



May the Indian passport gain power over barriers

Our passport has risen on Henley's chart of passports ranked by access to other countries without a prior visa. As it strengthens, let's reopen our national debate on dual citizenship

This year's Henley Passport Index is out and India has some reason to cheer. The country's passport now ranks 80th on this annual chart published by Henley & Partners, a London-based global citizenship and advisory firm, up from its 85th rank in 2025. The little blue booklet with the Ashoka lion-crest now grants citizens visa-free or visa-on-arrival access to as many as 55 countries, which implies an increase in its power as a door opener. Earlier this week, Germany allowed Indian travellers visa-free transit. While this permission to pass through German airports for onward flights to other places may not necessarily reflect in Henley's rankings, Indian diplomacy may be helping expand the freedom with which Indians can go globe-trotting. Given a detectably rising urge among us to visit overseas destinations as tourists and the growing need of business travellers to get around the world, a strengthening passport is clearly good news.

Of course, other passport holders remain significantly more welcome, globally. Take Singapore's passport, which tops Henley's chart; it allows easy access to 192 countries. Second-ranked Japan's and South Korea's passports let their holders breeze past border barriers in 188 countries. The third position on the chart is shared by Denmark, Luxembourg, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland, citizens of which have instant access to 186 destinations. As for the US, whose passport has long been among the world's most sought-after, its citizens must content themselves with the 10th spot, with access to 179 countries without the need of a visa acquired in advance. While we move up, we have much catching up to do. No

doubt, there are many passports that are ranked lower than India's. The weakest passport, as per Henley's criteria, is Afghanistan's. It is placed 101st on the 2026 list, as it allows entry only to 24 countries without a prior visa. Syria's is ranked 100th, with just 26 nations ready to let the citizens of this strife-ridden country enter without being cleared ahead of arrival by immigration authorities. As India's economy emerges, we can expect to see more and more countries granting us the privilege of showing up in the expectation of being let in.

The wait for access to many prized destinations, however, could be long. Anti-immigration sentiment in the West has been on the rise and political conditions in rich Western countries may not be conducive for them to relax entry barriers for Indian citizens, many of whom may be under suspicion for being economic refugees in the guise of casual visitors. Our passport's relatively low rank may be a reason why so many globe-faring business people opt for foreign citizenship. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many people of Indian origin who do acquire other passports would be glad to have an Indian one too. New Delhi, however, has long disallowed dual citizenship among Indians, with Person of Indian Origin (PIO) booklets issued to non-residents who qualify and need visa-free access to India. Many nations, though, have no qualms letting their citizens hold other passports simultaneously. It may be time for us to reopen our debate on letting people be citizens of India as well as of another country. As for security risks, case-by-case checks could ensure that we don't expose our national interests to threats. Liberalized citizenship rules will please PIOs, but could also give our passport more power.

MY VIEW | MYTHS AND MANTRAS

What are men and women good at? The answer may surprise you

Women do a great many things better but this is acknowledged only so long as the work is unpaid



Quick, tell me which gender has more natural affinity and skill in the following fields? Make-up. Sewing. Cooking. You are likely to tell me that while it is not as if men can't be trained in them, women are naturally better in each of these fields. But now comes the kicker. In the Indian film industry until a few years ago, women were not allowed to work as makeup artists, as per the bylaws of The Cine Costume, Makeup Artists and Hair Dressers Association. They could only be hair-dressers. Yes, women were not allowed to do make-up once it became a paying profession.

A woman who recently graduated in hotel management told me that the hardest department to break into in a hotel is the kitchen. Deliberately, the atmosphere is made such that it discourages and even drives away women. To give only one example, abusive language is often used.

Silai-kadai (sewing-knitting) are considered feminine hobbies, but how many women tailor masters do you know? In a city that is a major garment export hub, there is not a single one in any manufacturing unit.

Immediately, the pattern becomes clear. When a skill is unpaid and unvalued, it is a woman's domain, but if the market is willing to pay a price for it, women are systematically discriminated against and kept out of that domain. The

very thing that was women's work within the household becomes something she is incapable of doing when it pays well. You have men, sometimes even at high places, questioning whether women have the same aptitude and skills in maths and technology as men. But there was a time when nearly all the computer programming and war-time code breaking was done by women.

Ada Lovelace is regarded as the first computer programmer, having published an algorithm intended to be executed by the first modern computer. By the 1940s, almost all software programmers were women. One report said, "Programming requires lots of patience, persistence and a capacity for detail and those are traits that many girls have."

The programmers of the Electronic Numerical Integrator and Computer (ENIAC), the first programmable general-purpose electronic digital computer, were six female mathematicians: Marilyn Meltzer, Betty Holberton, Kathleen Antonelli, Ruth Teitelbaum, Jean Bartik and Frances Spence. Nevertheless, the women who worked on ENIAC were warned that they would not be promoted to professional ranks, which were only for men. Designing the hardware was "men's work" and programming the software was "women's work."

Even till the 1960s, there were a significant proportion of women software programmers. But guess what happened as software was seen as more important and better paying than hardware—the field was overrun with men, and women were characterized as being incapable of mastering technology.

From high-tech professions in the West to the most down-to-earth in the East. Do you know that the bulk of the labour on Indian farms is provided by women? But they do not own the land they work on, do not do the monetary transactions of selling crops, and our mental image of the typical Indian farmer is usually not a woman.

That is the case in many areas. The hard work is done by the women, but

the person out in the market is a man. A large share of construction labourers are women, but the masons and contractors are almost all men.

