It should also put in place tough checks to prevent unplanned growth and rampant illegalities, especially a lack of compliance on structural and fire safety, waste management, parking and groundwater usage. The other road could lead to disaster.

QUICK TAKE

STRAYING FROM THE POINT

THE Supreme Court seems to be chasing its own tail in the matter of stray dogs. While calling out municipal authorities for failing to implement animal birth control (ABC) rules, a three-judge Bench stated on Wednesday, "The only thing missing is providing counselling to the dogs as well. So that they don't bite when released back." On Thursday, it said, "A dog can always smell a human who is afraid of dogs. It will always attack when it senses that." While the first comment can be seen as a moment of levity, the second one strays into an imperfect scientific territory. What pet lovers—and even those not particularly fond of them—need is clarity on rules and the effective implementation of ABC.

WITH the rejection of their bail pleas, Umar Khalid, Sharjeel Imam and a few other political prisoners continue to be victims of Indian legal system's failure. In *Gulfista Zardina & Others* (2026), after considering the "individualised roles" allegedly played by the seven accused, the court chose to decline bail to Khalid and Imam while granting bail to the other five. Pertinently, there is no allegation of any overt act of violence involving them. Even according to the Supreme Court, "the material relied upon against them is predominantly in the nature of speeches, meetings, digital communications and alleged strategic deliberations" regarding agitations against the Citizenship Amendment Act.

The judgement negates the bail jurisprudence evolved by the court itself in a line of cases. It repelled the argument that prolonged incarceration without trial violates Article 21 of the Constitution and, therefore, is a ground to release the accused on bail. The accused in this case were in jail for five and a half years. The court relied on the recent judgement in *Saleem Khan* (2025), where the two-judge Bench upheld a Karnataka High Court verdict that declined bail to one accused charged under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act while granting it to another. The court, in that case, simply endorsed the Karnataka judgement without laying down any legal principle.

A constitutional view on the issue was taken by a three-judge Bench in *K A Najeeb* (2021). In that case, the court held that a statutory restriction like Section 43D(5) of the UAPA per se does not oust the ability of constitutional courts to grant bail on the ground of violation of fundamental rights due to long incarceration without trial. Section 43D(5) contains an embargo against granting of bail if there are reasons to believe the accused is a flight risk.

Another Supreme Court Bench, in *Sheikh Javed Iqbal vs Uttar Pradesh* (2024) agreed with the law laid down in *Najeeb*. It said that the seriousness of the alleged crime should prompt the state to expedite the trial, not to delay it. The court even said: "When a trial gets prolonged, it is not open to the prosecution to oppose bail of the accused undertrial on the ground that the charges are serious." *Thaaba Fasal* (2021) and *Athar Parwez* (2024) also followed the constitutional view expressed in *Najeeb*. In *Javed Gulam*

The Supreme Court's decision to deny bail to Umar Khalid and Sharjeel Imam goes against its own jurisprudence. It erodes constitutional guarantees that flowed from India's freedom struggle

THE EROSION OF RIGHTS IN A BROKEN BAIL JUDGEMENT

KALEESWARAM RAJ

Lawyer, Supreme Court of India



SOURAV ROY

Nabi Shaikh (2024), too, the court said that prosecution cannot rely on the seriousness of an alleged crime when the trial is inordinately delayed.

In the latest case, the court noted that, "Prolonged incarceration is a matter of serious constitutional concern and carries great weight." Yet, it denied bail to Khalid and Imam with an unfathomable claim that "this approach does not dilute Article 21" on the right to life and personal liberty. It does exactly that. Again, the issue of delay was not the sole ground that Khalid and Imam urged; the reliance was equally on the fragility of the prosecution story.

The two-judge Bench said that the three-judge Bench's judgement in *Najeeb* "must be understood as a principled safeguard against unconscionable detention", yet somehow reached the

opposite conclusion on Khalid and Imam. The two-judge Bench is wrong and unfair in bypassing the spirit of the three-judge Bench judgement of 2021 that has been reiterated in several subsequent judgements. Instead, it opted to accept a contrary view laid down in cases such as *Gurinder Singh* (2024) and *Dayamoy Mahato* (2025). This exposes a harsh legal reality in India—a selective use of draconian laws by the executive is often followed by a selective use of precedents by judges.

The judgement legitimises an executive that suppresses dissent and public protest. Activities like road blockades, which could be counted as an offence only under conventional laws, have been interpreted as an act of terrorism. The meaning of Section 15 of the UAPA, which defines "terrorist act", has been

WHY OIL'S NOT WELL IN VENEZUELA

ON the third night of the new year, the Caracas skyline was dotted with explosions. US military helicopters whisked the first couple of Venezuela from their comforts for a midnight ride to New York—in an operation eerily similar to a sequence from the 2001 movie *Spy Game*, in which Brad Pitt and Catherine McCormack's characters are flown out of a Chinese prison. The intent and outcome differed in real life. It was about oil altering world dynamics.

Venezuela has figured for long on the US presidential radar. A growing Chinese and Russian influence in the South American country's oil industry triggered a conflict of egos.

During a 2010 visit to the Venezuelan capital, Vladimir Putin, then the Russian prime minister, was gifted a symbolic 'key to Caracas' as Hugo Chávez strengthened ties with Russia. A 20-year cooperation plan between Iran and Venezuela signed in 2022 included recovery of the latter's oil industry. Despite sanctions, China continued as the largest customer of the state oil company Petróleos de Venezuela (PDVSA).

As oil was the common denominator, the strategic capture of Venezuela strikes at the base of this growing nexus. Moreover, to stymie West Asia's dominance in oil, the 303 billion barrels of Venezuelan reserves remain a *pièce de résistance*. With US and Canadian participation, a formidable competitor to Opec seems to be on the anvil.

This column had earlier mentioned the capability and inclination of the US's Gulf Coast refineries to process Merex, a popular Venezuelan blend favoured by Chinese teapot refineries, and heavy crude from the Orinoco belt preferred by select Asian refiners.

In 2001, a report by the Baker Institute and the Council on Foreign Relations—later presented to US Vice President Dick Cheney and titled National Energy Policy 2001—mentioned the "fear of energy vulnerability" caused by an erratic Saddam Hussein keen on catapulting his pan-Arab image as a power centre and emerge as a key "swing producer" of oil. This presented a growing danger to the world's capitalist economy and a "possibility that Hussein may remove Iraq oil from the market for an extended period".

What ensued was Saddam's weapons of mass destruction narrative. No weapons were ever discovered. Big Oil reaped significant gains, securing access to large reserves, as did major oil services subcontractor Halliburton, of which Cheney was



RANJAN TANDON

Senior markets specialist and author

the CEO before assuming the V-P's office.

This brings to mind Libya in the early 1980s during Muammar Gaddafi's regime, and how its mistreated Mediterranean coastline and Italian facilities were forever altered by US intervention.

Libya's suspected involvement in the 1986 bombing at a West Berlin discotheque frequented by Americans led the US to retaliate by bombing Tripoli and Benghazi. The December 1988 Pan Am flight 103's explosion over Lockerbie in Scotland was another defining crisis.



Frequent oil leakages at Venezuela's Lake Maracaibo symbolise the country's decrepit energy infrastructure. Despite Trump's claims, the massive investment needed to rejuvenate the industry requires a guarantee like what the US gave to Iran in 1981

As Gaddafi acceded to a billion dollars in compensation to the victims, a gradual rapprochement led Libya to officially abandon its own weapons of mass destruction programme, including the surrender of its nuclear missile development in December 2003 and shipping of nuclear materials to the US in March 2004 under the watchful eyes of US and UK officials. This was followed by a 2008 meeting between Condoleezza Rice and Gaddafi in Tripoli, the first with a US secretary of state in 50 years. But within three years, the Libyan strongman was assassinated in an uprising, leaving Africa's top oil-rich nation fractured.

In Venezuela, an infrastructure run down in the absence of investments and maintenance has led production to plummet and a sanctioned oil industry, once

responsible for 96 percent of government revenues, in a state of decay. The 13,000-sq-km Lake Maracaibo, situated in a region that holds 15 percent of the Venezuelan reserves, is a nightmare of spills and contamination. With thousands of kilometres of eroded pipelines lying at its bottom, leaks and logistical failures are common.

Though Chevron remains active in Venezuela on an extended reprieve, it would be a long haul for oil majors to commit large capital expenditures in the prevailing political situation. This recalls another moment in history—the 1981 Algiers Accord that provided for compensations after the 1979 nationalisation of Iran's oil industry. With the release of hostages and frozen assets, the US had pledged non-interference in Iran's internal matters. Similar guarantee mechanisms would be a prerequisite for the billions of dollars needed to resurrect the ailing PDVSA.

As the global media showcases a blindfolded Maduro, the message insinuated by Trump is that he means 'business'. Moscow is watchful, though any reaction would be calibrated against the Ukraine war. China is refraining from overt defiance, with Taiwan in its backyard. However, with huge outstanding oil-linked loans to Caracas, a mute Beijing is hard to imagine. The failed nuclear talks with Tehran stand out in sharp contrast. While the situation differs vastly, a cue is conveyed nevertheless. Iran and its oil could bolster a sagging US hold in West Asia as much as Venezuela and its resources could in Latin America. Though Tehran stood isolated in the Israeli conflict last year, by virtue of its oil wealth, Beijing's patronage and Moscow's proximity remain its bargaining chips. The Islamic state enjoys a good 'working relationship' with other Opec members. More adventurism in West Asia could be counter-productive.

Learning from history, a pragmatic US should refrain from interfering in Caracas's internal politics or from seeking more geopolitical realignments. On the other hand, a collaborative provision for infrastructure and technological support would encourage Iran and North Korea to begin trusting America.

(Views are personal)

MAILBAG

WRITE TO: letters@newindianexpress.com

GDP worries

Ref: GDP growth buoyant (Jan 8). The strong growth numbers are encouraging, yet the uneven performance across sectors calls for caution. Agriculture and mining need urgent policy attention to sustain momentum. External shocks must be hedged through trade diversification, not complacency over headline figures.

M Barathi, Bengaluru

Trump's games

Ref: The unpredictable man (Jan 8). The US president's statements show a pattern of loud self-praise and calculated pressure tactics. On India, his words appear less about partnership and more a psychological game meant to create pressure through public claims. India should see through such mind games and respond with calm diplomacy.

T Kalish Ditya, Hyderabad

Dangerous statecraft

The article exposes how unpredictability, when elevated to a governing doctrine, degenerates from tactical ambiguity into outright coercion. The real danger lies less in any single action than in the growing acceptance of unilateralism as legitimate statecraft. Power exercised without restraint or institutional moorings hollows norms.

Sanjeev Jha, New Delhi

Healthcare divide

Ref: The boots needed on budget (Jan 8). Six percent spending on education is a national necessity. The 2026 budget must also address the rural-urban divide in digital diagnostics. We cannot 'viki' if quality healthcare remains a privilege. Decentralised financing must be coupled with aggressive rural health-tech infrastructure.

Mohd Thulath, Malappuram

SIR weariness

Ref: One more BLO dies (Jan 8). Removing voters from rolls is like a jute vendor repeatedly crushing sugar cane. The first round yields plenty, the second less, and by the third, only a few drops remain before the cane is discarded. The Election Commission must recognise a practical limit—beyond which brings little gain and only weariness.

R S Narula, Patiala

Census preparation

Ref: Int phase of Census to start on April 1 (Jan 8). It will enable respondents to give factual information for each item in the questionnaire of the houselisting and housing survey, if the list of questions is ready in advance.

N Rama Rao, email

FIR on JNU protests: Confusing dissent with disloyalty

The authorities of Jawaharlar Nehru University (JNU) seem to have erred in their decision to expel, suspend, or debar students for raising controversial slogans that were allegedly raised against Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Home Minister Amit Shah. They said on X, "The Jawaharlar Nehru University administration has vowed the strictest action against students found raising objectionable slogans against Hon'ble Prime Minister and Hon'ble Home Minister. An FIR has already been lodged in the matter."

It hasn't mentioned what was 'objectionable' about

the slogans. If there was any hint of violence to be perpetrated against Modi and Shah, or some obscenities hurled at them, action against the protesting students would be justified. But penalising any slogan against the duo, or anyone else, is a gross abuse of authority by the officials concerned. Students and others have the democratic right to criticise and protest against politicians, however senior the latter may be. Seniority, rank, and station do not provide immunity to anyone from criticism.

In a statement, the JNU said, "Universities are centres for innovation and new ideas, and they cannot be

permitted to be converted into laboratories of hate. Freedom of speech and expression is a fundamental right. But any form of violence, unlawful conduct or anti-national activity will not be tolerated under any circumstances. Students involved in this incident will also face disciplinary measures including immediate suspension, expulsion and permanent debarment from the university."

But the JNU authorities have failed to provide any details to the media about the "form of violence, unlawful conduct or anti-national activity" that the protesting students indulged in. They have reportedly

identified nine students, including the four office bearers of JNU Students Union, who organised an event "ostensibly to observe the sixth anniversary of the violence that occurred in JNU on 5 January 2020". At the event, slogans relating to the "bail pleas of Umar Khalid and Sharjeel Imam" were also raised.

So what? Newspapers have written editorials against the denial of bail to Khalid and Imam. Should those newspapers also face action? It is troubling how the elastic and often politically loaded terms such as "anti-national" are used so cavalierly.

Perhaps, this is a case of

more royalist than the king; the university officials may be trying to score brownie points with their political bosses. The top leadership—that is, Modi and Shah—must realise that such cheap stunts by sycophantic officials do no good to either them or to the nation's reputation. The duo is too strong politically to need any support from the officials of a prestigious university.

University officials would do well to remember that their primary responsibility is to nurture learning, research, and critical thinking. Their job is not to police political opinion or act as guardians of the reputa-

tions of those in power. Nor should they confuse dissent with disloyalty. A confident nation does not fear slogans; it confronts them with arguments, evidence, and dialogue.

IFNU truly wishes to uphold its own stated ideals, it must transparently explain what rules were violated, how those violations meet the threshold of violence or illegality, and why the harshest punishments are warranted. Failing that, the disciplinary actions will rightly be seen as arbitrary and politically motivated. In a democracy, universities must stand as bastions of free inquiry, not as echo chambers of power.

LETTERS

Controlling strays requires a multi-level approach

THIS refers to your editorial "Needed a dogged pursuit to tackle stray menace" (THI, January 8). On an average, India accounts for 35 per cent of the rabies deaths that occur across the world. An important point to note is that the dogs, after being neutralised, are to be returned from where they were picked up.

This clause has ruffled the feathers of a few citizens who want the animals to be removed from their area altogether. It is so important not to feed the stray dogs near homes because they may start guarding the area they were fed from and form clusters. The significance of anti-rabies vaccination for dogs cannot be overstated. A combination of scientific, practical and humane approaches can end the misery of dogs as well as human beings.

Dr Ganapathi Bhat, Akola

II

Reference to editorial "Needed a dogged pursuit to tackle stray menace": Stray dog menace is a serious problem confronting almost all parts of India, where unwary public become victims to the predatory instincts of street dogs. There can be several reasons why and how stray dogs become aggressive to attack people, without provocations.

The Supreme Court gave clear guidelines to civic bodies in tackling and control of stray dogs that some states are not seriously implementing. The strays are contributing to growing road accidents, resulting in costly treatments and prolonged hospitalisations. The municipal bodies must expertly execute the tasks assigned to them without any fear of animal lovers coming in the way of creating road-blocks.

S Lakshmi, Hyderabad

III

THE stray dog issue has become a major problem not only to citizens, govts and local bodies but also to judiciary (THI, 8/1/26). Most of the times stray dogs roam in the streets in groups and attack the people on the roads many without any provocation for unknown reasons.

The sterilisation programme and isolation of dogs to some distant places is not implemented as it might be difficult for any official to look after the dog centres perfectly. If street dogs are poisoned and killed, the animal lovers agitate for the love of stray dogs and they never realise the severity of dog bites and agony of the victims, the children in particular. If any one of their families get bitten by stray dogs then they will experience the agony.

But Supreme Court did not advise how to tackle the stray dogs issue perfectly with standard operating procedures. For this it should have advised central govt to appoint a committee of veterinary doctors, civic body representatives, social activists, animal lovers associations to bring out operating procedures to tackle stray dog menace.

J P Reddy, Nalgonda

Grappling with divisive ideologies

AN entirely divisive Dravidian political ideology now grips the nation. Amit Shah's assertion that Hindus are unsafe in Tamil Nadu, coupled with Stalin's rebuttal, underscores the colonial legacy of division that persists even after their departure. The most profound impact of colonialism is the colonial consciousness, which has permanently altered our minds to conform to colonial narratives. The saddest chapter in India's history is the mythic and non-existent Aryan-Dravidian narrative, fabricated by colonial intellectuals to fracture our unity.

Dravidians, tribals, Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, Dalits, Sikhs, Jains, and Hindus all contribute to the rich tapestry of this magnificent land and culture. However, we still grapple with a lack of collective clarity regarding terms such as 'Hindu', 'Hinduism', 'Hinduism', or 'Sanatan'. The term 'Dravidian' is understood in both its historical geographical context and its modern linguistic sense; racial interpretations are unscientific and irrational, merely reflecting a colonial mindset.

Dr Pingali Gopal, Hanamkonda

No entry fee for Chennai Book Fair

MAKING the Chennai Book Fair free of entrance fees is a transformative boon for the underprivileged, removing barriers to knowledge and literature. This inclusive step will inspire countless more visitors, encourage book purchases, and foster a reading culture, paving the way for an enlightened society.

T S Karthik, Chennai

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BENGALURU ONLINE

BJP-JD(S) merger likely in near future: Shivakumar

BENGALURU: Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar on Thursday said there was a strong possibility of the Janata Dal (Secular) merging with the Bharatiya Janata Party in the near future, based on the political stand adopted by JD(S) leader HD Kumaraswamy.

"If one looks at Kumaraswamy's approach, it appears that JD(S) may soon merge with the BJP. If that happens, it will actually be good for us as well. We can then fight the BJP directly, and the confusion of 'three parties in the game but only two in the calculation' will come to an end," Shivakumar said. He was speaking at the JKPC office after inducting JD(S) leaders, including former Chamaraajpet corporator Govindaraj, into the Congress party. Welcoming the new entrants, Shivakumar said Govindaraj, his wife Gowramma, Chandrashekar, former JD(S) president David and several other leaders had decided to join the Congress as they were unable to accept the growing understanding between the BJP and JD(S). "Govindaraj is a family friend and has been known to me for a long time. He worked hard to build the JD(S) in Chamaraajpet and even contested elections. However, he has now chosen Congress due to ideological differences," he said.

Shivakumar stated that the Congress follows a secular ideology and that the new entrants were drawn to the party under the leadership of Zameer Ahmed Khan.

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

Dysfunctional families: A disturbing social indicator

SURGICAL STRIKE



K. KRISHNA SAGAR RAO

I no longer see family breakdown as a private tragedy. I see it as a public warning. When families fracture, societies do not merely change, they weaken. What we are witnessing today in rising emotional instability, collapsing discipline, fragile relationships, and institutional disorder is not accidental. It is the cumulative outcome of what is happening inside our homes.

We have learned to talk endlessly about economic indicators, political stability, and technological progress. But we have stopped asking the most fundamental question, what is happening to the family as a functional unit. The family is not simply an emotional arrangement. It is the first institution of leadership, values, emotional regulation, and accountability. When that institution becomes dysfunctional, every other institution eventually pays the price.

Dysfunctional families are not created by lack of love. They are created by lack of structure. Modern society has become deeply uncomfortable with hierarchy, responsibility, and authority inside the home. We have mistaken freedom for absence of order and equality for absence of leadership. The result is fragmentation. A family without hierarchy is not progressive. It is unanchored. And when homes become unanchored, societies begin to drift into anarchy.

I strongly feel the below five distinctive drivers enable functional and structured family systems.

1. Clear hierarchy of authority

Every functioning system requires structure. A school has a principal. An organization has a leadership chain. A nation has a constitutional order. Yet we have convinced ourselves that the family can survive without hierarchy.

Children need leadership before they need liberty. They require emotional security that

comes from knowing someone wise is in charge. When parents abdicate authority to appease their children, the home does not become warmer. It becomes unstable.

Equality of dignity does not mean equality of decision-making. A family is not a parliament. It is a leadership structure where responsibility must be clearly defined and located. When rules are endlessly negotiated, every instruction becomes a debate, when boundaries become optional, what disappears is not just obedience, it is emotional safety.

We must be honest enough to say that structure is not oppression. Hierarchy is not cruelty. It is emotional leadership. It tells the child, you are not alone, someone is carrying the weight of direction for you.

2. Defined roles and responsibilities

Dysfunction begins when roles blur into entitlement. Parents want children to behave like adults. Children want adult rights without adult responsibility. Spouses want partnership without accountability. No one wants to own the consequences. There are plenty of families which are this chaotic, as they reflect above conditions.

In a functional family, roles are not about superiority. They are about responsibility. Parents are not merely companions, they are providers, protectors, and moral anchors. Children are not just negotiators, they are learners in preparation for future responsibility. When this clarity disappears, resentment replaces respect.

We see the long-term effects everywhere. Individuals raised without role clarity struggle with authority in workplaces. They rebel against structure but cannot build it. They demand rights but evade duty. They interpret boundaries as injustice and discipline as hostility.

Role definition is not cultural rigidity. It is operational clarity. Without it, families drift into emotional chaos. And emotional chaos inside homes eventually manifests as institutional dysfunction outside them.

3. Value transmission over emotional comfort

Modern parenting has been reduced to emotional appeasement. We want our children



Modern parenting has been reduced to emotional appeasement. We want our children to be comfortable, confident, and constantly affirmed. What we have forgotten is that comfort without character is social sabotage

to be comfortable, confident, and constantly affirmed. What we have forgotten is that comfort without character is social sabotage.

4. Misinterpreted gender equality between spouses

One of the most significant and least discussed contributors to family dysfunction today is the way gender equality is being misunderstood within marriage.

Let me state this clearly. Equality between spouses is a moral principle. But when equality is interpreted as the absence of hierarchy, final responsibility, or leadership inside the family, it creates instability rather than empowerment.

A family cannot function when both spouses insist on equal command in every decision. Leadership does not mean domination. It means accountability. Someone must carry the final responsibility for direction, especially in moments of conflict, crisis, or discipline.

What we increasingly see instead is marriage turning into a negotiation table rather than a leadership unit. Every decision becomes a contest of ego. Authority is challenged in the name of independence. Partnership is mistaken for parallel sovereignty.

This has serious consequences for children. When spouses routinely counter each other's authority in front of their children, they do not demonstrate empowerment.

used in finance research as it estimates the implied cost of equity by incorporating expected earnings growth and payout ratios. This provides a forward-looking perspective on how markets assess risk, which is essential when examining policy-driven CSR expenditure.

The study affirmed that there is a positive correlation between CSR expenditure on alleviating poverty and the implied cost of equity (CoE) for the Indian companies.

"This signifies that there is a great deal of CSR expenditure that is mandatory and that there is a greater return

They model confusion. Children raised in such environments do not learn coherence. They learn to exploit gaps between authority figures. They learn that rules are negotiable, that discipline is optional, that values depend on whom parent is currently winning the argument. Two equal partners do not weaken a family. Two competing authorities do.

Equality of worth does not require equality of command at all times. A household needs leadership, not rivalry. This does not mean one spouse is superior. It means that authority must be functional, contextual, and clearly respected. Without that, power becomes performative and responsibility disappears.

We must also confront the emotional cost of this confusion. Homes that operate as battlegrounds of control produce anxiety, not confusion. Children internalize instability. They grow up uncertain about boundaries, hesitant about authority, and resistant to structure.

5. Accountability and consequence

Dysfunctional families are allergic to accountability. Everyone is 'expressing themselves.' No one is responsible for outcomes. Discipline has been caricatured as cruelty. In reality, discipline is training. It teaches cause and effect. It teaches restraint. It teaches

on equity that is required to attract investors. Mandatory CSR spending can reduce perceived corporate benefits, leading to lower investor confidence and a higher CoE. Investors may interpret mandated CSR expenditure as a compliance cost rather than a strategic investment.

"The study outcomes remain consistent across alternate analytical models, which strengthens the validity of the results. Service sector firms have shown a contrasting trend, where current year CSR spending lowers their CoE, unlike firms in other sectors," he said.

Mandatory CSR spending can lead to low investor confidence: IIM study

NEW DELHI

MANDATORY CSR spending can reduce perceived corporate benefits, leading to lower investor confidence and a higher cost of equity for Indian companies as investors may interpret the mandated expenditure as a compliance cost rather than a strategic investment, a new study by IIM Lucknow has found.

Centric to the Indian market, the study investigates how mandatory Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) spending can impact investors' perspectives, financial

risk assessments and the cost at which firms can raise equity capital. The findings of this research have been published in the prestigious Journal of Accounting in Emerging Economies.

According to Seshadev Sahoo, Professor, Finance and Accounting, Indian Institute of Management, Lucknow, to gain in-depth insights into CSR financial implications

for the Indian corporate sector, the research team examined the data from 2014 to 2020 of 484 Indian companies that spent on poverty alleviation initiatives under the CSR mandate of the Companies

Act, 2013. By applying the Ohlson and Juettner-Nauroth (OJ) model and multiple econometric approaches to analyse the data, the research team investigated whether mandated CSR helps or hurts firms' financial positions.

The study specifically concentrated on the perspective of investors, examining how such spending influences their evaluation of firm risk, their confidence in the company, and ultimately the price at which the company can raise equity in the market. Explaining the Ohlson and Juettner-Nauroth (OJ) model, Sahoo told PTI, "The model is widely

used in finance research as it estimates the implied cost of equity by incorporating expected earnings growth and payout ratios. This provides a forward-looking perspective on how markets assess risk, which is essential when examining policy-driven CSR expenditure."

The study affirmed that there is a positive correlation between CSR expenditure on alleviating poverty and the implied cost of equity (CoE) for the Indian companies.

"This signifies that there is a great deal of CSR expenditure that is mandatory and that there is a greater return

DECCAN Chronicle

9 JANUARY 2026

India, despite 74% forecast in GDP, cannot drop guard

The financial year 2025-26 has been one of the most volatile years for the world when armed conflicts and protectionism became a global norm rather than an exception, heightening global uncertainty and adversely affecting emerging economies. India, however, has been a pleasant exception which, as advance estimates suggest, is poised to record better-than-expected economic growth.

According to the First Advance Estimates of Gross Domestic Product released by the National Statistics Office, India's real GDP growth is projected at 7.4 per cent in the financial year 2025-26, compared to the 6.5 per cent growth recorded in FY 2024-25. Nominal GDP is estimated to grow by eight per cent, taking the overall economic size to Rs 357.14 lakh crore (\$3.97 trillion), indicating sustained income expansion despite currency pressures and capital outflows.

This financial year has not been kind to emerging economies. US President Donald Trump's unjust and unilateral tariffs played a major role in disturbing global economic stability. He imposed an unprecedented 50 per cent tariff on Indian goods due to the country's continued growth of Russian crude oil, affecting several export-related sectors. Simultaneously, the rupee has remained under pressure due to global dollar strength, while foreign institutional investors have continued to pare exposure to Indian markets.

Nevertheless, Gross Value Added (GVA) is estimated to grow by 7.3 per cent in FY 2025-26, compared to 6.4 per cent in the previous year, demonstrating the country's ability to decouple domestic momentum from external shocks. This growth has been driven primarily by the services sector, which continues to act as the backbone of India's growth model. Financial, real estate and professional services, along with public administration, defence and other services, are estimated to grow by 9.9 per cent in real terms. Trade, hotels, transport and communication services are expected to grow by 7.5 per cent, highlighting the revival of mobility, tourism and logistics activity.

On the demand side, Private Final Consumption Expenditure is estimated to grow by seven per cent in real terms, broadly in line with last year's performance. This suggests that household spending has remained resilient despite inflationary pressures and global uncertainty. Government consumption also rebounded by 5.2 per cent, despite fiscal tightening being visible across many major economies. Gross Fixed Capital Formation is expected to show better-than-expected growth at 7.8 per cent, higher than the 7.1 per cent growth posted in FY 2024-25, aided by continued public infrastructure spending and improved private sector confidence. Manufacturing and construction are expected to grow by seven per cent, signalling steady industrial activity despite global supply-chain disruptions and trade frictions. Agriculture and allied activities have registered moderate growth of 3.1 per cent, while mining has shown some contraction.

Though the advance estimates tell a story of India's resilience, the government and industry cannot afford to let their guard down. The world is on the cusp of a major transformation, comparable to a moment like Bretton Woods, and what India does in the next few years will determine its trajectory for the coming decades.

Grand alliances won't sway TN

That grandiosity cannot garner votes is something that the BJP does not seem to bother about. For the way in which the AIADMK-led alliance in Tamil Nadu went about roping in the PMK faction, led by Anbumani Ramadoss, reportedly offering close to 20 seats, only betrays a sense of desperation to expand the coalition. Since it happened just as AIADMK general secretary Edappadi K. Palaniswami was getting ready to leave for New Delhi for a rendezvous with BJP strongman Amit Shah, it was construed to have happened at the behest of the BJP that is highly concerned about the slow pace of its alliance gathering in the state that comprised primarily just two parties.

Since most political outfits in Tamil Nadu shied away from joining that alliance at a time when the DMK-led coalition remained steadfast in its unity, despite several voices from within seeking to break it, the BJP wanted to let the world that it, too, has its own allies. It may have told AIADMK, which prides itself as the alliance leader, to go for a tie-up with any party that comes their way. So, the PMK faction of Mr Ramadoss was let in though it did not guarantee that PMK votes would not be splintered with senior Ramadoss declaring that, as founder of the party, he was the boss.

What the BJP and the AIADMK forgot was that the pushy attitude could only help them make show claims of spearheading a grand coalition but it could not bring in what is required — votes. Or is it that the BJP just wants to tell the rest of the country that it has managed to make inroads into Tamil country, where it has eternally struggled to capture the imagination of the people, by showing off a multi-party rainbow alliance in which it also wants the presence of former AIADMK leaders with no grassroots support like O. Panneerselvam and T.T.V. Dinakaran? Such efforts may, however, empower banking since politics is no commercial marketplace for loud claims and sales pitches to sway voters.

Is it that the BJP just wants to tell the rest of the country that it has managed to make inroads into Tamil country by showing off a multi-party rainbow alliance in which it even wants OPS and T.T.V. Dinakaran?

Subhani



Yunus' mess: Can Tarique tackle Dhaka's challenges?

Manash Ghosh



With the passing of Begum Khaleda Zia, former chairperson of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), an extremely acrimonious phase of that country's politics has come to an end. It also coincides with the beginning of a new era marked by the homecoming of her 60-year-old son, Tarique Zia, now BNP chairman, after 18 years of forced self-exile in London.

Immediately on his return, he is saddled with the responsibility of navigating his party through the tortuous crosscurrents of electoral politics and casting it to victory in the coming polls, which will be a tough challenge. The February election will be a totally different from those in the past. The big question is if Tarique will measure up to the challenges he will face before, during and after the elections despite inheriting the rich political legacies of his parents.

The coming election will also severely test his leadership skills and political acumen, besides his ability to hold his own while steering his party to victory at the hustings.

For the first time, the BNP will face the Jamaat-e-Islami-led 12-party Islamic alliance as its main rival. The BNP had earlier always had Jamaat as an electoral ally, with which it formed governments and even shared key portfolios with. This time both are fighting one another with a polemic, dubbed "jihad". With interim government head Md Yunus having unjustly barred the Awami League and Jatiyo party from contesting, the BNP's chances of victory are brighter. But there are many imponderables that might rob it of success, most important being Mr Yunus' deliberate failure to create a level playing field. His highly partisan actions have emboldened his "neutral" image

The students who installed Yunus in power are now openly accusing him of being involved in a 'deep-rooted conspiracy' over the recent targeted killing of their leader Osman Hadi in broad daylight in Dhaka

so badly that the election's credibility is undermined. The poll process is on an anti-political lawlessness in Bangladesh, with sophisticated arms and jihadi outfits abounding in the political arena. Besides, the political ideology of those outfits are linked with the Jamaat, which will help it electorally. Also, Mr Yunus' proximity to Jamaat is an open secret, which may prevent free and fair elections. His "neutral" image has taken the hardest hit from the very student leaders who had installed him as interim government head after Sheikh Hasina's regime collapsed. They are now openly accusing him of being involved in a "deep-rooted conspiracy" over the recent targeted killing of radical student leader Osman Hadi in broad daylight in Dhaka.

It's now clear why Hadi was killed and with what nefarious intent. This accusation was further buttressed by Hadi's brother who has levelled similar charges against the government. The purpose, they claim, was to indefinitely postpone the elections, citing the worsening situation in the country. Hadi was killed for having campaigned for Bangladesh making a smooth democratic transition through free and fair elections and also for declaring himself a candidate. The other objective was to fulfil Mr Yunus' cherished wish to prolong his unbridled rule indefinitely.

Mr Yunus's undeclared strategy remains to create a situation where he can play the role of an arbiter in the country's internal instability and anarchy, maybe leading to civil war. His government knew such a strategy gave an excellent opportunity for the US-backed Jamaat-e-Islami and ISIS-supported jihadists to fish in troubled waters as they have large stockpiles of arms loaded in power armories in the 2024 "uprising", which they could use for a power takeover declaring

and a lack of convincing justification. The complaint from DRDO's distinguished scientist S. Nambi Naidu is more than a personal grievance. It underlines our chronic inability to comfort with meritocracy when it clashes with "other considerations." If the senior-most, high-ranked candidate is bypassed, the system must have an unassailable rationale on record. That's not a courtesy; that's governance 101.

However, the real concern is that this isn't an isolated incident. Whether it's police chiefs, PSU leaders, or regulatory heads, too many critical appointments end up litigated because the government treats due process like an optional accessory. Courts and tribunals shouldn't have to repeatedly play the role of moral compass for administrative decision-making.