These narratives are everywhere: teachers will say that girls are more mature than boys at the same age. At home, school-age girls are given responsibilities that range from household chores to looking after younger siblings.

Married women are asked to regulate their husbands' emotional states. Overall, at home, women are supposed to have the superpower of multi-tasking, managing emotions and maturity. But guess which gender is seen to be a better manager when it is a paid position?

On the other hand, given any family responsibility, men tend to forget everything from their children's schedules to their own medical appointments. A man told to cut potatoes will likely just cut them and leave them on the cutting board, not cleaning or putting away the knife and board because, hey, they were not instructed to. That is like lowly employees saying they needed more specific instructions, revealing an inability to think for themselves. But then, that treatment is reserved only for unpaid labour. At the job, they are supposed to be able to think of everything and execute it better than women.

See the pattern? The work is classified as easy, unimportant and feminine when it is unpaid or pays little. As soon as it begins to bring in money, power or prestige, it becomes a male domain. Once you see the pattern, you can't unsee it.

What is this discussion doing in a finance column for *Mint*? That would be a valid question if it wasn't for the fact that women are half the world's population and should be 50% of the economy. Even for those who have zero interest in social equity, it is a reminder that no country has moved up the income ladder without a very substantial participation of women in the paid workforce. Thus, even from a purely economic point of view, this is not something that can be ignored.

MY VIEW | WORLD APART

Airlines like IndiGo should follow Ryanair's flight path

RAHUL JACOB



Few industries anywhere in the world suffered the reputational damage that India's airlines did in 2025. As the industry looks to reset, there is no better role model than Ryanair, the European low-cost carrier that is the most efficient and profitable airline in the world. Its profit-after-tax margin for the six months ended 30 September was 25.9%, well ahead of Emirates' 15.1%. Moreover, it flies four times as many passengers as Emirates does.

Ryanair's strength is its operational efficiency. Having learnt its business model from the US budget carrier Southwest Airlines more than three decades ago, the Dublin-headquartered airline has taken its obsession with lowering costs to new levels. As its CEO, Michael O'Leary, told the *Financial Times* last week, "If I could get rid of everyone's bags, I'd have a much better airline." Introducing baggage fees for everyone who checks-in luggage not only reduced the share of passengers checking bags in from 80% to 20%, it speeded up aircraft turn-

around time at airports, now just 25 minutes. Ryanair charges people who don't check-in online and doesn't offer refunds on tickets bought. There are listicles online of O'Leary quotes and this is a legendary one: "You're not getting a refund so [bleep] off. We don't want to hear your sob stories."

The most revolutionary of the maxims Ryanair lives by is a plain-speaking contract with passengers. As the *Wall Street Journal's* Benjamin Katz reported after an interview with O'Leary a few years ago, "He was very distinct in saying that 'we don't treat our customers like guests. We give them a seat to fly on, and that's the agreement.'"

There are lessons here for Indian airlines, regulators and the flying public. We need a similar contract between airlines and passengers so that airlines can run no-frill, efficient operations and use the savings to treat their overworked pilots and staff more equitably. As a former travel, food and drink editor for the *Financial Times* who believes airline service is the most over-discussed subject at dinner parties, I would argue that airlines in India offer better value for money than anywhere else. This week, looking at absurdly low airfares from Bengaluru to Rajasthan while navigating eye-watering hotel tariffs in Jaipur in March led to a dislo-

cation so severe that I wondered if I was forgetting how to count.

By contrast, Ryanair charges an additional fee of almost ₹6,000 from passengers who check-in at the airport. A 10kg bag for check-in notified at the time of booking the ticket would cost about ₹1,000 but as much as ₹4,000 if done at the airport. The fee on additional cabin baggage beyond a small bag is comparable. O'Leary has even said that he would like to charge customers to use toilets on board, though it was not clear if he was serious. The customer is usually not right in his world-view: "If you don't comply with our rules, we hate you and we will torture you. But if you comply, we love you."

Although many O'Learyisms make their way into the company's rulebook, some of them, in a manner not unlike Warren Buffett's, are delivered because they are eye-catching and make for good copy for business journalists who must otherwise cover management tutored by public relations firms. He is on the record as

having said that Nigel Farage, who polls suggest may become the UK's next prime minister, "should be in prison" for championing Brexit. Recently, he revealed that US President Donald Trump had in 2016 turned on a charm offensive over a phone call. "Fifty minutes later, he [was] still going and his basic thing was, 'We want more flights to Prestwick (in Scotland) and into Shannon (in Ireland) so that people can fly to his golf courses,'" he told the *FT*. Trump offered O'Leary a stay at one of his hotels. Did he stay? "No I did [bleep] not," O'Leary said.

Even his straight talk and comic asides are dedicated to the bottom-line. It's cheap publicity. After more than 30 years as CEO, he is still looking to lead it for another several years but has narrowed his focus tellingly to "aircraft negotiations, cash generation and financial discipline." One more role, as marketer in chief, remains his as long as he is CEO. Ryanair spends relatively little on marketing: €4 million compared with €45 million by Air France or KLM.

If we want the ultimate Indian 'jugaad' to continue—i.e., low-fare services that mostly get us to our destinations on time despite high-maintenance customers who often don't follow simple instructions and usually have too much hand luggage—we need to use Ryanair as a case study of 'tough love' for passengers. It doesn't even offer seat pockets. Once again, this is to speed up turnaround times and reduce cabin cleaning costs.