In defence institutions, leadership credibility is not ornamental. If the government wants to claim efficiency and professionalism, it must demonstrate it where it matters most.

CADRE EXPANSION IN UP

Uttar Pradesh has just bumped up its IAS sanctioned strength. More posts, more senior positions, more neatly classified reserves. This expansion signals two truths. First, the sheer scale of UP's governance challenge finally has official acknowledgement. A state this large cannot run on a skeletal level, with constantly

LETTERS MAKING TRUMP HAPPY

Apropos the cartoon "How to make Trump happy in 30 days?". The sketch underlines an important contrast. While PM Modi's approach to global leaders has been largely neutral, bold and straightforward, rooted in India's long-term interests rather than shifting moods, it is the unpredictability of Trump's positions, often changing with circumstance, that complicates engagement. India cannot be expected to recalibrate policy with every turn of personality-driven diplomacy. A steady, principled stance, even when faced with erratic counterparts, is a strength, not a weakness. The cartoon's humour works best as a reminder that consistency and clarity matter more than appeasement.

Abbharna Barathi
Chennai

PMK IN ALLIANCE

It is good to learn that the PMK faction headed by Anbumani Ramadoss has finalised its decision with the AIADMK for the upcoming assembly elections. Of course, it was expected. Anbumani Ramadoss, it is learnt, has support of over 90 per cent of PMK cadres. As days progress, there are likely to be many surprises in the formation of alliances. The BJP, already in the alliance, will endeavour to rope in many parties to defeat the DMK-led government whose performance is not considered satisfactory. All said and done, this is going to be one of the toughest elections in the state.

S.Ramakrishnaswamy
Chennai

MUSIC, BOOKS, MARGAZHI

Books and music are widely recognised as fundamental components of human life, offering profound benefits. Both serve as powerful forms of expression, communication, and connection that have been integral to cultures worldwide. However, Chennai's festive season, where these two intrinsic elements come together to delight the eyes and ears of aficionados around the same time in the Tamil month of Margazhi. Yes, the world-renowned December Music Festival and the Chennai Book Fair typically occur around this month, with their dates often overlapping. While the greatness of the December music festival lies in its unparalleled scale, cultural significance and unique atmosphere, the amplitude of the annual Chennai Book Fair lies in its scale of event, and its role in promoting reading and connecting authors with readers, and fostering a strong publishing ecosystem.

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Dilip Cherian
Dilli Ka Babu



Lateral entry: Reform on paper, retreat in practice

Forget the slogans. The story isn't about "opening the doors" to experts so much as about how nervous the government got the mandate politics snuffed trouble. Over a year after the UPSC published ads for 45 lateral-entry posts at joint secretary, director and deputy secretary levels, and then immediately pulled them amid political backlash over reservations. We're back in consultation mode. The department of personnel and training (DoPT) says it's talking to ministries about changes, but concrete policy is still on paper.

If lateral entry were truly the sea change it's touted to be, the bureaucracy — one of the most ossified institutions in the country — wouldn't be wading through the same mud again. What's striking is that about 60 domain specialists were brought in earlier, yet only 38/40 remain. That attrition rate speaks louder than anything else.

Lateral entry isn't inherently bad. India's civil services can benefit from outside expertise — economists, technologists, scientists — especially as policy challenges get more complex. But the mechanics matter. Without rigour and transparency, we risk the worst of both worlds: eroding meritocracy while inviting cronyism and political interference.

The reservation backlash wasn't just political theatre. It exposed an endemic problem — the reform was never fully thought through in the

context of India's legal framework and social justice commitments. Merely resurrecting the idea without addressing eligibility, assessment methods, accountability and tenure security won't cut it.

Lateral entry shouldn't be a flavour-of-the-month slogan recycled every election cycle. If it's going to work, it must be institutionalised with clear rules. Certainly, it's not something to be tossed aside at the first sign of trouble.

MISSILE PRECISION, ADMINISTRATIVE CHAOS

The Central Administrative Tribunal's move to scrap the appointment of Jaitheer R. Joshi as director general of BrahMos Aerospace is a telling commentary on how India's labu machinery continues to fumble even when the least effort to. When an institution as strategically critical as BrahMos is told to "restart the selection process", it's a polite jolt of way of saying your governance standards need adult supervision.

BrahMos isn't exactly the neighbourhood innovation lab. It's a flagship Indo-Russian defence collaboration, centre to India's defence capability and technological prestige. You'd expect the appointment of its chief to be the gold standard of transparency and institutional rigour. Instead, what emerges is familiar contested seniority, questionable evaluation

and a lack of convincing justification.

The complaint from DRDO's distinguished scientist S. Nambi Naidu is more than a personal grievance. It underlines our chronic inability to comfort with meritocracy when it clashes with "other considerations." If the senior-most, high-ranked candidate is bypassed, the system must have an unassailable rationale on record. That's not a courtesy; that's governance 101.

However, the real concern is that this isn't an isolated incident. Whether it's police chiefs, PSU leaders, or regulatory heads, too many critical appointments end up litigated because the government treats due process like an optional accessory. Courts and tribunals shouldn't have to repeatedly play the role of moral compass for administrative decision-making.

CADRE EXPANSION IN UP

Uttar Pradesh has just bumped up its IAS sanctioned strength. More posts, more senior positions, more neatly classified reserves. This expansion signals two truths. First, the sheer scale of UP's governance challenge finally has official acknowledgement. A state this large cannot run on a skeletal level, with constantly

freighting babus. But unless the culture around postings, autonomy, and accountability changes, the government could simply be creating a larger administrative orchestra that will still end up playing to political tunes.

Vacancies were never the only headache in Uttar Pradesh. Chronic transfers, shortened tenures, parallel power structures, and political micromanagement have hollowed out administrative authority at every level. You can appoint more district magistrates, more commissioners, more secretaries, but if their average lifespan in a job is measured in months, not years, how exactly is that strengthening governance?

UP doesn't just need more officers; it needs a system that trusts them to do their job. Stagnant tenure, protection from arbitrary interference, clarity of responsibility, and outcome-based accountability are far more valuable than any cadre expansion notification.

Otherwise, this entire exercise risks becoming classic Indian babu theatre: impressive paperwork, impressive numbers, impressive announcements — and a governance reality that refuses to improve.

Love them, hate them ignore them at national peril, is the babu guarantee and Dilip's belief. Share significant babu escapades dilipcherian@hotmail.com.

The Indian EXPRESS

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RAMNATH GOENKA

IN 1932

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES ALL

Don't count faith to kill a college, lot at stake

A MEDICAL COLLEGE in Katra that got the National Medical Commission's green signal to run an MBBS course just four months ago is now asked to shut it down, four days after an inspection conducted in haste. The latest NMC decision unabashedly short-circuited due process — there was no show-cause notice to the college, no room for appeals. The volte-face tells a dismal story of prejudice and intolerance — and the pandering to it — in defiance of the Constitution, which guarantees the right to equality and protects against discrimination. While the NMC justifies its action by pointing to a shortage of tutors, library resources and lecture theatres, it is clear that the real reason lies elsewhere. The Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Institute of Medical Excellence (SMVIDME) had become the staging ground for protests ever since 44 of the first batch of 50 students in its MBBS course turned out to be Muslim. This was the result of a national exam administered fairly and freely. But for a group of nearly 60 pro-RSS and pro-BJP organisations, this wasn't the result they wanted — these groups argue the college was set up with donations to the Vaishno Devi shrine by Hindu pilgrims from across the country. And this should reflect in the faith of the incoming class.

That these groups should ask for the ouster of students of a particular religion from the classroom, and that the statutory regulatory body for medical education and practice in the country should take heed of their perverse demand and discontinue the course entirely, is enormously disturbing. The cost of the NMC's cave-in will be borne by the students, of course, and by the faculty at SMVIDME. But there is a greater price to be paid. Ever since the abrogation of Article 370 in August 2019, the BJP-led government at the Centre has spoken of a "Naya Kashmir", more intimately integrated with the larger Indian story, and less weighed down by its turbulent history. In their speeches, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Home Minister Amit Shah have underlined that promise. The NMC decision poses a question mark against those assurances. It threatens to stoke distrust among the people of Kashmir.

The institution needs to knock on the court's door before more damage is done. The NMC needs to read the Constitution. It makes space for the establishment of minority educational institutions to preserve a language or religion, but for the rest, there can be no headcount, no discrimination and no exclusions. In the classroom. To scatter these students in other colleges is a violation of their rights — you cannot bequeath if you are kept separate. What is happening in the Katra college goes against the constitutional letter and spirit, it's a stain not only on the idea of "Naya Kashmir" but also on that of the nation. The sooner it is reversed, the better.

Madhav Gadgil, the people's ecologist

IN HIS memoir, *A Walk Up The Hill*, Madhav Gadgil recounts a conversation with his father, the economist D R Gadgil, who had just returned from a deliberation on the Koyana Hydroelectric Project. "Baba was normally a cheerful person. But when we had dinner together after the meeting on Koyana, he was distraught. He said, I do believe that we need electricity to drive industrial progress, but surely, we should not be paying environmental and social costs." This was 1956. To the planners of a young nation, the often-contradictory pulls of ecology and economic development were not always apparent. His father's remarks left a deep impression on 14-year-old Madhav Gadgil, who died on Thursday, built a career that stands as a testament to his commitment to balancing economic well-being with the protection of forests, wildlife, and aquifers. He was a rare scholar whose work is seen as synonymous with the discipline.

Born in 1942 into a family steeped in public service, he was deeply influenced by the reformist traditions of Maharashtra. His parents counted B R Ambedkar and Irawati Karve as their friends and they inspired young Madhav to be argumentative. As a research scholar in the US led to lively conversations with the greats of biological sciences, such as EO Wilson. Gadgil, however, gave up on an academic career in the US to join the Indian Institute of Science, then headed by one of the country's finest institution-builders, Satish Dhawan. The Centre for Ecological Sciences, which he founded at the IISc, continues to set benchmarks in environmental studies.

Gadgil was a public intellectual in the most expansive sense of the term. One of his most influential contributions was the idea that the country's forests are not "pristine wildernesses" but cultural landscapes, shaped over millennia by human management. He argued that ecological degradation disproportionately harms the poor. The report of an environment ministry committee he headed on the Western Ghats made a powerful case for demarcating parts of the ecologically fragile area that needed to be protected against unregulated mining and tourism. He advocated greater participation of local bodies in the management of these areas. The report was vehemently opposed and remains mostly on paper, even after calamities have underscored its prescience. At a time when ecological challenges are raising questions about India's developmental trajectory, Gadgil's scholarship is a reminder that inconvenient voices need to be heard and heeded.

In 2026, the case for more friction

THERE IS much that parents and techbros disagree on. The former are constantly trying to keep their kids gadget-free, the latter are working hard to keep them hooked. For parents, well-rounded growth matters, while for techbros, efficiency is the goal. But the thing they disagree on the most, perhaps, is the value of effort. To grow, one must step out of one's comfort zone, say parents. The boys in Silicon Valley dream of a world where every "inconvenience" has been ironed out by technology. Doorstep delivery for food, groceries and chat supplies, a swipe to find a romantic partner, thinking outsourced to "intelligent" chat windows.

As 2026 kicks off, the scales seem to be tipping in favour of Team Effort, going by the trending of the concept of "friction-maxxing". The idea is to bring back discomfort that leads to growth. In stepping out, sitting in traffic and waiting for a waiter, instead of ordering in, one can learn patience and the ability to navigate environments one has no control over. In turning to the real world for connection, one makes room for serendipity and develops the fortitude to withstand rejection.

Reintroducing friction in a world bent on seamless efficiency may seem like a radical idea. But it is also an invitation: Life, with all its adventures, in all its unpredictability and chaos, is waiting.

THE SUPREME COURT's refusal to grant bail to Umar Khalid and Sharjeel Imam, while accepting the bail pleas of five other accused in the same case, is not merely a judicial order affecting two individuals. It marks a deeply troubling moment for constitutional democracy in India. While the ruling party, its army of trolls, and a largely captive media ecosystem celebrate this unjust and far-reaching order, the political silence of much of the mainstream opposition — with the exception of the Left parties — remains conspicuous and must be questioned.

The order reinforces a pattern in which extraordinary laws, most notably the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA), are normalised as instruments for the prolonged incarceration of dissidents, rather than being used for the proclaimed goal of protecting "national security". The bench of Justices Arvind Kumar and N V Anand accepted the prosecution's assertion of prima facie involvement and held that Khalid and Imam were "on a qualitatively different footing" from the other accused.

Ironically, the only obvious difference is that neither of them was present in Delhi during the period of the violence. Imam was already in judicial custody, having been arrested in January — nearly a month before the Delhi violence — on the charge of making an inflammatory speech. Khalid was elsewhere. These facts, which should have strengthened the case for their non-involvement in any alleged conspiracy, were turned on their head, and absence from the site of violence was perversely interpreted as evidence of orchestration.

In its order, the court has reversed the logic of earlier SC judgments that took a more balanced view on granting bail

under the UAPA. The order adds new and dangerous dimensions to the already draconian nature of the law. Under this interpretation, one need not be involved in any act of violence, nor directly provoke violence, to be liable under the UAPA. Participation in a road blockade, disruption of public spaces, or actions deemed to affect "economic stability" can now be treated as terrorism.

Under such an expansive reading, workers going on strike, Adivasi blocking roads to protest mining in their lands, or slum dwellers resisting the illegal demolition of their homes could all potentially be arrested under the UAPA and designated as terrorists. What, then, remains of the "golden triangle" of the Constitution — Article 14 (right to equality), Article 19 (freedom of expression), and Article 21 (right to life and liberty)? This interpretation opens the door for an authoritarian government to equate dissent with sedition and systematically curtail opposition to its policies through fear and incarceration.

At the heart of the injustice lies another stark reality: The prima facie evidence and the actual chronology of events point in an entirely different direction. The backdrop to the violence was the widespread opposition to the amended Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). This opposition was, by and large, peaceful, secular, and unprecedented in its spread across caste, community, and regional lines. The demonisation of this protest became one of the main planks of the BJP's campaign in the Delhi Assembly elections held in the first week of February 2020.

Who can forget the provocative words of the Home Minister, urging voters to "press the button so hard



BRINDA KARAT

The absence of a clear stand in cases like that of Umar Khalid and Sharjeel Imam by secular and democratic opposition parties weakens the struggle for the defence of democracy and the Constitution

that the current will be felt in Shaheen Bagh? The BJP lost the election. This defeat only strengthened the imperative, from the ruling party's perspective, to break, sabotage, and neutralise the anti-CAA movement. A comparison of speeches made during that period by Khalid, Imam, and other activists on the one hand, and by BJP leaders such as Anurag Thakur, Parvesh Verma, and Kapil Mishra on the other, clearly reveals whose words incited hatred and violence.

This writer filed complaints with the police and petitioned the courts with video evidence against these BJP leaders. Not a single FIR was registered. Justice S Muralidhar, responding to another petition and after viewing the videos in open court, criticised the Delhi Police for their failure to register FIRs in cases of hate speech. He was transferred soon after.

The violence began on February 23, following Mishra's provocative speech. Yet, there was hardly any preventive action. On the contrary, video evidence emerged of sections of the police conniving with rioters. On February 25, the Delhi Minorities Commission wrote an anguished letter to the Lieutenant Governor, urging the immediate imposition of curfew. On the same day, then Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal and Police Commissioner Anurag Thakur flagged the grave shortage of security forces to the Home Ministry, which was the authority over law and order in the national capital.

Who was responsible for the low deployment of police forces? Why was the Army not deployed in time? Why was curfew imposed late, and restricted to only a few areas? According to official figures, 41 of the 53 people killed were Mus-

lims, and the overwhelming majority of those whose homes, shops, and places of worship were destroyed were also Muslims. This has disturbing parallels with earlier episodes of communal violence, where delayed or selective state action enabled mobs to operate with impunity.

Yet, we are asked to believe that this violence was planned and executed by a group of 18 people, most of them young students. There is another dimension that cannot be ignored: The demonisation of Muslim activists who opposed the CAA on constitutional grounds. Of the 18 charged under UAPA, 16 are Muslims, including three women. Of the approximately 751 cases filed at the time, in case after case, lower courts have slammed the Delhi Police for their shoddy investigation and dubious witnesses.

It is imperative for opposition parties — particularly Congress — to speak out clearly and consistently on these issues. Silence transforms injustice, more so when it has a communal colour, into routine governance. When there is hesitation to challenge unjust court orders, to oppose political persecution carried out through laws like the UAPA, whether in the Delhi violence cases, the Bhima Koregaon prosecutions or the *NewsClick* case, the ruling regime faces no real political cost for its repression. In such a political climate, even the custodial death of a Stan Swamy — caused by the sheer cruelty of denying bail and basic facilities despite his serious health conditions — becomes normalised.

The absence of a clear stand in cases like that of Umar Khalid and Sharjeel Imam by secular and democratic opposition parties weakens the struggle for the defence of democracy and the Constitution.