The logic of the Indigo model, which runs a single-aircraft-model fleet and also turns planes around quickly, suggests that it would benefit most by doing what Ryanair does. It could use the money made by charging for both hand luggage and check-in suitcases to give its pilots more time off and reduce night flights that add disproportionately to pilot fatigue. Some pilots allege that even reductions in night flying under new roster rules are being obeyed by following their letter rather than spirit. "For management, we are just a number," says one Indigo pilot.

Our airlines need to focus on charging passengers more and treating their own staff better. We should also question why our metro-city airports are now pleasure palaces so lavish that railway passengers would think them a hallucination. It's time to end these sops for the middle-class and rich.



JUST A THOUGHT

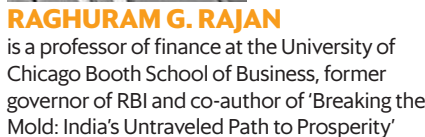
There is no such thing as a woman who doesn't work. There is only a woman who isn't paid for her work.

CAROLINE CRIADO-PEREZ

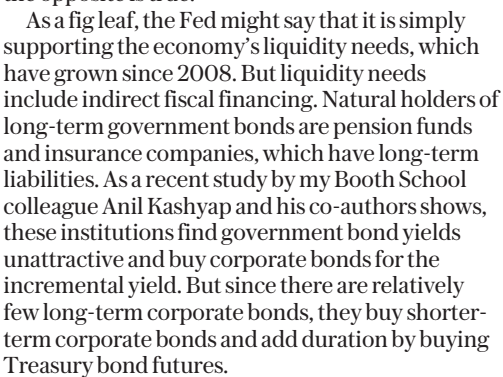
MINT CURATOR

Lego's Smart Bricks feel a little dumb: Why not try robotics?

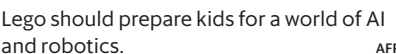
Their financing of fiscal gaps raises questions about the sustainability of debt being piled up by governments like America's



Unfortunately, while QE was easy to pull off, QT



The Fed isn't the only central bank enmeshed in direct or indirect fiscal financing. The current situation raises troubling questions for central banks, including whether committing to supply the system with ample reserves increases the instability of government debt financing. For the sake of their economies' long-term health, central bankers need better answers. ©2025/PROJECT SYNDICATE



But it would be a shame for Lego to miss the obvious opportunity it has with SmartBricks. What if they could teach kids how

Robots and AI will undoubtedly shape the future that today's youngest Lego users grow up in. The company could prepare them if it decides an educational ambition is worth pursuing again—which it almost certainly is.

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THEIR VIEW

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It compares poorly with other systems. Consider the EU's approach. Its taxonomy specifies exact thresholds in terms of grams

The usual defence is that India needs flexibility. The economy still depends on coal. Many sectors lack clean alternatives. Small

Worse, without uniform definitions, capital flows are likely to get distorted. Investors faced with disclosure overload can't compare companies across sectors, while credit decisions lack consistent data and public finance institutions work with different playbooks. The result: misdirection of the very capital India needs for its climate transition. In such a scenario, what would actually work?

Third, we need verification capacity. Sebi has approved some assurance providers but that's nowhere near enough. India needs a national registry of qualified verifiers using established standards. More certified assessors means better oversight, not just more paperwork.

A window for taxonomy corrections is still open, thankfully, but it may close soon. Once companies adapt their systems to current requirements and market expectations solidify around the existing framework changes would become much harder and more costly to make. Numbers create trust. Deadlines create urgency. Coordination creates scale. Without these, India risks turning its climate finance framework into an expensive exercise in theatrics.

Tax story

India’s tax base is expanding, but remains skewed

For a long time, policymakers have agonised over India’s narrow tax base and tax collections not keeping up with economic growth. However, reforms in the last five years now seem to be bearing fruit. Recent data from the Central Board of Direct Taxes (CBDT) show that between FY20 and FY25, the Centre’s direct tax collections expanded at a 16 per cent CAGR (Compound Annual Growth Rate) compared to 8.6 per cent CAGR in the previous five years.

Direct tax revenues have galloped despite muted nominal GDP growth, resulting in big gains in tax buoyancy. Direct tax collections grew at 1.7 times nominal GDP in the last five years. There has also been some widening in the tax base. Between FY20 and FY25, the number of individual return filers has grown 36 per cent, while the number of corporate filers has seen a 30 per cent increase. The number of taxpayers has kept pace with returns filed. This is positive as in the past, growth in returns filed often didn’t translate into contributions to the tax kitty. The reasons for this could be two-fold. For one, the last five years have seen significant direct tax reforms, with the government taking a carrot and stick approach where taxpayers are offered much lower rates if they give up exemptions. In September 2019, domestic companies were offered a 22 per cent tax rate (against 33 per cent) if they opted for an exemption-free regime. Most companies have since migrated to this system. In April 2020, individual taxpayers were given the option of a similar exemption-free regime with lower rates with this eventually made the default for every taxpayer. With this new regime sweetened with lower rates, many individuals have made the switch.

Two, the tax department has tightened compliance. Real-time data sharing arrangements between CBDT and CBIC (Central Board of Indirect Taxes) after GST have allowed the two arms to identify discrepancies between reported incomes from business and personal sources and plug them. Tech-enabled data mining on high-value transactions and aggregated wealth data at the PAN level, has allowed CBDT to track down under-reported heads of income.

However, several issues remain unaddressed from the taxpayer point of view. One, taxpayers continue to grapple with voluminous return filings, unnecessary disclosures and frivolous demand notices, not to speak of rent-seeking by tax officials. Two, while there has been a five to six-fold expansion in the return filers in the ₹50 lakh plus income bracket, the bottom of the pyramid is shrinking with 30 per cent of filers in the sub- ₹5 lakh category dropping out in five years. As they account for a third of taxpayers, this is a worrying trend. Three, from making roughly equal contributions to the tax kitty five years ago, individual taxpayers now chip in with 25 per cent higher taxes than companies. This skew needs corrective steps.