The writer is a senior CPI(M) leader

His environmentalism put community at the centre



HARINI NAGENDRA

MADHAV GADGIL, India's foremost ecologist, passed away on January 7. He left behind a legacy of work that ranged from rigorous scientific research to engagement with conservation policy. He worked with grassroots movements across diverse ecological systems in India — from mining-affected communities to displaced grazers, and from forest protection communities to coastal fishermen's collectives.

To the Indian public at large, Gadgil is perhaps best known for chairing the highly-discussed Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel, colloquially known as the Gadgil commission, whose 2011 report delineated large sections of the Western Ghats as an ecologically sensitive zone. The report, which attracted equal volumes of praise and controversy, was never implemented, but much of what Gadgil warned of has come to pass — the unchecked economic exploitation of hillsides, forests, wetlands and rivers has had devastating impacts on the ecology and communities that live in these beautiful mountains. Well before this, he was that unusual scientist who sought to use his research to bring about real-life change.

Gadgil was born in Pune in 1942 to the economist Dhananjiya Gadgil and spent much of his childhood amidst nature, whether on his grandfather's farm in Nagpur or climbing the hills of Sinhagad. At an early age, he was deeply inspired by the anthropologist Irawati Karve and the ornithologist Salim Ali, by whom he was informally mentored.

He was a keen sportsman and naturalist who had, as he often liked to declare, a "lifelong love affair" with the Western Ghats. But he was equally at home in all parts of the country. In 1971, after completing his PhD with EO Wilson at Harvard (one of the great naturalists of all time), Gadgil — with his wife, the leading climate scientist Sulochana Gadgil — returned to India, joining the Indian Institute of Science in Bengaluru in 1973. There, they embarked on an illustrious career in science, raising their children Siddhartha and Gauti in the Institute's green wooded campus. In 1983, Gadgil founded the Centre for Ecological Sciences, one of In-

dia's leading centres for ecology.

At the Institute, Gadgil launched new work on issues as varied as sacred groves in Maharashtra and Karnataka, the dry deciduous forests in Karnataka and Kerala, and the sustainable harvest of bamboo by basket weavers. This work was fundamental in the creation of the Nilgiri Biosphere in 1986 and in launching India's first wild elephant census. With the renowned anthropologist K C Malhotra, he began a long collaboration that examined the historical shifts in resource use of the pastoral communities of the Western Ghats, and with the well-known historian and writer Ramachandra Guha, he wrote two now-classic books on India's ecological history that have been used in hundreds of classrooms across the world — *This Fissured Land*, and *Ecology and Equity: The Use and Abuse of Nature in Contemporary India*. Gadgil developed guidelines for People's Biodiversity Registers and created the Western Ghats Biodiversity Network (at which point I joined him by my PhD), bringing together college teachers to document the rich biodiversity of the Western Ghats.

He was a keen mentor of 10 PhD students, and inspired scores of young ecologists and naturalists across the country. His work was recognised by numerous Indian and international awards, including the Padma Shri, the Padma Bhushan, the Volvo Environment Prize, the Tyler Prize for Environmental Achievement, and, very recently, the UN Champions of the Earth award in 2024. Gadgil's life and experiences, his contribution to scientific research, policy and practice are far too rich and varied to list in one short summary. Perhaps the best way to understand his life and works is to read his autobiography, *A Walk up the Hill: Living with People and Nature*.

In an especially evocative passage, Gadgil wrote, "the purpose of scholarship is not merely to understand, but to deploy that understanding towards action". His message imbues us with hope in these difficult times.

The writer is director, School of Climate Change and Sustainability, Azim Premji University

In Somnath, a new tryst with the civilisational past



ADVAITA KALA

WHEN PRIME Minister Narendra Modi chooses to spend two nights in Somnath, it sends a message. Indian political culture places great emphasis on the leader going; however, how long a leader stays is of even greater significance. A fly-in-and-out visit signals political courtesy, not commitment. A pause, however, signals intention.

PM Modi's two-night stay in Somnath comes after his comments on the long arc of civilisational memory and resilience. This visit is a re-embedding of the Indian state in a geography marked by rupture and continuity. Destroyed, rebuilt, desecrated and rebuilt every time — if there was ever a civilisational stress test, Somnath has endured it and passed. For decades after Independence, Somnath was treated with embarrassment. Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first PM, made his disapproval of its reconstruction evident. This was the first symptom of the Indian state's selective amnesia. Trauma was to be recognised only if it could be universalised; otherwise, it was dismissed as rooted in "backward" thought. If wounds demanded reparation, they were ignored and, more importantly, denied.

Modi plays politics of emphasis differently. He does not erase wounds; he acknowledges them. In doing so, he prevents them from festering. By placing Somnath and Ghumti in the same narrative bread, Modi presents a subtler argument: India does not need to avenge its past. It needs to understand it without apology.

Two nights in Somnath signal that this is not a speech-stop but a contemplative pause. In Indic tradition, staying is sacred. Kings did not merely visit temples; they resided, listened and absorbed, because even a king was meant to learn and imbibe.

At a time when India is redefining its identity as a civilisational state, symbols are loaded with greater meaning. The Islamic world anchors its legitimacy in sacred geography. The West mythologises the Enlightenment. China foregrounds its civilisational identity. India alone attempted to compress itself into constitutionalism, as though a civilisation of millennia could be reduced so easily. This is more ironic given India's civilisational inheritance was acknowledged by the Constitution's framers.

It is therefore important to emphasise that Modi's stay is not one that carries a message of division or supremacy, but one of presence and acknowledgement. It is a statement that clarifies: We are no longer in denial of what we have lived through.

The usual naysayers will inevitably give this visit a negative spin. Words like "majoritarian signalling" will be used. However, India's civilisational story does not belong to only one community. More importantly, a nation that knows its civilisational spine has no use for facile, performative secularism.

By invoking Ghazni in the context of resilience, and Somnath without insecurity, Modi is repositioning Indian memory away from grievance. By staying there, he is reminding the political class that power, too, must sometimes bow to time. Because civilisations do not shout. They endure.

Kala is a writer, including of the novel, *Almost Single*

40 YEARS AGO

January 9, 1986



Reagan acts against Libya

US PRESIDENT Ronald Reagan has announced a ban on all direct import and export trade with Libya except for humanitarian purposes. He also ordered all 1,500 American nationals still in Libya holding lucrative jobs to return to the US or face penalties. Reagan urged US allies to isolate Muammar Gaddafi.

Europe may resist Reagan

AMERICA'S EUROPEAN allies, with billions of dollars at stake in Libya, looked set to resist President Ronald Reagan's call for economic

sanctions against Libya. The US call evoked strong opposition from Arab countries, Iran, the Soviet Union and China. Several developing countries have also condemned the US move and the Islamic Conference has expressed solidarity and said the threat against Libya was a threat to "all Islamic states".

Barnala on terrorism

PUNJAB CHIEF Minister Surjit Singh Barnala alleged that there appeared to be a "link" between the forthcoming transfer of Chandigarh to Punjab and the recent spurt of violence in the state. The CM said that forces inimical to Punjab had always tried to divert

national attention from the real issues by unleashing a rash of violence.

Gamblers' den raided

In a massive raid at Maurya Sheraton Hotel near Dhaula Kuan, New Delhi district police arrested 13 gamblers and seized from them more than Rs 85,000. Some employees of Maurya Hotel are also being questioned. The raid came following reports that hotel rooms are being used as gambling dens. The police said there were also reports that the hotel was being used as a meeting point by drug smugglers. Eight grams of white heroin was seized from one man.

The chaos that Donald Trump is causing in the world makes the case for continental solidarity.
— The Guardian



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DIS/AGREE
THE BEST OF BOTH SIDES

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

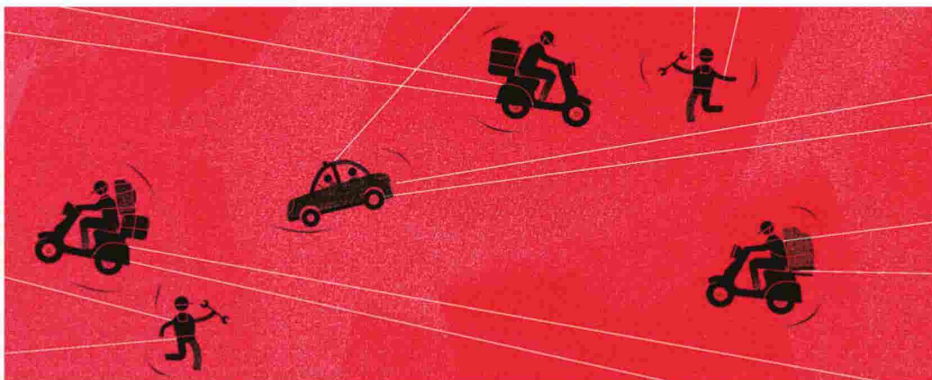


ILLUSTRATION: CR SAKSHI

MGNREGA overhaul plugs gaps, keeps up with changing times



Soumya Kanti Ghosh

THE SWEEPING overhaul of the erstwhile MGNREGA, to align with the Viksit Bharat 2047 vision through VB-GRAM G, has unleashed a wave of criticism. Emotive outbursts in a charged atmosphere, devoid of supportive data, require us to analyse the provisions of the new law factually and comparatively.

First, the new law attempts to attain a goal of guaranteeing 125 days of employment per rural household. This should incrementally enhance the workdays allocated to willing households in future as against the 100 days framework. The fact that despite two decades of existence, the average number of households that completed the desired 100 days of work remained abysmally low at around 75-80 per cent and even the average number days of employment provided per household has remained sticky (50.4 days during FY21-25 as against 45.9 during FY07-13) necessitates a shift. During FY25, 5.78 crore households worked under MGNREGA, aligning towards the pre-Covid level of an average of 5.0 crore working each fiscal.

Second, concerns over the increased fiscal costs to states on account of the conversion of the scheme from a central sector scheme (90:10 ratio) to a centrally sponsored scheme with a generic 60:40 ratio is not supported by hard data. During the last 19-years (FY07-FY25), the Union government has spent Rs 9.95 lakh crore under MGNREGA, around 80 per cent of the funds (Rs 7.8 lakh crore) released during FY15-FY25 period alone. The budget allocation for 2025-26 stands at Rs 86,000 crore (Rs 11,300 crore during FY 2006-07), the highest ever. In fact, the cumulative final allocation from 2014-15 till 2024-25 has been higher by Rs 1.6 lakh crore compared to budget estimates, as against the trend before 2014-15 when the revised amount was mostly lower than budgeted (Rs 10,000 crore lower). The estimated cost share could go up to around Rs 95,692 crore in FY27. Separately, states' borrowing is fixed at 3 per cent of GDP, and there is no possibility of higher borrowing by states for whatever reasons as has been argued.

Third, MGNREGA fared poorly on the cardinal principle of adequate compensation for labour-intensive works, with wages unable to catch up. The average wage per person per day has increased from an average of Rs 88 during FY07-FY12 to currently around Rs 267. However, in real terms, the average wage per person has increased by 10 per cent in FY25 over FY08-FY12 on the back of stable and low inflation. A centrally sponsored scheme is expected to usher in better compensation for workers. Also, consistently low inflation will ensure that, in real terms, wage growth will be adequate to boost consumption. Further, the law has explicitly removed the disemployment provisions under the old MGNREGA. States have to ensure that legitimate workers are adequately informed well in advance of the work to be undertaken so that the question of disemployment provision does not even arise at first instance.

Fourth, the current approach of the MGNREGA has been towards income

generation for rural areas through engaging in works that may have little economic relevance. This faulty approach, dotted with short-termism, has often resulted in works that may not be aligned with the core idea of productive asset creation. No wonder there was an average gap of 13.3 per cent in work demanded and work provided by the states during FY21-25.

Since inception, around 9.6 crore rural assets have been created, of which a staggering 84 per cent were created during the last decade (FY15-25). The CSS structure, with works focused across four interwoven broader areas of water security, rural infrastructure, livelihood infrastructure and climate resilience — wherein assets are aggregated and geo-tagged into the Viksit Bharat National Rural Infrastructure Stack and spatially integrated with national systems such as PM Gati Shakti — could ensure the harnessing of optimal benefits. An example could be planning grain produce storage godowns near a cluster of roads built under PM Gram Sadak Yojana that loops into the highway network, ensuring the availability of larger markets beyond small periphery.

Fifth, the shift to normative funding as opposed to an archaic demand-driven approach ensures that allocation will be state-specific, keeping in mind local parameters and uniquely optimal requirements amidst competing needs. This should reduce the fluctuation in grants to states across years, identifying areas of utmost importance and sharing best practices across states.

have aimed to weave a model similar to how the FC tax devolution is shared by allocating weightage to equity (say, the number of gram panchayats) and efficiency (share of women participating). The simulation results indicate that most of the states only stand to gain through the central assistance under such normative allocation.

Sixth, the 73rd Constitutional Amendment brought in the concept of rural local self-governance through the Panchayati Raj institutions advocating empowerment of grassroots democracy and decentralising power. The changes proposed nudge gram panchayats to be a spirited partner in Viksit Bharat plans, identifying opportunities amidst ground realities and pitching projects that anchor the quest for sustainable and equitable prosperity coupled with trends like newer skillsets, digital awareness and physical connectivity that are rewriting the game playbook.

Seventh, with rural poverty declining significantly in the last decade, we estimate that the share of MGNREGA as an annual expenditure at the overall poverty line across states is on average minimal at around 10 per cent, indicating that the rural population's income sources have diversified manifold and thus the discussion of MGNREGA and rural poverty does not serve any much purpose other than intellectual hara-kiri.

VB-GRAM G is a big step forward towards ensuring a well-intentioned scheme remains relevant in changing times, bringing accountability, responsibility, transparency, pooling of resources and technological integration that simultaneously benefits the bottom of the pyramid and also the local economy. It can be the lynchpin of a socio-economic renaissance. Let us not kill this bold idea whose time has just come.

The writer is member, 16th FC, member, PMEGAC, and group chief economic advisor, State Bank of India. Views are personal

Recent strike by gig workers raises questions about their rights and the responsibility of companies

Exploitation is built into gig work



Himanshu

ON DECEMBER 31, gig and platform workers declared a strike with a call to log off from their delivery apps in protest against exploitative working conditions, inhuman treatment and lack of social security. While the protest evoked muted response with delivery platforms declaring record deliveries, the issues raised remain relevant. But they are not new. Governments all over the world are struggling to define the nature of work and finding it difficult to regulate the conditions of work and the nature of relationship between workers and large corporations.

At the heart of the matter is the nature of the contract with the app-based aggregators, who refuse to be classified as employers even though they employ the services of these workers for delivery of their goods and services. It is this fundamental refusal to accept the employer-employee relationship that makes it difficult to regulate them using the existing labour laws and social protection measures. Since for all practical purposes the workers are employed by the corporations, the nature of the contract is irrelevant irrespective of the nature of work performed. Unfortunately, in almost all cases, they are treated as self-employed without any explicit contract. Or when there is a contract in technical language, the workers are unable to understand the legalities of such a contract.

It is this opacity of the relationship with the corporations that allows them to exploit the workers without any consequences. It also implies a reward-and-punishment system that puts the workers at the mercy of the corporations. The incentive structure is built around a system of self-exploitation, and any deviation is punished through an algorithm that no one understands. There is no grievance redressal mechanism, with the system designed to keep the workers subservient and docile. Forget about any provision of social security, even basic wage compensation is determined by an algorithm that has zero tolerance even for genuine mistakes.

For corporations, these workers are outside the purview of any labour laws. To

make matters worse, they are sought to be glorified as partners even though the partners have no idea of the nature of the corporation. Its profits or even its basic functioning. But it is not just the corporations — even government regulations are silent on treating them as workers. Take the case of the recently implemented labour codes, which were enacted in 2020. Among the four labour codes, the most fundamental is the code on wages. While it is applicable everywhere, it excludes gig workers. They are included only in the code on social security, but again without any corresponding rights. The only obligation for the corporation is to contribute to the social security fund with no corresponding commitment on workers' rights. These workers are neither governed by any limit on the number of hours worked nor are they eligible for any leave or benefits in case of sickness or accidents.

In a country with a significant population living in precarious conditions and with a huge unemployment problem, gig work is unlikely to disappear. These are the new casual workers disguised as self-employed and partners, but their condition is as bad as, if not worse than, that of casual manual labourers. While there is no social security, the uncertainty in case of sickness or accidents is also structured in a way where they bear the entire risk.

The response to the strike showed that the urban middle class, which is the biggest beneficiary of their services, is unlikely to come out in support. It is also not likely that the corporations dependent on these services are going to respond to the workers' demand. It is here that the role of the government becomes important. A first step in this direction would be to recognise them as workers and corporations as employers. It is not entirely unheard of, and many countries in the Global North have moved towards such status. But even many in the Global South, including Mexico and Brazil, have done so. There have been similar attempts here in the case of Rajasthan, which enacted a law, and Karnataka, which has proposed such a law. But none has moved beyond obligating the corporations to contribute a part of their profits for social security.

With gig workers emerging as the largest group of workers with the most precarious and vulnerable occupational structure, any regulation must begin by recognising them as employees with all the rights available to them.

The writer is associate professor, JNU

There are no easy villains or answers



Srinath Sridharan

ON DECEMBER 31, while India counted down to a new year with discounted meals and 10-minute deliveries, a section of gig workers prepared for a strike that was the cumulative result of long shifts, uncertain pay, algorithmic pressure and physical risk without institutional protection. Platforms' response followed a familiar playbook. Incentives were temporarily raised to ensure service continuity. APR push downplayed the discontent. The striking workers were described as a small minority of "miscreants". Markets, after all, do not like disruption, especially when valuations depend on the promise of seamless convenience. Yet, this framing missed the larger point about the structural trends under which India's fast-growing labour segment now works.

India has seen this conflict before in mills, mines and manufacturing floors, where efficiency was defended until dignity demanded legal recognition. What is different now is scale and visibility, which platforms recast as inconvenience and mischievous, even as consumers confront the truth that their expectation of instant gratification is inseparable from labour precarity. India's gig economy occupies an unresolved legal space. Workers are acknowledged yet inadequately protected. Social security is promised but rarely enforced. The law recognises their presence while withholding certainty of rights. This ambiguity has benefited platforms and transferred risk almost entirely onto labour.

Gig work is a practical response to an economy that struggles to generate enough formal employment and livelihood means. Workers opted for gig work not because it was ideal but because it was available, organised and immediate at a time when employment remains a constant worry. Gig employment is projected to grow from roughly 77 million workers today to over 23 million by 2030. That makes it one of India's largest job-creation engines over the next decade. And yet policy response remains slow, fragmented and reactive.

Defenders of the platform model argue that gig work reflects market-driven supply and demand. That workers choose flexibility. That platforms are not doing society a

favour but merely enabling economic participation. This is all partially true.

But it is also incomplete. Market pricing does not absorb moral responsibility. Nor does flexibility justify the transfer of all downside risk to the worker while upside value accrues elsewhere, including to key investors, without the entities making substantial profits. There is an uncomfortable historical parallel here. In the early phases of colonisation, economic extraction preceded any serious conversation about rights. Labour was mobilised efficiently long before freedom, dignity or social structures entered the discussion. Rights, as history shows, rarely arrive at the inception of economic systems. They emerge later, after the imbalance becomes too visible to ignore. Much of the public discourse conveniently forgets another contradiction. Most gig platforms are still not meaningfully profitable, despite payouts that workers argue are insufficient. Customers, meanwhile, are acutely price sensitive. Many who express outrage on social media are rarely willing to pay more for the services they praise.

Platform users, as much as other investors, participate selectively in this "moral arithmetic". Platform valuations today trade at multiples that assume future dominance, efficiency and pricing power. Yet when labour asks for predictability or protection, the language suddenly shifts to market discipline and thin margins. This is where the debate often turns shrill and unproductive. There are no easy villains, or simple solutions. Gig platforms do not create India's informal labour tradition. They have industrialised it, digitised it and scaled it faster than our regulatory reflexes have adapted.

Convenience without conscience is only efficiency borrowing from the powerless. The government's role cannot be to arbitrage between capital and labour indefinitely. It must balance growth with fairness in labour pricing. That means moving beyond symbolic recognition towards enforceable standards. Not rigid employment reclassification but the minimum protections of a safety net, grievance redressal and algorithmic transparency.

The deeper discomfort this episode exposes is cultural. We want market efficiency without social cost. We want speed without responsibility. We want innovation without friction. That bargain never holds for long. Every economic system eventually confronts its moral accounting. The gig economy is no exception. Labour may be flexible. Dignity should not be.

Sridharan is a corporate advisor and author of Family and Dhanda



Mahesh Kushwaha

LONG AFTER media and researchers reported on the issue, Nepal's anti-corruption body finally filed a corruption case in the Special Court against dozens of high-profile politicians and bureaucrats over irregularities in the construction of Pokhara International Airport (PIA), funded by a Chinese loan of \$215.96 million. The chargesheet has alleged cost inflation through high-level political collusion that led to a total loss of \$74.34 million and a reportedly substandard airport that has struggled to attract a single international passenger flight to date.

Although the airport was sanctioned well before Nepal even signed the Memorandum of Understanding on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China had taken over

Is China's grip on Nepal loosening?

erally claimed that PIA was a flagship project under the BRI, despite the Nepal government's constant rejection and Nepalese leaders' protests. This "strategic blunder", manifested in China's overall approach to engaging Nepal, has led to a geopolitical reset in Nepal's political climate after the Gen-Z uprising in September.

Ever since India-Nepal relations soured in 2015, leaving a vacuum, China engaged Nepal more aggressively, which was a departure from its traditional "low-profile" diplomacy and in line with the broader Wolf Warrior diplomacy. During this time, China's role and involvement in Nepal's infrastructure landscape increased significantly, with Chinese companies and contractors securing most large projects in hydropower, roads and aviation and telecommunication.

But the Gen-Z movement was a major setback for Chinese engagement in Nepal, at least in the form it had taken over

the years. It dislodged the pro-Belting communists, led by K P Oli, from power and set the stage for newer, alternative forces. Not only did the movement disrupt the patronage network China had cultivated over the years, it has also severely reduced the chances of Oli's party regaining the same position and power in the immediate political equation of Nepal. This assessment was evident in China's measured congratulatory message for PM Sushila Karki, while India and the Western countries extended her a warm welcome.

In the aftermath of the Gen-Z protests, China's attitude has shifted markedly from actively engaging Nepal to a cautious wait-and-watch approach. That said, its investment in and cultivation of Nepalese elites over the years leaves enough room for China to bounce back in case India or the West miscalculate or overestimate their strategic leverage.

If the government continues its crackdown on several other corruption scandals, China will likely suffer more damage, either due to its direct association or through the dismantling of the political networks that facilitated Beijing's engagement. The current political climate offers India an opportunity to reset its ties with Nepal and regain the trust and influence it had lost over the years. By providing neutral support for Nepal's democratic safe landing and extending technical and financial assistance for its development, India can reposition itself as a reliable and culturally connected partner. The most sustainable way to engage it should be through political, technical, and economic assistance for democratic consolidation, good governance, and inclusive development.

The writer is non-resident fellow at the Centre for Social Innovation and Foreign Policy (CESIF), Nepal

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Turkman Gate

THE FIRST detailed report on the Turkman Gate demolitions ("Turkman Gate: Mughal gateway to site of a dark chapter during the Emergency, IE, January 8) during the Emergency was published in the front page of The Indian Express on April 19, 1977. It was written by me, then a special correspondent of the paper, based on interviews of demolition victims. It led to a defamation case by one of the demolitions' chief organisers against me and The Indian Express. The judicial process continued for 17 years.

Javid Lali, New Delhi

GDP numbers

ONE TENDS to endorse the editorial's view that the economy's

slower nominal growth over time could play spoilsport for the "optimistic" projection of a 7.4 per cent growth rate in 2025-26 ("Economy grows faster, but there are concerns", IE, January 8). Inhibiting external factors may defy these estimates.

S K Gupta, via email

GDP AND employment estimates remain indispensable. The lacuna lies in over-reliance on infrequent surveys and red-herring indicators ("Economy grows faster, but there are concerns", IE, January 8). GDP estimates draw heavily from the corporate sector, thereby under-representing micro and informal enterprises. Employment data suffer from similar blind spots

R Narayanan, Navi Mumbai

POLITICS

Inside Assam govt's contentious ST status bid for six communities

Sukrita Baruah
Guwahati, January 8

A REPRESENTATIVE group of Assam's Scheduled Tribe (ST) communities Tuesday "rejected" the state government's recommendation for the grant of ST status to six communities that have long agitated for the same.

As Assam moves towards elections this year, this issue has emerged as one of the most heated political questions over the past few months. Existing ST communities have expressed anxiety about a potential weakening of their political rights. The six communities — which account for a just under a third of the state's population — have turned up the heat on the government.

What's Assam's current framework for ST reservation?

The tribes currently recognised in Assam are divided into two categories: ST (Plains) with 10% reservation and ST (Hills) with a 5% reservation for state government recruitment and educational institutions. ST (Hills) refers to tribes from the autonomous hill districts of Karbi Anglong, West Karbi Anglong and Dima Hasao. Two of Assam's 14 Lok Sabha constituencies and 19 of its 126 Assembly constituencies are reserved for ST candidates. According to the 2011 census, these communities had a total population of around 38.8 lakh, which is 12.4% of the state's total population. The major tribes are Bodo (35% of the state's ST population), Mishing (17.52%), Karbi (11.1%), Rabha (7.6%), Sonowal Kachari (6.5%), Lalung (5.2%), Goro (4.2%) and Dimas (3.3%).



Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma. ANI

AHEAD OF POLLS

● The ST status bid has become a particularly fraught issue ahead of elections in Assam.

● The six communities for which the state has recommended the tag make up around a third of the state's population.

● Existing ST communities have expressed anxiety about a potential weakening of their political rights.

What is the Assam government's stand?

The Assam government constituted a Group of Ministers (GoM) to frame recommendations on this issue. Its report, tabled in the Assembly in November, found "full justification" for the inclusion of the communities in the list and recommended the creation of a complex "three-tier classification" of tribes.

Essentially, in addition to the Plains and Hills categories, it recommended the creation of an ST (Valley) category for the larger communities: Ahoms, Chutias, Tea Tribes and Adivasis, and Koch Rabongshis (excluding those residing in the undivided Goolgaria region). The ST (Valley) category will have separate quotas with distinct rosters and vacancy registers for state government recruitment and educational institutions, and that "existing ST(P) and ST (H) quotas will remain fully protected". It said "a proportionate share can be deduced" from the 27% OBC reservation and be made available to this category.

It recommended that the smaller Moran and Motok communities and Koch Rabongshis in undivided Goolgaria — subject to an NOC from the Bodoland Territorial Council for parts of undivided Goolgaria under the BTC — be included in the ST (Plains) list. However, it recommended that in the case of central government reservations that all these communities compete under the common ST pool as there is a single national ST list.

The GoM has stated that it has tried to walk the tightrope between accommodating the demand of the six communities and protecting the political rights and socio-economic and educational interests of existing ST communities.

Why have existing ST groups rejected this proposal?

The Coordinating Committee of Tribal Organisations of Assam has rejected the GoM recommendation. A COTOA consultative group said the six communities cannot be "re-classified" as ST for "political expediencies" once the National Commission for Backward Classes already identified them as OBC and after they were not considered for ST status historically. It said the demand is "only to ensure their political reservation especially at the level of the Panchayats, Autonomous Councils, Autonomous District Council and State Legislative Assembly as there are no seats reserved for the OBCs in the State Assembly".

The COTOA refers to these communities as "advanced and populous". It also says that the communities, especially the Tai Ahoms who "ruled Assam for six hundred years", do not fulfil the criteria for recognition as ST.

ENVIRONMENT

Despite patchy record, US climate exit will still pinch



AMITABH SINHA

THE US Thursday said it was pulling out of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and more than 60 other international treaties and organisations that "no longer serve American interests". On the long list are several climate-related entities, including the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), International Solar Alliance (ISA), and International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA).

Last year, immediately after Donald Trump took charge as President for his second term, the US had withdrawn from the 2015 Paris Agreement. That decision will become effective on January 20, after the one-year notice lapses. Over this past year, the Trump administration has also scaled down funding and staffing of its national agencies engaged in climate research.

Thursday's decision marks its complete disengagement with the international climate architecture, and puts a serious question mark over the effectiveness of the existing multilateral process to deal with climate change.

Flip-flop on climate change

American discomfort with the international climate regime is not new. The US had played an important role in the finalisation of the UNFCCC, which acknowledged the problem of climate change and laid down the basic rules and principles for a global response. But it never became a member of the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, an instrument under the UNFCCC that assigned specific emission reduction targets to different countries.

In fact, the US led the efforts to put in place an alternative to the Kyoto Protocol, efforts that eventually culminated in the 2015 Paris Agreement. But its record in fulfil-



President Donald Trump at the 80th session of the UN General Assembly in September 2025. THE NEW YORK TIMES/FILE

filling its responsibilities under the Paris Agreement has been extremely poor.

It has done precious little in terms of emissions reductions, or in providing finance or technology, all of which are its mandatory obligations under the UNFCCC and the Paris Agreement.

However, the US, all this while, never denied the problem of climate change. It remained fully engaged and continued to exert a big influence on the climate discourse. It invested heavily in scientific research on climate and in development of clean technologies. It incentivised green investments, at home and abroad. While the pace of transformation was slow, and not commensurate with what was expected of it, the US did work to minimise the impacts of climate change.

But Trump is a proud climate denier, and has repeatedly mocked the global efforts being made on clean energy transition. Under his Presidency, the US has acted overtly to undermine the progress made so far. The budget cuts on climate re-

Impact on India

For India, the US decision could result in lower pressure to decarbonise fast.

But India's plans to attract investments in clean technologies could also be affected.

search, for example, can have long-term implications, not just for the US but for the world as a whole, since many of the American agencies are equipped with the best resources and networks for data-collection and monitoring.

The fallout

The US move to sign out of the UNFCCC and other organisations was not surprising, even if not entirely expected. The withdrawal from the Paris Agreement and the scaling down of funding on climate research had already done most of the damage. The world is sure to miss its 2030 emission reduction targets, and the US, even before Trump, wasn't on a pathway to make any meaningful contribution to fill the gap.

In the short-term, therefore, the impact of the US decisions on global climate might only be marginal. The fallout over the longer term will depend on the stance Trump's successors in the White House take.

But by disassociating completely from the climate regime, the US might be jeop-

ardising its own long-term interests, ceding the leadership in this area to its main rival China. Most countries are already committed to renewable energy pathways. Renewable sources like solar or wind promise not just energy access but also energy security. They have also become significantly cheaper. For large parts of the world, renewable energy has begun to make economic as well as strategic sense.

The efforts of the Trump administration to go against the tide, by pumping in more oil in the energy market through its adventures in Venezuela or other measures, might slow down the pace of energy transition but are unlikely to turn the clock back. And it is here that China can press forward its advantage. Renewable energy deployment requires equipment and infrastructure, and China has an undisputed lead in their manufacturing and supply chains. By vacating this space, the US could be undermining its economic interests as well as political leverage.

What India could face

For India, the US decisions could result in lower pressure to decarbonise fast, but its plans to attract investments in clean technologies could also be affected. Before Trump's second Presidency, India had a long-standing strategic partnership on climate and clean energy with the US, which had been supporting a number of activities in diverse energy-related fields. Such collaboration is expected to stop, which could force India to revise its energy transition pathways.

One of the organisations the US has withdrawn from is the International Solar Alliance that India had helped set up in collaboration with France on the sidelines of COP21 climate meeting in Paris in 2015. The US had joined the ISA only in 2021 as the 101st member. It does not give any financial support to the ISA. At its last assembly meeting in 2025, the ISA had decided to charge an annual membership fee of USD 50,000 from developed nations and USD 25,000 from developing countries, but this decision is still to be operationalised.

ECONOMICS

TN, a pioneer in pension reforms, reverses course 2 decades on

P Vaidyanathan Iyer
New Delhi, January 8

AHEAD OF elections in April-May, Tamil Nadu Chief Minister MK Stalin announced the Tamil Nadu Assured Pension Scheme (TAPS). Depending on the DMK's return to power, the scheme will come into effect from January 1, 2027.

Tamil Nadu has an estimated 9.3 lakh government employees and about 705 lakh pensioners. While only a small percentage (2%) of the electorate, a government employee is viewed as a vital constituency by parties in the state. This is because they are the ones tasked with implementing government schemes and, thus, are seen as a group that can shape the public narrative.

What benefits will TAPS provide, what is its cost to the government?

TAPS guarantees a pension of 50% of the last drawn monthly salary to all state employees retiring on or after January 1, 2027. The employees are required to contribute 10% of their monthly salary towards pension, while the state will contribute the balance towards 50% of the employee's salary. According to a government statement, the state will incur a one-time expenditure of Rs 13,000 crore and an annual cost of Rs 11,000 crore.

Like serving employees, pensioners too will benefit from salary increases twice a year, with hikes in Dearness Allowance (DA) in January and July. The DA is essentially a cost-of-living adjustment granted to government employees to protect them from rising prices, and the percentage increase is linked

to retail inflation over the preceding six months. Further, TAPS will ensure that upon the pensioner's death, their nominee will receive 60% of the amount as family pension.

What scheme will TAPS replace?

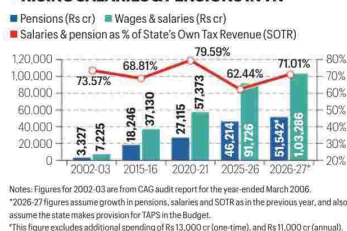
Tamil Nadu became the first state to reform its pension system in 2003, noting the unsustainability of rising pension costs. Then Chief Minister Jayalitha took the political call to replace the Old Pension Scheme, with a new Contributory Pension Scheme (CPS). "Tamil Nadu has the highest pension-related commitments when compared to other states in the country. It is also one of the fastest-growing components of the total revenue expenditure," C P Nallan, then state finance minister, said while presenting the Budget for FY 2002-03.