FROM THE VIEWSROOM.

Canine row: Misplaced anger

Chitra Narayanan

The Supreme Court wants to ban dogs from institutions — from schools, colleges, hospitals, and public spaces — and consign them to shelters. Admittedly, India has a huge dog dilemma, and the mounting anger over cases of dog bites is justifiable. The street dog population has exploded over the years, and peaceful co-existence no longer seems feasible. But the anger seems to be misdirected. The civic bodies have abjectly failed in the animal birth control (ABC) programmes and shown gross negligence in their duties and yet the public and judicial anger seems to be directed at voiceless dogs and their carers. In my neighbourhood in East Delhi, there are approximately 150 community dogs. Out of these a hundred are under the direct care of a band of responsible volunteers, and each pooch has a name, has vaccination records and has been sterilised. There have been negligible bite cases in the last decade by any of the dogs

under the care of the volunteers. The few that have happened have been by dogs that have been dumped in the neighbourhood — this happens off and on, with the frequency increasing since August 11, 2025 when the Supreme Court in a suo motu case ordered all strays to be captured and housed in shelters. Suddenly new dogs arrived in our area, but the volunteers took swift action — rounding them up and getting them vaccinated and sterilised and trying to find shelters for them. Thankfully, the absurd order was reversed on August 22, 2025 with a different bench giving the directive to return to the ‘capture-sterilise-vaccinate-return’ method. But the new year has been fraught with anxiety with some of the pronouncements made by judges in a hearing on January 13 positively antagonistic against the pooches. As my neighbourhood has shown, where there is a will, the issue can be resolved with concerted action. But it should not be falling on the lot of animal lovers — the state has to wake up and do its duty.

India and the next Kondratiev wave

GROWTH NARRATIVE. Digital deep tech will drive the next wave. India, which has the talent, data and demand, can play a key role here if policy, capital and institutions align



VIPIN SONDHI
SANDEEP VERMA

Every few decades, the global economy reshapes itself decisively. New technologies rise, old industries fade and economic leadership shifts. Nearly a century ago, economist Nikolai Kondratiev described these moments as long waves of growth, each lasting 40-60 years and driven by clusters of transformative technologies. As the digital economy matures and a new convergence of frontier technologies gathers pace, another wave is possibly taking shape. This time, India appears well positioned to ride it.

THE FIVE WAVES History bears out Kondratiev’s insight. The first wave (1780-1830), driven by steam power and textile mechanisation propelled the industrial revolution. The second wave (1830-1880) was built on railways, iron and coal. The third wave (1880-1930), centred on electrification and chemicals, enabled mass production and modern R&D. The fourth wave (1930-1980), dominated by automobiles and petrochemicals, reshaped mobility, urbanisation and geopolitics. The fifth wave (1980-2030) was driven by information technology and automation, creating the digital economy and globalised services.

Notably, each wave reinforced production systems, spawned new institutions and recalibrated global power. Countries that aligned early, prospered. Those that lagged were forced to adapt. India’s engagement with these K-waves has been uneven; peripheral in the first three, marginal in the fourth and a partial beneficiary of the fifth through software and IT services, but rarely shaping frontier technologies. The anticipated sixth K-wave, however, may provide a structural opportunity.

THE SIXTH WAVE This new K-wave, expected to gather momentum beyond 2030, will be driven

by digital deep technologies: artificial intelligence, quantum computing, biotechnology, advanced materials, space systems and clean energy. Unlike earlier cycles, these technologies are convergent. AI is accelerating drug discovery, materials design, manufacturing optimisation and climate modelling. Medical technology is fusing with data and automation. Energy systems are becoming digital.

Deep tech satisfies the conditions of a K-wave, requiring clusters of breakthrough innovation and sustained investment to create economic value. There is another difference. Earlier waves were enterprise-led, driven by private capital responding to market demand. The sixth wave will hinge on mission-mode outcomes. Climate change, health security, energy transition and supply-chain resilience are global imperatives. Public digital infrastructure, long-horizon capital, regulatory foresight and ecosystem coordination now matter as much as entrepreneurship.

INDIA’S MOMENT One early signal is visible in digital finance. By the end of 2024, the Unified Payments Interface had processed approximately 172 billion transactions, growing to around 228 billion in 2025, functioning as a general-purpose economic rail. It underpins everything from everyday payments to emerging AI-driven analytics for credit and fraud insights.

In earlier K-waves, railways and electricity served as platforms on which industries scaled. Today, digital public infrastructure is beginning to play that role in India, supported by robust domestic markets. A comparable transition is visible in the space sector. India’s recent lunar

This new K-wave will be driven by digital deep technologies: artificial intelligence, quantum computing, biotechnology, advanced materials, space systems and clean energy

mission captured public imagination, but the more consequential shift has been institutional and economic. Long anchored by ISRO and now opened up through IN-SPaCe, the space sector has moved beyond a government-led model. Policy liberalisation has enabled private firms to enter launch services, satellite manufacturing and downstream analytics at the intersection of AI, advanced materials and precision manufacturing. Space is moving into a viable economic domain with integration into global innovation networks, powered by India’s frugal scientific prowess.

Clean energy offers another indicator. In green hydrogen, mission-led coordination across energy, industry and scientific agencies has accelerated pilots in manufacturing and mobility, compressing what would otherwise have been a decades-long adoption curve. India’s push on hydrogen is not merely about decarbonisation; it is about building integrated industrial value chains.

Among the early signals are electrolyser-based hydrogen production projects in Haryana and India’s first hydrogen-powered train prototype, suggest movement from policy intent to execution.

If carried through, hydrogen could play for India the role petrochemicals played for fourth-wave economies, anchoring a broad, export-capable industrial ecosystem.

POLICY, PLATFORMS, AND CONVERGENCE Policy architecture is beginning to reflect this moment. Across public fora, the Prime Minister has emphasised that reforms will remain central to India’s economic agenda, with the long-term vision to build an Atmanirbhar and Viksit Bharat by 2047. This continuity matters for deep-tech sectors, where long investment cycles depend as much on regulatory predictability, capital and talent. The National Quantum Mission, India AI Mission, National Semiconductor Mission, National Electric Mobility Mission, space-sector reforms and clean energy initiatives point in the same direction: recognition that frontier technologies will determine

competitiveness. Their impact, however, will depend on convergence. AI must accelerate materials discovery; clean energy must integrate with digital grids and storage; biotechnology must link data, automation and manufacturing. Every successful K-wave has been defined not by isolated inventions, but by clusters of technologies reinforcing each other.

Four factors will determine whether India can ride this wave. **First, institutions:** Deep technologies require translational platforms that connect research to industry. Recent reforms, including the creation of the Anusandhan National Research Foundation (ANRF) and the launch of the ₹1 lakh crore Research, Development and Innovation (RDI) Fund, signal an effort to align public funding, private participation and frontier science at scale.

Second, patient capital: Breakthrough technologies demand financing aligned to long cycles rather than short-term returns.

Third, human capital and IP systems: Talent development, credible intellectual property regimes and incentives for researchers are essential to sustain knowledge accumulation across deep-tech transitions.

Fourth, standards, governance and global integration: In every wave, rule-makers have shaped markets. AI safety norms, hydrogen certification, quantum security protocols and medical technology regulation will influence who leads and who follows.

In conclusion, the contours of the next wave are now visible in the convergence of digital deep technologies and mission-led innovation. India has the key structural ingredients: talent, scale, data and demand. If policy, capital and institutions align to long cycles, deep tech could write the next chapter of India’s economic story.

By 2047, success will be measured by whether deep technology is embedded in national economic infrastructure, reshaping productivity, sovereignty and economic gravitas.

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Rural development needs people, not just funds

A national cadre of trained local para-professionals in rural India is needed to foster climate-resilient farming

PVS Suryakumar

Public money isn’t the constraint in rural India. The missing link is people — locally rooted *Dharti-Putras* translating schemes into livelihoods. India’s public system invests heavily in agriculture and rural development. The Union Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare was allocated roughly ₹1.32 lakh crore in 2024-25, while MGNREGA accounted for another ₹86,000 crore. At the State level, a representative farm State like Odisha set aside ₹33,919 crore for agriculture and allied activities. We are not short of schemes or public resources. What we lack is a continuous, competent human presence in every panchayat that can translate these investments into resilient livelihoods and higher farm productivity.

District and State reviews routinely read like inventory statements: beneficiaries enrolled, fertilizer bags distributed, ponds excavated. Rarely do they ask whether fertilizers were applied appropriately, whether a new irrigation tank led to diversified cropping, better fodder for milch cattle, or higher household incomes. Line departments are administratively dense — busy troubleshooting and disbursing. What is thin is follow-through on the ground.

This gap matters because agriculture, horticulture and animal husbandry are practice-driven systems. Productivity improves only when advice is timely and context-specific. Public assets deliver results only when someone stays on to make them work for crops, livestock and livelihoods.

A practical and fiscally modest answer is a national cadre of trained local para-professionals — *Dharti-Putras* — young women and men selected from their own villages and certified to support climate-resilient farming, livestock care, water management and small-enterprise handholding. They would not be permanent government staff. Instead, *Dharti-Putras* would be locally embedded, contracted when programmes need them, and remunerated through a blend of modest public honoraria and service payments from farmers, FPOs, SHGs and value-chain actors. Their remit may also include basic, verifiable social-audit reporting on asset maintenance and scheme functioning in their own panchayats.

COST-EFFECTIVE Training and certifying 10,000 *Dharti-Putras* at an illustrative cost of ₹1 lakh per person — covering training, starter kits and simple digital tools — would require about ₹100 crore. This is a



FARMERS. Need for handholding

negligible share of existing agriculture allocations. A small, targeted investment can seed a persistent field presence that multiplies the value of every rupee spent on assets and inputs.

India already has fragments of this idea. Krishi Sakhis, NRLM community cadres and other local resource persons have shown how trained locals can mobilise adoption and sustain enterprises. The problem is that these cadres are typically programme-bound — assembled and dispersed with project cycles. What is missing is a durable national architecture that treats local human capacity as public infrastructure rather than a temporary expense. Global experience supports this logic. From community animal-health workers in East Africa to farmer-field facilitators in Asia and forest stewards in Nepal,

locally rooted actors have extended the state’s reach and improved outcomes. *Dharti-Putras* build on this proof of concept as a national, certified cadre that combines local trust with institutional permanence, blended financing and clear career pathways. Design will determine success. Recruitment must be local and selective. Certification should be competency-based, with continuous technical backstopping through KVKs, polytechnics and extension networks. Public funding should create the cadre and pay honoraria for public tasks. *Dharti-Putras* remain self-employed, supplementing incomes through farming or fee-based services from farmers, FPOs and SHGs. A modest mandatory state contribution will ensure buy-in and accountability. Institutions such as the newly established Tribhuvan Sahkari University at Anand could provide a credible, non-contractor anchor for such training. The state remains the financier, regulator and guarantor of public goods; *Dharti-Putras* become the operational bridge that turns infrastructure and investments into resilient livelihoods. India has the money, the schemes and the local institutions. This human architecture can make them work better.