The CPS applied to all those who joined government service on or after April 1, 2003. Both the employee and the state contributed 10 per cent of the salary (Basic Pay + Dearness Allowance) towards CPS.

How does TAPS compare with CPS?

Under the CPS, Tamil Nadu's wages, salaries and pensions as a percentage of the State's Own Tax Revenue dropped by almost 10 percentage points over the last two decades. Reporting on the state's pension liability in 2020-21, then Finance Minister P Thiruganathan noted that the state had 3,44,834 pensioners in service before April 1, 2003, when CPS became effective. The total expenditure towards pension and other pensionary benefits stood at Rs 28,250.59 crore in 2020-21. Employees recruited on or after

RISING SALARIES & PENSIONS IN TN



TAPS and TN pensioners

● TN currently invests sums collected under CPS in low-yield instruments.

● If TAPS follows the UPS model, this may allow govt staff to put investment avenues such as stock markets.

April 1, 2003, in Tamil Nadu, and enrolled under CPS were 5,88,166. As many as 28,893 who joined after April 1, 2003, have exited the CPS following retirement or other reasons.

TAPS will raise pension liabilities sharply in 2026-27, the first year if the Budget for the year provides for the one-time expenditure as well as the annual increase in cost. In subsequent years, the increase may be moderate since there won't be the one-time expenditure component.

So far, Tamil Nadu has arrested sharp increases in pension liabilities over the last two decades. This may change now, depending on how the state chooses to go ahead.

Where did TN get the idea from? Jayalitha's move preceded the NDA

government's pension reform. In 1998, it appointed a committee to design a sustainable pension system. The panel's report, published in 2000, built the pension reform architecture — a pension regulator, pension funds, etc — and moved from a defined benefit regime to a defined contribution system. The New Pension Scheme (NPS) was thus introduced in 2004 and covered all central government employees who joined service on or after January 1, 2004.

Although AIADMK led the subsequent Assembly election in 2006, and the NDA won the 2004 Lok Sabha elections, successive governments in the state (both DMK and AIADMK) did not revert to the Old Pension Scheme. Neither yielded to the temptation of keeping the contributions of the employees and the state government as cash balances in the Budget.

As part of pension reforms, the Centre introduced a Permanent Retirement Account Number for each employee. Both the employee and the government contribute towards the pension, and these are invested according to the employee's choice and risk capacity in the pension funds set up by banks and financial institutions. The Centre's contribution has increased from 10 per cent in 2004 to 14 per cent in 2019.

Following sustained demands, the Centre introduced the Unified Pension Scheme in 2024, assuring each employee 50% of the last 12 monthly average basic pay as pension. This led the Centre to increase its contribution to 18.5% towards the pension, while 10% of the employee's basic salary, plus dearness allowance, is set aside for this.

ENVIRONMENT

Recalling Madhav Gadgil's seminal Western Ghats report, and the opposition to it

Nikhil Ganekar
New Delhi, January 8

EMINENT ECOLOGIST Madhav Gadgil, 83, died late on Wednesday in Pune after a brief illness. In a storied career as an ecologist, his seminal work as chairman of the Western Ghats Experts Ecology Panel (WGEEP) stands out, despite the fact that the report was eventually rejected by the then United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government.

Gadgil continued to champion the cause of protecting the fragile mountains from mindless development. Despite the report's fate, its recommendations are brought up whenever landslides and ecological disasters occur in the region.

Need for a prescription

The Western Ghats are known as the water tower of peninsular India, with the Cauvery, Godavari, Krishna, Periyar, and Netravathi rivers originating here. The chain of hills spans from Gujarat to Kerala and

Tamil Nadu. It is a globally recognised biodiversity hotspot with a high level of endemism, meaning that certain kinds of trees and animals are only found in this ecosystem.

In March 2010, the WGEEP was constituted in view of the region's environmental sensitivity and ecological significance. Its complex geography, and the threat of climate change. In a 2014 article in the *Economic and Political Weekly*, Gadgil had noted that the trigger for the panel was a meeting of the Save Western Ghats movement in the Nilgiris in 2010. "Union Minister of Environment and Forests, Jairam Ramesh attended it and participated in the deliberations, which culminated in setting up of the WGEEP," Gadgil wrote.

The official mandate was to assess the Ghats' ecology, demarcate sensitive areas and recommend ecologically sensitive zones. It was also tasked with recommendations on conservation and rejuvenation, including devising modalities for a managerial authority for sustainable development.

Recommendations, restrictions

After Gadgil led extensive consultations on the ground with communities and public representatives, the panel designated the entire 1,29,037 sq km extent of Western Ghats as an Ecologically Sensitive Area (ESA). It assigned three levels of sensitivity to various zones, categorising them as Ecologically Sensitive Zone (ESZ).

Extensive guidelines were accordingly proposed for each sector. These included a prohibition on cultivating genetically modified crops across zones, and the creation of special economic zones or new hill stations. The panel said no new mining licenses were to be issued, and called for phasing out existing mines within five years in ESZs 1 and 2. ESZ 1 would not have new licenses issued for quarries. It proposed no new railway lines and major roads, except where highly essential, in ESZ 1 and 2.

It also recommended the creation of a 24-member Western Ghats Ecology Authority (WGEA), a statutory authority appointed by



Gadgil died on Wednesday night aged 83. FILE

the Environment Ministry under the Environment Protection Act. This was envisaged as an apex, multi-state authority for regulation, management and planning of activities impacting all ESZs in the six Western Ghats states — Gujarat, Goa, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Kerala.

Political opposition

The initial report was submitted to Environment Minister Jairam Ramesh in March 2011, and a final version was submitted in August 2011. Gadgil noted in EPW that under Jayanthi Natarajan, who succeeded Ramesh in July 2011, the report was not made public, but was circulated to state governments to seek comments. Gadgil wrote that the report itself made a case for inclusionary development, and they suggested taking it to all Gram Sabhas, to replace "exclusionary development and conservation."

After RTI appeals and a court battle, the Environment Ministry ordered in May 2012 that the report be made public.

The report was strongly opposed, especially by the governments of Kerala and Maharashtra. Several states also opposed the embargo on new hydroelectric projects. Kerala said that the economy of Idukki and Wayanad districts would be affected if large tracts were demarcated as ESA, as these areas were home to cash crops.

Kasturirangan panel

Following the opposition to the report, the Environment Ministry constituted a High-Level Working Group (HLWG) under the space scientist K Kasturirangan to "examine the WGEEP report in a holistic and multidisciplinary fashion".

The HLWG's report in 2013 proposed to demarcate 56,825 sq km of the Ghats region as ecologically sensitive. It too called for curbs on polluting industries, mining, new thermal plants, and large townships in ESAs. Unlike the previous panel, the Kasturirangan panel identified some villages as ESAs and published a list of such villages across states. Based on these recommendations, the Centre has issued the draft notifications demarcating the ESAs six times so far, owing to a lack of finality over the areas that fall under the category. The notification still hangs in the balance. An expert panel under former Director General of Forests, Sanjay Kumar, is working with states to finalise the matter.

The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Census 2027

The importance of counting right

INDIA is governing a population of over 1.4 billion using data that is nearly two decades old. The last Census was conducted in 2011. It was before the pandemic altered livelihoods, before mass migration reshaped cities and before demographic shifts redrew social and economic realities. Census 2027, which is to begin on April 1, is, therefore, a necessity to correct years of policy-making based on outdated assumptions. Accurate population data is the backbone of governance. Welfare allocations, urban planning, health infrastructure and education policy depend on knowing where people live and in what conditions. In the absence of updated numbers, schemes risk underperforming, cities remain overstretched and regional inequalities deepen. Census 2027 offers an opportunity to replace administrative guesswork with evidence-based planning.

The proposed exercise also marks a structural shift, being India's first fully digital census. If implemented carefully, digital tools can reduce errors, speed up data processing and improve transparency. The option of self-enumeration signals a modern, citizen-centric approach. However, it must supplement — not replace — door-to-door surveys to avoid excluding the digitally marginalised. The most contested element is the inclusion of caste data after nearly a century. While politically sensitive, the lack of reliable caste data has long weakened social justice policies. Welfare programmes cannot be evaluated meaningfully without knowing who benefits and who remains excluded. Data must lead to reform, not fuel political polarisation.

Equally important are concerns over privacy and data security. A fully digital census demands strong safeguards, transparency and accountability to maintain public trust. Census 2027 will also shape India's democratic future, forming the basis for delimitation and fair representation. A credible census can strengthen governance and democracy alike. But success will depend on execution, inclusivity and restraint in how the data is ultimately used.

Congress fee

Hefty sum may put off some ticket aspirants

IT'S not uncommon for the Congress to charge application fee from ticket aspirants in poll-bound states. However, the party's decision to hike the fee to Rs 50,000 for the Assam Assembly elections has raised eyebrows. This is not a small amount, and it applies uniformly to all contenders for candidature. Moreover, refunds will reportedly be made only for those seats where the Congress will let its alliance partners contest. The ostensible rationale for the move is on familiar lines: a substantial application fee discourages non-serious aspirants. However, in a state with deep socio-economic disparities and intense intra-party competition, the "one-size-fits-all" approach seems to prioritise financial capacity over grassroots work. The party had given a concession to applicants from the reserved category in Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Telangana and Haryana in recent years.

The Congress is certainly not the richest political party in India. Its fund balance of Rs 857 crore pales in comparison with the BJP's Rs 7,113 crore, as per data compiled by the Election Commission for 2023-24. The saffron party continues to dominate political funding and donations even after the scrapping of the controversial electoral bonds scheme. The Congress, in contrast, does not have adequate money to smoothly run its state units and contest elections across the country.

However, the process of generating funds should not cause resentment among the party cadre. Alienating local workers by erecting financial barriers is nothing but a self-inflicted injury. The Congress needs to counter the BJP's claim that it has turned the ticket application process into a cash-driven exercise. Promising refunds across the board with a clear timeline can be helpful. The party should also go all out to refute the allegations that it allots tickets to the highest "bidders".

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune

LAHORE, SATURDAY, JANUARY 9, 1926

Police administration in Punjab

THE report on police administration in Punjab (1924), which has been published, is of more than ordinary interest, because it deals not only with the annual statistics of crime in the province but also with the much larger question of the re-enforcement of the police force. The number of true cognisable cases of all kinds dealt with by the police during the year was 45,566, as compared with 44,161 during the previous year; eliminating petty crime, the total was 34,365 as against 34,395 in the previous year, a decrease of 30 cases. The figures for such crimes during the last four years are as follows: 36,052 cases in 1921; 37,776 in 1922; 34,395 in 1923; and 34,365 in 1924. It would thus appear that in spite of the fact that the conditions governing the commission of crimes and their investigations by the police have been abnormal during these four years, there has been an actual decrease in the number of cognisable cases (omitting petty cases) reported to the police. The figures relating to more serious forms of crime disclose the same state of affairs. There were 960 cases of rioting during the year, as compared with 757 in 1923; but this increase of 203 cases is more than accounted for by the registration in Lahore district of 301 cases under Section 145, Indian Penal Code, in connection with the Bhai Phuru Morcha. As to cases of murder, 653 were reported as compared with 748 in 1923 — a decrease of 95 cases. There were 211 cases of dacoity during the year, as compared with 333 in 1923 and 349 in 1922. The Inspector General of Police regards this decrease as "real and satisfactory".

Civil-military gap must be bridged

Successive pay commissions have served to aggravate the asymmetry

ADMIRAL ARUN PRAKASH (RETD)
FORMER CHIEF OF NAVAL STAFF

IN April 2006, the Chairman, Chiefs of Staff Committee, wrote a letter to Rakesh Mantri (RM) Pranab Mukherjee, seeking his "personal intervention for the appointment of a Service officer as a constituted member of the 6th Central Pay Commission (CPC)" and reminding him that "...a lack of Service representation was perhaps one of the main reasons for the dissatisfaction expressed by the Services post 5th CPC award..." While expressing agreement in principle, the RM regretted his inability to comply with this request.

The recommendations of the 6th CPC initially evoked a positive response due to an overall salary hike, but this quickly soured as specific anomalies emerged that were seen as unjust to the military. In an unprecedented move, the three Service Chiefs delayed submission of revised salary bills, effectively deferring implementation to send a message to the government. The reaction to the 7th CPC was even more severe, with the Service Chiefs, in 2016, taking the extraordinary step of writing to the Prime Minister about holding the implementation in abeyance; they executed it only after "assurances that anomalies would be addressed."

Civil-military dissonance has been an issue of long-standing concern in India, and it constitutes a major flaw in our national security matrix. The root of this problem lies in two convictions of the politician: firstly, that "civilian control" of the military can/should be exercised on its behalf by the bureaucracy; and secondly, that civil-military relations are a "zero-sum game" in



POLICY: If Non-Functional Upgrade is considered a rational measure, it must not be denied to the military. PTI

which civilian control can be maintained/enhanced only by balancing and blunting the military's influence/prestige. An indicator is the progressive blurring of lines between the military and the Home Ministry-helmed 1.1 million-strong Central Armed Police Forces (CAPFs).

Since relative seniority in the government hierarchy is based on a functionary's "basic pay", the easiest way of altering established relativities is by changing the pay structures. The best instrument to effect such changes is the decadal CPCs staffed by bureaucrats. This is how successive pay commissions, all of which have excluded military representation, have served to aggravate this civil-military asymmetry.

Typical of the anomalies that have caused serious concern to the military leadership is a policy termed "Non-Functional Upgrade" (NPU), which guarantees civilians automatic higher pay entitlements, even without a merit or vacancy-based promotion. By according this unjustified benefit to the civilians and then to the CAPFs, but denying it to the military, the CPC not only depressed the latter's relative status but also dealt a blow to morale. This sense of systemic discrim-

It is incongruous that the standing of the armed forces should remain unspecified and open to repeated misinterpretation vis-a-vis civilian and police organisations.

ination was further fuelled by other measures, including a drastic cut in pensions for soldiers disabled on duty and a system of "hardship allowances" that favoured civilians in peace areas over the military in combat zones. A drive into history is necessary in order to get to the root of these problems.

At the time of Independence, a hurried reorganisation of the imperial defence structure took place to suit the new republic's needs. During this turmoil, the military leadership remained blissfully ignorant of a significant development orchestrated

by the civil services; the armed forces HQs, instead of being designated independent "departments" of the Ministry of Defence (MoD), were reduced to "attached offices" and made subaltern to the Department of Defence. This "act of commission" was to be followed by equally significant "acts of omission".

The Constitution, vide Article 312, created two new "All-India Services" — the IAS and the IPS (to be joined later by the Indian Forest Service). Inherited from the empire was another category of bureaucracy, known as the Central Civil Services, consisting of 89 Group 'A' and 'B' services.

In 1961, the President promulgated the Allocation of Business (AoB) and Transaction of Business Rules, which provided the administrative framework and guidance for civil service functionaries of the Government of India (GoI).

For 58 years, in none of these documents was there any mention of the military till, in 2019, the 353rd amendment to the AoB Rules incorporated the new Department of Military Affairs (DMA). However, the constitution of the Chief of Defence Staff — a historic step — still did not find mention in these rules.

Since their status vis-a-vis the All-India as well as Group 'A'

and 'B' civil services has remained undefined, successive CPCs, maintaining that the armed forces do not fall into any "recognised category", have employed whimsical logic to depress their emoluments and, consequently, their status.

Apart from upsetting historic relativities with the IAS, IPS and the CAPFs, such alterations have created awkward situations for military commanders. Civilian personnel of organisations such as Border Roads, Military Engineering Services, Naval Armament Services and Armed Forces HQ Cadre, created to support the armed forces, having overtaken their military superiors in terms of pay grades, now demand an altered relationship.

The Service Chiefs, too, receive perfunctory attention from politicians and bureaucrats because they have no locus standi as per rules of the GoI. It is the civilian Secretary, Department of Defence, who is deemed responsible for the "...defence of India, and every part thereof" and speaks for the Services. This is an iniquitous situation which has stimulated civil-military friction for decades.

As the constitution of the 8th CPC has been promulgated, the issues highlighted above assume urgency. It is incongruous that the standing of the armed forces of the Union should remain unspecified and open to repeated misinterpretation vis-a-vis civilian and police organisations. It is similarly inappropriate that the Service Chiefs and the CDS — responsible for national defence — should be denied due recognition in GoI rules and remain "invisible" in the MoD.

A clear definition of the status of the armed forces as being on a par with the All-India Services and spelling out the role and functions of the military hierarchy will lead to smooth and harmonious civil-military functioning in the MoD and the inclusion of a Service officer as a constituted member of the 8th CPC will raise the military's morale and bolster national security.

If NPU is considered a rational measure, it must not be denied to the military.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Leadership is all about taking responsibility, not making excuses. — Gen Bipin Rawat

Context matters on the linguistic front

RAJBIR DESWAL

MIRZA Ghalib seemed to have anticipated our present-day dilemma when he asked, with gentle irony: "Har ek baat pe kehte ho tum ki tu kya hai; Tumhi kaho ke ye andaz-e-guftagu kya hai?" And Tasleem Razvi said: "Pyar jab hudd se badha, soare takalluf mit gaye; Aap se fir tum huge fir tu ka umman ho gaye."