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German ties The visit of German Chancellor Friedrich Merz to India assumes significance against the backdrop of geopolitical disruptions triggered by the policies of US President Donald Trump. Germany is trying to reduce its energy dependence on Russia and reassess the US role in Europe’s security architecture. India faces high US tariffs, and sustained Western pressure to curb its purchase of Russian oil. In this context, both countries have recognised the need to find common

ground to safeguard their national interests. The German Chancellor’s reiteration of support for concluding the India-EU Free Trade Agreement at the upcoming EU-India summit on January 27 is therefore timely.

M Jeyaram Sholavandan (TN)

Welcome move It refers to ‘No more 10-minute delivery: Govt to e/q-comm players’. Quick commerce platforms used 10-minute delivery as their biggest USP and the line between need and wants blurred for consumers over

time. It is heartening that now delivery aggregators can not promise 10-minute delivery. But it is not the end of the road for quick commerce as deliveries will still happen without pushing unsafe driving. For double income families q-comm was a boon, but few extra minutes for delivery will not make a difference to their lives.

Bal Govind Noida

Tax equity Apropos the Editorial ‘Tax breakthrough’ (January 14). The

recent OECD agreement on the global minimum tax, while a step forward in curbing profit shifting by multinationals, leaves a major concern with the exemption granted to US-headquartered companies like the big tech giants. This special treatment, secured under US pressure, means American MNCs largely escape the 15 per cent floor that applies to others, potentially putting non-US firms — including those operating in India — at a relative disadvantage. India, as a signatory, has already moved in the right direction by abolishing the

equalisation levy and aligning with the broader framework. To protect our interests, the government should swiftly finalise and implement Pillar Two rules domestically, including a qualified domestic minimum top-up tax where needed. Continuing to push for fair implementation of Pillar One will also help secure more revenue from digital profits. Such pragmatic steps can ensure India benefits fully from the global effort despite the asymmetry. **A Myilsami** Coimbatore

Business as usual

Govt nudge shouldn't be an exercise in optics. The draft social security rules for gig workers must be reviewed

THE GOVERNMENT HAS nudged quick-commerce operators to stop publicising their 10-minute delivery services—and they have complied, at least formally. But it is hardly surprising that barely a day later, these services continue to be available as before. No one seriously expected them to be discontinued. After all, quick commerce is a lucrative business, especially at a time when a growing number of households want goods delivered almost instantaneously. To be sure, no platform will openly defy the Centre's directive on advertising; that would not go down well with the authorities. But aggregators are unlikely to give up the opportunity to leverage an abundance of cheap labour to boost profits. Speed will therefore remain central to the business model. In other words, the era of 10-minute deliveries is far from over. What should worry policymakers, however, is that delivery riders—and those sharing the road with them—remain exposed to significant risks.

Many have suggested that the government should take a hard line and bar ultra-fast deliveries altogether. But such direct and drastic intervention in business models is neither easy nor particularly desirable. The result is an unhappy middle ground—the service continues, advertising is toned down, and safety concerns persist. More troubling is what this means for gig workers' livelihoods. It is difficult to see how their meagre earnings can meaningfully improve under the current system. Zomato founder Deepinder Goyal has said average hourly earnings have risen to ₹102 from ₹92 in 2024. On paper, this suggests that a delivery partner working 10 hours a day for 26 days could earn about ₹26,500 a month, or roughly ₹21,000 after fuel and other expenses.

But reality appears far removed from these theoretical calculations. A recent on-ground experiment by Indian Express correspondent Soumyarendra Barik tells a different story. Posing as a gig worker for three days, Barik rode 105 km, worked over 15 hours and completed 23 deliveries to earn ₹782. After fuel costs of ₹250, he was left with ₹532—about ₹34 an hour. The gap between promise and practice is telling. Not every worker can achieve the "average" earnings cited by platforms. Many likely cannot, as it requires punishing schedules, minimal breaks, constant availability during peak hours and near-total acceptance of orders. Refusing an order often comes at a cost. Some platforms penalise workers by disabling their accounts for a day if three orders are rejected; others put accounts on temporary hold. This is before accounting for the physical toll of navigating traffic in cities like Delhi or Mumbai.

The gig economy has undoubtedly created employment for millions. But even if these workers are not on company rolls, they deserve a better deal. The government would do well to revisit the draft social security rules, particularly the eligibility criteria. Lowering the minimum number of days a gig worker must log with a single aggregator—say, to 45 from 90—would be a start. As this workforce continues to expand, it is incumbent on policymakers to ensure that speed and convenience for consumers do not come at the cost of safety and a dignified livelihood for those powering the system. Banning advertisements is no substitute for substantive reform. At best, it is an exercise in optics; at worst, it deflects attention from the real issues that need to be addressed. The debate around 10-minute delivery should not remain what it is today—a performance that reassures no one and protects little.

Big Oil won't keep beating the crude market

JOHN D ROCKEFELLER, the godfather of the modern oil industry, called his tactic of purposely crashing oil prices and sending the stocks of his rivals into a tail-spin "a good sweating." Soon after, he'd conveniently buy shares cheaply. For the following century, one of the few certainties of petroleum investing was that low crude prices are bad for Big Oil.

That remained true until last year, when oil company shares rose while the cost of a barrel of crude plunged. For some investors, it marked the beginning of a new paradigm. I was never 100% convinced, and now cracks are starting to appear: It doesn't look like the sector can sustain its outperformance versus the commodity market. A reckoning likely looms in 2026.

Last year, West Texas Intermediate, the US oil price benchmark, and Brent crude, its European counterpart, dropped by about a fifth. But shares of the world's largest international oil companies—including Exxon Mobil Corp., Chevron Corp, Shell PLC, TotalEnergies SE, and BP PLC—rose anywhere from 4% to 18%.

Behind the breakaway performance is an industry that in many ways is being managed a lot more like Rockefeller's Standard Oil Co. a century ago. The American oil tycoon had an infamous attention to strict cost controls, down to the very last cent. For example, his employees used machines that applied 40 soldering drops to seal the lids on five-gallon cans of kerosene. "Have you tried 38?" Rockefeller asked during an inspection tour. While the number the boss suggested wasn't enough—some cans would invariably leak—trial-and-error tests demonstrated that 39 always sufficed. That single drop of tin solder delivered cost savings of \$2,500 in the first year—about \$100,000 in today's money.

Today's oil executives are similarly focused on saving billions of dollars in recurrent spending, in some cases by firing a large chunk of the staff. In the most significant moves, Chevron and Shell have both announced plans to reduce their workforces by as much as 20%.

By reducing spending on both day-to-day operations and on new projects, companies have been able to offset the impact of lower commodity prices. Higher production has also helped. The data says it all: The top five international oil companies are expected to have generated free cash flow—the measure between cash generation and expenses—of nearly \$96 billion in 2025, when WTI oil averaged just under \$65 a barrel. That's almost the same as in 2008, when WTI averaged more than \$99 during the commodity boom.

As companies generate more free cash flow, executives are able to boost dividends and sustain multi-billion dollar buyback programs even when commodity prices weaken, as is now the case. The result? Investors are re-rating Big Oil's shares. The timing couldn't be better: Fossil fuels aren't as unpopular today as they were five years ago, and that means more investors are willing to buy oil company stocks even while crude prices are depressed.

The sector has another cushion: The cyclical downturn comes after the oil majors used the commodity windfall of 2021–2023, after Russia invaded Ukraine, to reduce debt. With the exception of BP, all the top oil companies could re-leverage to sustain dividends and buybacks—to a point.

But capital discipline and debt reduction alone won't sustain their shares forever. It's early days, but so far this year WTI crude has averaged \$58 a barrel, significantly lower than the nearly \$75 a barrel of the first two weeks of 2025, suggesting further downside to the sector's free cash flow. The problem is exacerbated by simultaneously lower natural gas prices, plus weaker refining and chemical margins. Put it all together and it's difficult to see how Big Oil can sustain its out-performance this year if oil remains, as I expect, in the doldrums.

INDIA'S GROWTH DEPENDS ON OPENNESS CALIBRATED CAREFULLY WITH SECURITY CONCERNS

Keeping India open and secure

AMITABH KANT
RANVEER NAGAICH

Respectively chairperson and managing director, Fairfax Centre for Free Enterprise



Globally, screening frameworks have balanced investment needs and national security concerns. The Committee on Foreign Investment in the US (CFIUS), Australia's Foreign Investment Review Board (FIRB), the European Union's Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) Screening Regulation, Japan's framework, and South Korea's system all share a common philosophy of applying risk-based, sector-specific scrutiny. Clear trigger conditions are defined, and reviews start only if the

space and defence; transport & telecommunications; and power, petroleum, coal, and minerals. All other sectors are designated non-strategic. In strategic sectors, the public sector will remain present. In the same vein, India's FDI policy mandates government approval for investments in defence (above 74%), telecom (above 49%), and public sector banks (up to 20%).

However, over the past five years, markets have become more resilient and

Sectors like infrastructure, banking, power, defence, etc. carry national security implications and require strong domestic capabilities

deeper. Domestic retail participation has increased, and growth prospects look solid. Given our investment and job-creation needs, can PN3 be reviewed? According to leading law firms, several gaps exist within the current framework. First, there is no clear definition of who qualifies as a "beneficial owner". Second, there is no standard threshold for when approval is required, and no fixed timeline for decisions. As a result, investments in areas with no security implications, such as consumer electronics, auto ancillaries, renewables, and other fast-growing manufacturing segments often face delays. These delays slow expansion plans and discourage global firms from integrating India more deeply into their supply chains.

Investments thrive in environments with policy predictability and transparency. Rather than a blanket ban on investments, a structured, transparent

approach can yield better results. Our FDI policy already reflects this risk-based approach, which must be institutionalised. We must evolve a risk-based system that protects national security and keeps India open for business. India could adopt a three-tier framework—high-risk sectors subject to full scrutiny; moderate-risk sectors reviewed only when specific, objective triggers are activated; and low-risk sectors placed under the automatic route. A clearly defined beneficial ownership threshold, of say 10–25%, and a 60–90 day statutory decision period, would bring much-needed policy predictability and transparency.

We must also take an outcome-oriented view. Our goal is to raise our per capita income. Investments that create jobs and help India align with global value chains must be welcomed. Consumption accounts for ~60% of our GDP, with per capita income of \$2,500 in nominal terms. If we account for purchasing power, our per-capita incomes are closer to \$9,000. Either way, our domestic market is sizeable. As our per-capita incomes grow, so will domestic consumption and savings. Our large domestic market and our high growth potential are also strategic advantages we must leverage. In evaluating proposals, we must also keep in mind the potential for job creation. To start with, sectors such as electronics, renewables, and energy storage can be opened.