Language is never merely a vehicle of communication; it is a mirror of relationships, social hierarchy, culture and power. The recent doctor-patient brawl in Shimla compels us to reflect on a subtler issue — can language, especially the use of honorific or non-honorific forms of address, intensify or ease conflict?

In Indian languages, forms of address such as *aap*, *tum* and *tu* are not mere grammatical variations; they carry cultural and emotional weight. *Aap* conveys respect and formality, often creating a safe distance. *Tum* suggests familiarity and equality. *Tu*, commonly perceived as rude or abusive, is not universally so. In Haryana's *khatoli*, *tu* is natural and conversational, not inherently aggressive. In parts of eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, the use of *tum* instead of *mein* is customary, sometimes misunderstood elsewhere as arrogance or superiority, though it is simply a linguistic tradition.

Problems arise when we assume our own linguistic norms to be universal. What feels disrespectful to one person may feel intimate or normal to another. This is why the doctor-patient relationship demands exceptional linguistic sensitivity. It is reasonable to expect a doctor to use *aap* as a mark of professionalism and respect. It is equally reasonable to grant a patient linguistic leeway, given the pain, anxiety and vulnerability. If *tu-tadak* escalates a situation, the fault lies less with the word itself and more with tone, timing and context.

Ironically, the same *tu* that provokes offence in confrontation becomes poetry in love and music. Consider popular Hindi songs with lines such as "Tu meri zindagi hai..." and "Tu is tarah se meri zindagi mein shaamli hai..." Here, *tu* is not vulgar or dismissive; it is intimate, tender and deeply human. Clearly, words do not carry fixed moral values — contexts do.

The solution, therefore, does not lie in rigidly enforcing one form of address over another. *Aap* is not an automatic guarantee of respect, nor is *tu* intrinsically insulting. What matters is situational awareness. In professions involving public dealing, especially healthcare, language should lean toward courtesy and calm, because words can either soothe or inflame. Simultaneously, society must learn not to criminalise linguistic diversity or confuse cultural speech patterns with deliberate disrespect.

In cities like Lucknow — celebrated for their etiquette, refinement and constant use of *aap* — one often hears abusive words uttered with impeccable politeness. Some people have even gone to the extent of committing murder while addressing each other with *aap*. This stark reality exposes a simple truth: respect does not reside in vocabulary alone, but in intent and conduct.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Trump upending world order

Apropos of 'Trump sets a perilous precedent', the article is a timely reminder of how raw power is being normalised as state policy. The abduction of the Venezuela President under the garb of "law enforcement" strikes at the very heart of international law, state sovereignty and the UN Charter. If a superpower can kidnap a sitting head of state for alleged violations of its domestic laws, no leader anywhere is safe. The muted response of the global community only emboldens such brazen adventurism. With threats extending even to territories like Greenland, the world must unite against the US' actions before it erodes rule-based order and pushes humanity towards dangerous lawlessness.

HARBINDER S DHILLON, UNA

A wake-up call for civic bodies

The deaths in Indore due to the consumption of contaminated water are shocking. The incident must make the civic authorities sit up and take immediate action. The tragedy must also act as a wake-up call for civic bodies across the board to carry out preventive action by conducting surprise checks at water treatment plants, and checking distribution water supply lines and sewerage network. A meticulous action plan and schedule needs to be devised to locate and plug the leakages, and to replace old, rusty and worn-out pipes with new ones.

KRISHAN KANT SODI, NANGAL

Legislation misinterpreted

Apropos of 'Can't read dog's mind when it wants to bite: SC', the stray dog menace is largely self-created. Earlier humans and canines coexisted without friction, people would offer food to strays and they in turn would provide vigil at night. The problem began with The Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act, 1960. Prior to this legislation, whenever an abandoned or aggressive dog posed a clear threat, the local authorities intervened, even though such incidents were rare. However, the Act inadvertently led to an unchecked proliferation of street dogs, a problem that has now spiralled beyond control.

VK ANAND, CHANDIGARH

Teaching is a full-time vocation

Apropos of 'A biting order'; it exposes the absurdity and risks of deploying teachers to count stray dogs, a task squarely within the municipal domain. Education requires urgent reform that prioritises quality infrastructure, higher public spending as a share of GDP and a professional environment that allows teachers to focus exclusively on teaching. Instead, they are routinely burdened with non-academic duties such as election work, surveys and now civic enforcement. Teaching is a full-time vocation involving lesson planning, assessment, mentoring and continuous academic updating. Assigning unrelated administrative work amounts to a misuse of trained human resources. While teachers can support civic awareness, they cannot replace municipal or veterinary personnel.

K KUMAR, PANCHKULA

Uncertainty looms large

It is heart-breaking to see that while some people are celebrating the shutdown of Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Medical College, it is the affected students who will suffer the most. Their future has been put at risk overnight, and years of hard work, their dreams and hopes now stand shattered. Celebrating the closure of a college means celebrating the loss of opportunities for our youth and the loss of progress for the region. Such a mindset will only push J&K backward. Shutting down an educational institution is being treated like a solution instead of questioning the authorities, demanding accountability and pushing for better facilities and improvements.

SHIVANI VUYAL, JAMMU

Hindu killings continue unabated

The killing of yet another Hindu in Bangladesh must raise an alarm. Incidents of mob lynching hint at targeting of Hindus, rising intolerance and a decline in effective law enforcement. While the authorities have initiated investigations and made arrests in certain cases, the targeted killings have not stopped that suggests that existing responses are insufficient.

RUKMA SHARMA, JALANDHAR

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@tribuneindia.com

Fair use or free ride? AI copyright dilemma



DINESH C SHARMA
SCIENCE COMMENTATOR

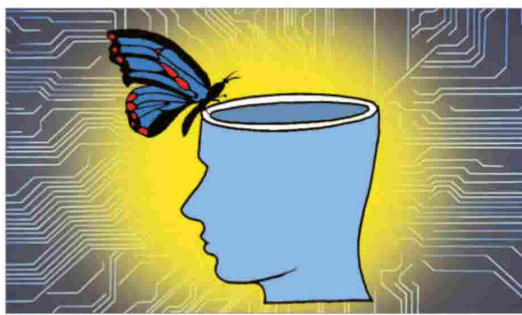
TOWARDS the end of 2025, the Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade published a working paper on 'Generative AI and copyright'. It is the report of an expert committee to examine the vexed question of copyright protection in the era of artificial intelligence, and its findings will most likely form the basis of India's policy on the subject in the near future.

Generative AI products like ChatGPT, Gemini, Perplexity, etc., are large language models (LLMs) that generate content based on prompts given by users. For instance, one can provide a brief storyline and ask ChatGPT to write a short story in the style of RK Narayan or Premchand, and it would generate it. Similarly, Dall-E, Midjourney (and other similar text-to-image and text-to-video generation models) can make a painting on a given subject based on prompts to generate it in the style of, say, Jamini Roy or MF Hussain or a short movie clip in Satya-

jit Ray's style. Such outputs from generative AI models are based on their training that uses data from a variety of types of sources (like novels of Narayan or paintings of Hussain and others).

The data used for training AI models may fall in different categories — copyrighted, copyright-expired works and data in the public domain available for 'fair use'. Ever since technology firms launched commercial versions of generative AI products, the question of their use of copyrighted material, such as books, research papers, photographs, films and other forms of creative expression has become central to the AI debate. It has posed complex legal, ethical and moral questions. Another unresolved issue is the copyrightability and authorship of AI-generated outputs.

Governments and courts in many countries have been struggling to deal with this new phenomenon — data training of AI models. Technology companies worldwide, including in India, have argued that AI models do not violate copyright laws as they are not copying or plagiarising copyrighted books, photographs, etc., but using them only as segregated datasets to train algorithms using patterns, styles, structures in terms of statistical relationships to enable them to generate new content. This, they claim, amounts to the



UNFAIR: The govt's proposal and industry's demands leave creators at the receiving end. SANDEEP JOSHI

well-accepted dictum of 'fair use' of creative works.

To argue that AI models are not 'copying' original works but only 'learning' from them does not hold water. This is because the process of training an AI system involves multiple steps, including copying and storage of data (original works), which, in effect, constitutes infringement. This, at the AI industry says, can at most be considered a 'technical infringement', not a legal one.

Rejecting the notion that no copyright licensing is required, and after studying various models being discussed or implemented elsewhere in the world, the expert committee has recommended a hybrid framework for India.

India's copyright framework must place the interests of creators ahead of an industry built on their work.

It has suggested a blanket licence to AI developers for the use of lawfully accessed copyright-protected works for training AI systems, provided the copyright holders are paid a royalty. But rightsholders will not have the option to withhold their works for use in the training of AI systems.

A centralised non-profit entity consisting of rightsholder organisations and designated by the government would be responsible for collecting the payments from AI developers. This entity would have copyright societies and industry organisations as its members, and these member-organisations would be responsible for passing on the royalties to individual creators. A certain percentage of the revenue gener-

ated from AI systems trained on copyrighted content would be payable as royalties, and the rates would be fixed by a government committee.

Technology companies argue that regulating the use of creative works and enforcing new copyright laws to make licensing compulsory would hinder technological innovation. They demand complete exemption of text and data mining (TDM) from copyright laws to enable the training of AI models. The representative of the industry body, Nasscom, in the expert committee disagreed with its recommendations and gave a dissent note. Instead of a copyright system based on the revenue of AI models, it wants a layered system of using copyrighted materials.

Nasscom has suggested that it was the responsibility of rightsholders to prevent the use of their publicly available work for TDM, and for this, they should be given an 'opt out' option at the point of availability of their work. For content which is not publicly accessible, rightsholders should be able to protect their rights through contract or license terms. All this puts the onus on rightsholders to protect their work, which, under the present circumstances, is very difficult because copyright is being violated openly and protected material is available online illegally. Technology companies have already

mined data from millions of books thus available online. The 'opt out' option also seems impractical in this scenario.

In both cases, people who create new works (rightsholders) are going to be at the receiving end. The expert panel wants automatic availability of copyright-protected works for training of AI systems and will make it a legal certainty to help the AI industry, while denying copyright holders the right to opt out of the TDM system. On the other hand, the industry is not ready to accept the royalty-based system proposed by the government, but wants to make copyright holders responsible for protecting their works through means like an 'opt out' or individual contracts. Both types of regimes are unfair to the creators of original content. In any case, the creators will have to depend on policies and whims of the platforms (and other mediators) where their content is displayed.

The AI companies have begun generating billions of dollars of business, and the volume is projected to grow. Yes, LLMs and other models are a result of technological innovation, but one that critically hinges on the digital theft of the work produced by millions of creative people around the globe over the decades. The copyright framework India is proposing must place the interests of creators ahead of those of the industry.

India's AI language leap



SHASHANK REDDY
MANAGING PARTNER,
EVAM LAW & POLICY

INDIA'S linguistic diversity, with 22 official languages and hundreds of dialects, has limited digital access for millions. A multilingual AI revolution now bridges this gap, turning access into empowerment and redefining inclusion as dignity. As India hosts the India AI Impact Summit 2026 on February 15-20 in New Delhi, it aims to build an AI ecosystem empowering every citizen through multilingual, multi-access models, embodying 'Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas'. This ensures excluded groups participate in the digital future.

By bridging the technology divide, India is unlocking its demographic dividend and entrepreneurial potential. When people can dream, design and deliver solutions in their own language, innovation becomes truly bottom-up, powered by the many, not the privileged few. AI is revolutionising education, healthcare and governance.

Yet, a critical gap remains. Most AI systems are trained primarily in English and a few global languages, sidelining billions whose native tongues are underrepresented. In India, barely 10% of the population is fluent in English.

For the vast majority, digital access alone does not equal digital inclusion. True empowerment begins when people can engage with technology in their own language. India's approach is, therefore, a global model, showing how AI can democratise the digital economy.

India's multilingual AI revolution is anchored in BHASHINI, the government's flagship initiative under the National Language Translation Mission. BHASHINI powers voice, text and video translation across more than 35 Indian languages using over 1,600 AI models. Integrated into platforms such as CPGRAMS for grievance redress, My Aadhaar for digital identity and services like the IRCTC and NPCI's IVRS systems, it enables citizens to engage in their own languages.

Complementing this are homegrown large language models (LLMs). They include Sarvam-M by Sarvam.ai, the first indigenous LLM supporting 11 Indian languages plus English, built with over 500 billion parameters for nuanced, context-aware interactions and AI4Bharat's IndicTrans and IndicBERT, covering all 22 scheduled languages for seamless

translation and dialogue.

This ecosystem ensures that the promise of Digital India reaches the farmer, artisan, student and entrepreneur in every corner. As India's multilingual AI matures, it will enable millions of new creators, coders, innovators and problem-solvers, fuelling a new wave of vernacular innovation that reflects the real voice of Bharat.

Initiatives like Adi Vaani, the world's first AI-powered tribal language bridge, are preserving endangered languages and connecting indigenous communities to public services in their native tongues. Similarly, the Open Network for Digital Commerce (ONDC) uses BHASHINI to enable small businesses to create multilingual interfaces, expanding market access for MSMEs. These examples illustrate a universal truth — removing language barriers unlocks participation, fostering equitable economic and social empowerment.

The AI summit will focus on outcomes guided by three sutras: people, planet and progress. For multilingual AI, the summit recognises India's linguistic inclusion model as a global standard, emphasising the moral and technological responsibility to ensure AI speaks the full spectrum of languages. India stands not only as a technological leader but also as a champion of linguistic inclusion.

Its message to the world is clear — to empower people, speak to them in their language. Only then can we truly unlock the nation's potential, harness its demographic dividend and shape a future where every citizen is not just connected, but truly included.

When people can dream and design in their mother tongue, innovation becomes truly bottom-up.

Saving Aravallis beyond height



SUDHANSHU GUPTA
INTERNATIONAL MEMBER,
FOREST STEWARDSHIP COUNCIL

THE Supreme Court's December 29, 2025 order on the Aravalli hills has been welcomed as an act of judicial self-correction. By staying its own November ruling — which had introduced a 100-metre elevation threshold for identifying Aravalli hills — and by directing the formation of a new expert committee, the SC signalled a willingness to revisit concerns raised by scientists, conservationists and affected communities. Yet, even in its caution, the order reveals a conceptual gap: it suspends a contested definition without outlining a clear pathway for developing a more robust one.

In doing so, the SC does not draw upon one of India's strongest precedents for mountain-range governance: the Western Ghats framework. The jurisprudence that emerged from the Western Ghats process, particularly the Kasturirang Committee's work, demonstrated that environmental protection must begin with the landscape itself, not with abstract criteria detached from ecological realities. That valuable legacy finds little explicit reflection in the December 29 order.

The Western Ghats exercise marked a methodological shift in environmental governance. It relied on remote-sensing, GIS-based mapping, vegetation analysis and terrain

studies to distinguish between natural and human-dominated landscapes. It recognised that ecological systems cannot be captured by simple height metrics or administrative conveniences. In contrast, while the December 29 order acknowledges the fragility of the Aravallis, it does not mandate any comparable landscape-based methodology. It pauses a definition, but does not prescribe a method. It raises questions, but does not yet require maps.

This omission matters because the Aravallis are not geometric objects. They are a two-billion-year-old eroded fold system — a mosaic of ridges, spurs and slopes that often fall below the 100-metre mark, yet they remain vital for groundwater recharge, climate resilience and ecological connectivity. Protecting such a system demands field-based understanding rather than geometric simplification. Without addressing the conceptual issues that triggered the earlier controversy, there remains a risk that the next committee may inadvertently revisit similar assumptions.

The order may be seen as a step taken in the interest of caution, but one that would benefit from clearer methodological guidance. While the SC has centralised interim oversight by requiring its permis-

sion for mining activity, it does not yet outline the scientific discipline expected of the new committee, the ecological thresholds that should guide future definitions or the roadmap for returning authority to decentralised, democratically accountable institutions. The result is a protective pause that averts immediate harm but leaves the long-term architecture of Aravalli governance open-ended.

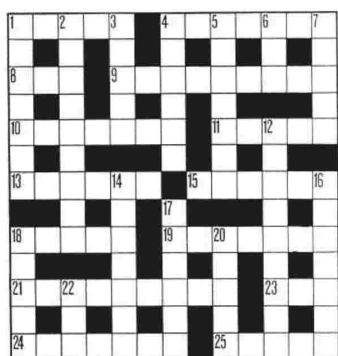
The order also creates a practical vacuum that merits attention. By keeping both the November judgment and the earlier committee report in abeyance, the SC has temporarily suspended the operative definition of the Aravallis without offering an interim framework for states. Forest departments lack criteria for identifying protected terrain; restoration projects face uncertainty; mining-related works remain in limbo. Most importantly, the order does not require the new committee to adopt field-based methods, consult local stakeholders or follow the landscape-mapping discipline that defined the Western Ghats process. Thus, the Aravallis' governance risks becoming dependent on judicial supervision rather than on transparent, decentralised and scientifically grounded decision-making.

The legacy of the Western Ghats matters because it had offered a model rooted in science, fieldwork and ecological literacy. Without drawing upon it, the SC order may set the stage for another definition vulnerable to contestation and another cycle of judicial intervention. The Aravallis deserve a framework that understands the land before attempting to define it. The next committee must succeed only if it begins where the SC paused — with the recognition that ecology, not geometry, must define the hills.

Views are personal

The Western Ghats' legacy is missing in the SC's Aravalli order. Ecology, not geometry, must define the hills.

QUICK CROSSWORD



ACROSS

- 1 Make progress with little effort (5)
- 4 Puzzled (2,1,4)
- 8 Nothing (3)
- 9 Attack vigorously (5,4)
- 10 Surrounding (7)
- 11 Very disagreeable (5)
- 13 Painful struggle (6)
- 15 Phlegmatic (6)
- 18 Power of decision (3-2)
- 19 Advise (7)
- 21 Provoke (9)
- 23 White ecclesiastical vestment (3)
- 24 Strike out (7)
- 25 Treat wound with medicaments (5)

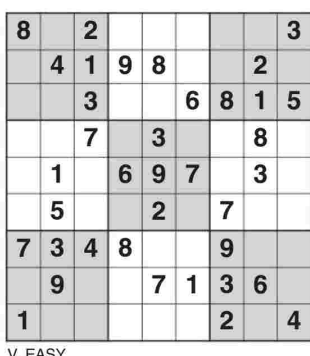
Yesterday's Solution

Across: 1 Half-witted, 8 Horde, 9 Propose, 10 Voucher, 11 Belic, 12 Adduce, 14 Send up, 17 Enact, 19 Inhibit, 21 Rampage, 22 Broth, 23 Take to task.
Down: 2 Aground, 3 Fresh, 4 Import, 5 Trouble, 6 Droll, 7 Fervent pitch, 8 Have a heart, 13 Cut back, 15 Dubious, 16 Direct, 18 Admit, 20 Habit.

DOWN

- 1 Get in touch with (7)
- 2 Free (2,7)
- 3 North American Indian tent (5)
- 4 Crafty (6)
- 5 Transversely (7)
- 6 Belonging to itself (3)
- 7 Mar (5)
- 12 Involving maximum effort (4-5)
- 14 State of feeling (7)
- 16 French composer of ballets (7)
- 17 Awkward predicament (6)
- 18 River of Paris (5)
- 20 Overturn (5)
- 22 Undermine (3)

SU DO KU



YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

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

CALENDAR

JANUARY 9, 2026, FRIDAY

- Shaka Samvat 1947
- Posh Shaka 19
- Posh Purnimite 26
- Hijari 1447
- Krishna Paksha Tithi 7
- Sothana Yoga up to 4:56 pm
- Uttaraphalguni Nakshatra up to 1:41 pm
- Moon in Virgo sign

FORECAST

SUNSET: 17:38 HRS
SUNRISE: 07:20 HRS

CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	14	07
New Delhi	17	06
Amritsar	11	05
Bathinda	12	05
Jalandhar	11	05
Ludhiana	13	07
Bhiwani	16	05
Hisar	14	06
Sirsa	12	05
Dharamsala	18	04
Manali	13	-01
Shimla	15	03
Srinagar	11	-02
Jammu	16	08
Kargil	0	-13
Leh	0	-15
Dehradun	20	05
Musoorie	14	03

TEMPERATURE IN °C

Europe calling

Faced with US-triggered volatility, India turns focus on Europe

Union commerce minister Piyush Goyal has joined negotiators in Brussels to give political momentum to ongoing talks on India's Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with the European Union (EU) so that significant announcements can be made at the India-EU Summit at the end of this year. With European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and European Council President Antonio Costa attending India's Republic Day celebrations on January 26 as chief guests, the talks started in November last year are reported to have reached final stages. In this backdrop, Europe will be in sharp focus in India's diplomatic calendar over the next few weeks, with high-profile visits by German Chancellor Friedrich Merz, European Union (EU) leaders Ursula von der Leyen and Antonio Costa and French President Emmanuel Macron. Coming at a time when India-US trade deal is struck due to Trump's tariff tantrums, this indicates a subtle shift in India's policy to the West.

Europe has become a priority for India in the face of the US unpredictability and China's expansionism. India is set to be the German Chancellor Friedrich Merz's first destination during his Asia visit next week. Germany is one of India's most important economic partners in Europe. Merz is expected to review ongoing initiatives while exploring new areas of cooperation amid shifting global economic and security dynamics with Prime Minister Narendra Modi during his two-day official visit. They will also engage with business and industry leaders and discuss regional and global issues. This will be followed by French President Emmanuel Macron's visit early next month. India's external affairs minister Dr S Jaishankar and commerce minister have already visited these major European countries to prepare the agenda for their high-profile talks with PM Modi during these India visits.

As Dr Jaishankar pointed out, India is strengthening its relationship with Europe and both sides can bring more stability into the international economy and global politics. The new global trade and security policies of the US President Donald Trump have created a high level of volatility and unpredictability in the world, and every country, every region is reassessing its interests and calculations. India's outreach to the EU and major countries in the European continent is a conscious effort to safeguard its national interests. Deeper bilateral and multilateral engagement with the UK and major EU partners like France, Germany is not only to "derisk" the impact of changing US policies but chart out a roadmap for shared prosperity and development in the times to come. Apart from a growing market, India offers a large pool of skilled professionals hemmed in by the US restrictive visa regime to Europe. It's a win-win situation for all.

ISI overhaul

Proposed law on Indian Statistical Institute undermines its institutional autonomy

Ninety-four years after its founding, the Indian Statistical Institute (ISI) faces a dispute over its autonomy as a section of faculty, students and alumni oppose a draft Bill they say would give the government excessive control over the pre-Independence institution. The ministry of statistics and programme implementation released the draft legislation in September, seeking to repeal the ISI Act of 1959 and introduce sweeping changes to the institute's governance. This fits into a broader pattern of systematic dilution of institutional autonomy and federal values through over-centralisation of powers over the last few years. The Centre wants to overhaul the governance structure of the Kolkata-based premier institute, which is synonymous with India's early efforts to use statistics for policy and development. There are growing concerns over how the hasty reforms could dilute the autonomy and undermine the federal spirit.

At the heart of the controversy lies the proposed restructuring of ISI's governing bodies. The draft Bill seeks to convert ISI from a registered society into a "statutory body corporate" governed by an 11-member board of governors (BoG). If the Bill goes through, this board will replace the existing 33-member governing council, which currently serves as the institute's highest decision-making authority and has a majority of elected members from within ISI. The BoG will be packed by a majority of government appointees who exercise broad powers over the institute's affairs, including appointing a panel to select the director to be appointed by the government - authority that currently rests with the governing council. This raises concerns of political interference, especially in appointments and academic decision-making.

What is alarming is that the draft Bill, seeking to repeal the Indian Statistical Institute (ISI) Act, 1959, omits references to national development, social welfare and planning but introduces new priorities such as global excellence, interdisciplinary collaboration, innovation and financial self-sustainability. Experts fear that increased focus on revenue generation may shift ISI away from basic research and the essential long-term research could suffer under a corporate-style funding model. The focus of the new legislation shifts from a nation-building and welfare-oriented mission to one centred on global excellence, institutional branding and innovation. Bypassing the existing society registered under state law amounts to an infringement of state jurisdiction and risks undermining the established legal framework that has guided ISI for decades. The Bill severely undermines academic autonomy by enabling the BoG to override decisions of the academic council.

Indore: Supplying deaths thru pipelines!

CAG had also warned of water-borne diseases due to unsafe water, including from tubewells



Abhilash Khandekar
POLITICS & BEYOND

The cleanest city competition under Swachh Bharat Mission was meant for municipal solid waste segregation and disposal. However, what happened in Indore which wears the 'India's cleanest city' tag is spine chilling. So many deaths due to drinking water, mind you, not because of illicit liquor!

Indore is governed by BJP for 25 years and that indicates total failure of its urban governance. Also, criminal negligence. Heavily contaminated drinking water with fecal matter mixed into it for months together was being supplied to hapless citizens. They had repeatedly complained of 'smelly dirty water' to the authorities but none listened, not even their representative in the government - a senior Cabinet minister!

A city adjudged the cleanest for eight consecutive years, had its innate limitations. Indore set an example for other cities in municipal solid waste management, discouraging open defecation and reducing litter through behavioural changes. Was safe drinking water supply not their responsibility because the cleanliness mission did not factor it in?

Indore Municipal Corporation (IMC) is now in the eye of a storm following shocking deaths as it never bothered about clean drinking water despite a handsome budget allocated for it. Amulya Nidhi, national convener of Jan Swasthya Abhiyan India, says MP got Asian Development Bank (ADB) loan of ₹800 crore many years back for improving water supply networks of municipal bodies, including Indore. Then came JNNURM, followed by Smart Cities



The catastrophic incident in the cleanest city may have been avoidable but under the current pattern of governance in Indian cities, there is no guarantee that such terrible human error will not occur again.

Mission and now AMRUT 2.0.

Clearly, top-of-the-surface garbage of the city was cleaned up, but none cared about other issues - mainly drinking water. It also includes the Bhagirathpura on step wells and water bodies like Sirpur Lake, a Ramsar site. The sunk well in 2023 exposed the fast-declining work culture of IMC. It is said that municipal bodies' officials function under tremendous political and other pressures, pushing basic problems to the backburners.

As the Sun set on 2025, 16 deaths shocked everyone. Over 1,200 people were admitted to hospital for drinking their own sewer's water. They were from only one colony of Bhagirathpura, the constituency of a 'powerful' BJP minister Kalash Vijayvargiya. Vijayvargiya is not only the Urban development minister for two years in the Yadav government, he was also the mayor for five years besides holding important portfolios since 2003 in the Cabinet. What has he done for Indore?

The Bhagirathpura disaster is the tip of the iceberg of the way Indian cities are governed. The contaminated water carrying lethal bacteria is unpalatable but is happening in other city areas too. The horribly dirty narrow streets, joining of the sewage lines with water pipes, the quality of civil works by shady private contractors and absence of proper supervision by engineering wings - all killed 16 innocent people.

In 2015, for example, the Sneha Nagar area, a posh colony of bank officers and businessmen, used to get yellowish water for months on which was undrinkable. Citizens complained to officials but in vain. Many households had to laboriously clean up their underground storage and overhead tanks almost daily and wait for clean water to come from their main taps. "The deaths like in Bhagirathpura could have happened in our colony too," recalls a former State Bank of India officer. Urban governance in India, espe-

cially when the much-trumpeted Smart Cities Mission is over, continues to raise doubts about smartness. If city managers can't provide clean drinking water, how could you call it a Smart City?

IMC is a known den of corruption. Public services have been way below expectation despite digital interventions and innovative helpline mechanisms.

The Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) reports about Indore had made shocking revelations a few years back. It had observed that Leakage Detection Cell did not exist in IMC, fecal coliform and turbidity were found in water samples and city's overhead water tanks were not cleaned for many months. This was at least seven-eight years back. The CAG had also warned of water-borne diseases due to unsafe water, including from the tubewells, to residents. But who cares about CAG?

The IMC budget for water works was of about ₹1,500 crore out of the latest total budgeted estimation amounting to ₹8,500.

The sad part of the story is that while the Constitution amendments ensured dissolution of powers and elected members began ruling local bodies for many years now, city mayor Pushyamitra Bhargava complained that officers refused to listen to him. The mayor convened meetings and waited for the officers, including commissioner and additional commissioners, but they did not show up indicating deep malaise in our democratic system, claimed to be people-centric.

The catastrophic incident in the cleanest city may have been avoidable but under the current pattern of governance in Indian cities, there is no guarantee that such terrible human error will not occur again.

The author is a senior journalist. Views expressed are personal.

BENGAL IS NOT VENEZUELA
WHERE YOU CAN JUST
RAID AND TAKE WHATEVER
YOU WANT



YOUR LETTERS

Land encroachment

Most land encroachments in India are on government lands and wetlands. So, the basic groundwater absorption and emptying systems have taken a hit. Therefore, when heavy rains lash the area, floods are the obvious result. However, the governments allow these encroachers to pitch their tents, for "votes", and then clumsily handle them to suit their convenience. Around 200 "illegal" houses that encroached upon government land meant for the waste management system were demolished recently at Bengaluru's Kogilu village. While the evacuated families were aghast, the state government defended its action. Since the encroachers belonged to the minority community, several "leaders" have voiced their eloquent views on the matter. The bigger question is how and why the land encroachers were allowed to settle by building full-fledged colonies.

Dr Ganapathi Bhat,
Akola

2025: Cybercriminals shift to threatening



Dr Khushalchand
Baheti

In 2025, cybercrime damages touched the \$10.5 trillion mark globally. The GDP of only two superpowers, the United States and China, is more than this. Indians lost ₹1.2 lakh crore.

Cyber scammers have shifted from luring victims for lottery or investment to paralysing them with fear.

The top 10 types of global cybercrimes of 2025 are as follows: **Digital arrest:** A Supreme Court observation in November 2025 cited losses exceeding ₹3,000 crore from digital arrest nationwide.

It begins with a call claiming a parcel containing narcotics, multiple forged passports or illegal weapons addressed to the victim has been intercepted. Scammers impersonating as CBI, FBI or Scotland Yard inform the victim that they are under 'digital arrest' and are strictly prohibited from hanging up the call, leaving their house or contacting family members or lawyers. This virtual confinement can be for hours, days or even weeks.

The victim is told that to protect their liquidity, they must transfer their savings to 'secret supervisory accounts'. These are, in reality, mule accounts controlled by the syndicate. Once the transfer is made, the money is laundered within minutes.

Deepfake: Deepfake scams exploit human reliance on "seeing is believing". A famous deepfake fraud of 2025 was with a multinational engineering firm Arup. A video confer-

ence call was made by the chief financial officer (CFO). Several other colleagues were also present. The 'CFO' instructed the employee to transfer \$25 million to various international accounts. The visual fidelity was perfect; the voice, mannerisms and appearance of the CFO and the other colleagues were indistinguishable from reality. Except for the victim, every participant in the meeting was a deepfake.

Pig butchering: The scam begins with a "wrong number" text message or a match on a dating app. The scammer spends weeks or months building friendships, sharing photos of their daily lives, mostly AI-generated, discussing hobbies and building deep emotional trust.

Then the scammer casually mentions his/her success in cryptocurrency trading that funds their lavish lifestyle. The offer to "teach" this trading follows. Initially, the victim invests small amounts and sees high returns. Victim is allowed to withdraw the initial profit. Once the victim (Pig) is hooked - "fattened" with confidence - they are manipulated into liquidating entire accounts, borrowing from friends to invest massive sums.

Sexortion: A young girl contacts a victim and explicit photos are exchanged. Then scammers send the victim a collage of their nude photos alongside the names and profiles of their parents, relatives harvested from the victim's social media follower lists. Ransom of ₹5,000 to ₹3,00,000 is fished.

Employment deception: Scammers scrape legitimate job postings. The 'hired' is asked to purchase a laptop immediately from a "certified vendor" to connect to the



company's secure network. A digital cheque is sent to cover the cost. The victim sends real money. The equipment never arrives. The cheque bounces.

Malvertising: Malicious advertisements (Malvertise) are placed on search engines and social media platforms. When a user searches, the top result is often a malicious ad labelled "sponsored". These ads lead to cloned websites that look identical to official vendor but deliver malware. The scammer instructs the user to "fix" the issue by copying and pasting a specific "PowerShell" script into their computer. With this the computer is hacked leading to account takeovers within minutes.

Peer-to-peer (P2P) payments: A scammer sends money to a victim's account from a stolen credit card, then tells the victim it was by mistake and pleads for return. If the victim "returns", they send their own clean funds. Later, the bank reverses the original stolen transfer, and the victim ends up loser.

QR phishing: Fake QR codes are pasted over legitimate codes on parking meters, restaurant menus, etc. When the user scans, he is directed to a fraudulent P2P payment prompt,

diverting funds to the scammer. **Virtual kidnapping:** A call is received from an unknown number to hear their child crying for help. A harsh voice then claims to have abducted the child and demands an immediate ransom transfer.

In reality, the child is safe. The screaming voice is an AI clone, generated from a short audio clip harvested from the child's social media videos. A few seconds of audio is sufficient to mimic the specific voice.

Supply Chain Hijacking: In the business-to-business fraud landscape, the dominant model of 2025 is "Triple Extortion". For example:

Encryption: Locking the company's data.

Exfiltration: Threatening to release sensitive data.

Harassment: Contacting the victim's clients, stakeholders to pressure the company to pay.

The healthcare sector remains a primary target due to the life-or-death urgency of data.

E-commerce frauds: Thousands of temporary websites advertising high-end goods at 80% discounts are set up. AI tools generate product descriptions, fake reviews and high-quality images to flood search results. The customers purchase a product and receive a worthless item.

'Year of Sophisticated Fraud' offers harsh lessons highlighting the need for teaching individuals to recognise the emotional markers of a scam.

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Views expressed are personal.

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