In the past weeks, the reform agenda has picked up significant pace. We have seen reforms in the Goods and Services Tax (GST), the abolition of several QCOs, and, most recently, the operationalisation of the new Labour Codes. A risk-based investment screening mechanism is the natural next step in this reform trajectory. It would allow India to protect critical sectors while keeping the broader economy open to capital, technology, and global partnerships. Reform does not mean dilution; the most critical sectors would continue to receive the strictest scrutiny.

India's PPP journey and the road ahead



V RAVI ANSHUMAN
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Respectively, professors of finance, IIM Bangalore and Jagdish Sheth School of Management

As infrastructure spending accelerates, public-private partnerships will drive growth and jobs only if risks are allocated and managed prudently

INFRASTRUCTURE INVESTMENTS ARE not only a prime driver of future GDP growth, but also generators of significant rural employment. A recent Morgan Stanley report estimates a total investment of around \$1.5 trillion (₹130 lakh crores) in the infrastructure space over 2024–2029. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has also reiterated the criticality of a strong infrastructure backbone towards the realisation of our Viksit Bharat 2047 goal. During the last decade or so, there has been a significant thrust in using the Public Private Partnership (PPP) business model in the infrastructure space as it eases fiscal constraints that governments face while also delivering the private sector's managerial efficiency and customer service.

However, ill-designed infrastructure investments are a recipe for future crisis. Below, we outline a set of recent policy reforms that have sought to mitigate many of these risks by facilitating optimal risk allocation, improving administrative efficacy, fostering greater capital formation for infrastructure investments and effectively leveraging technology.

Acquisition of land and obtaining environmental clearances are challenging in the Indian ecosystem where interests of diverse stakeholders must be delicately balanced. However, recent modifications in model PPP concession agreements place the onus of obtaining these approvals on the government, the entity most suited for managing this approval risk. As these approvals are specified as conditions precedent, the private sponsor is shielded from this risk.

Uncertainty in demand for infrastructure services creates another challenge. Bidders often overestimate demand and

bid aggressively leading to unsustainable high debt levels. Conversely, underestimating demand leads to windfall gains for the concessionaire, which raises doubts about the propriety of the bidding process. This leads to popular demands for ex-post renegotiation, which deters high-quality sponsors from bidding for future projects. In either case, society bears the cost.

Several contractual innovations have been developed to overcome these challenges. For example, the BOT-Annuity model assigns the responsibility of financing, development and operations of the project with the private sponsor in return for fixed annuity payments. The government collects the revenues from the users,

shielding the sponsor from demand risk. The annuity structure acts as a lever for ensuring quality of operations and maintenance activities by the sponsor. The hybrid annuity model (HAM) reduces the financial burden on the sponsor as the development cost is shared with the government (typically 60:40). An additional contractual feature is to adjust the concession period based on traffic realisation. Specifically, if actual traffic exceeds expectations, the concession period is reduced and vice versa. Similarly, in the airports space, user-tariffs are periodically revised upward or downward based on past revenue realisations.

Another policy reform adopted is the refinement of the bidding process for airports, where the parameter has been modified from revenue share percentage to

premium per passenger. This arrangement mitigates ex-post disputes between the regulator and the concessionaire, as monitoring revenue is complex whereas passenger data is fully transparent. This encourages greater participation by high quality sponsors who might have been deterred by the regulatory risk associated with potential ambiguity in interpretation of realised revenue, subject to accounting discretion.

Advances in technology have also enabled greater transparency in the development and operation of infrastructure projects. FASTag adoption provides better estimates of traffic at toll-roads. Installation of 48 million smart

meters has improved billing efficiency and reduced electricity theft. Usage of technology-based dashboards, satellite imagery, and drone-based surveillance has improved real-time monitoring, resulting in fewer delays and cost overruns. This reduced information asymmetry has enhanced the bankability of infrastructure projects.

Alongside, creation of Infrastructure Investment Trusts (InvITs) has expanded the capital pool. For sponsors, InvITs mitigate the financing challenge as they free up capital for future investments through sale of steady cashflow generating projects to an InvIT. For investors, InvITs provide a structured way for generating stable, predictable returns. A recent Knight Frank study highlights that InvITs in India have generated 16.5% returns for investors and expect the total assets under man-

agement for InvITs to increase from \$73 billion in 2025 to \$258 billion by 2030.

PM GatiShakti seeks to reduce red-tape through timely approvals, early detection of conflicts, and improved overall coordination. For example, in the Jogighopa Multimodal Logistic Park project in Assam, this initiative brought together waterways, railways, roads, logistics, and state agencies onto a single digital planning platform, reducing frictions in project execution.

However, a fair bit of ground still needs to be covered—a key area being dispute resolution. Given the long-term nature of infrastructure projects, disagreements are inevitable. Therefore, a time-bound and effective dispute resolution mechanism becomes critical. Further, the viability of setting up specialised courts for resolving disputes related to infrastructure projects like the Technology and Construction Court in the UK can be considered.

Another aspect that limits capital formation in infrastructure is regulatory uncertainty faced by investors due to the risk of ex-post invalidation of contractual terms due to an adverse or favourable shock. A feasible solution is to borrow from finance literature to incorporate ex-ante option-like features in contracts, so that the effects of such extreme events are transparently shared among parties. Innovative use of technology such as smart pricing of infrastructure services based on real-time usage data can enhance contracting clarity. While contract design can provide some flexibility for renegotiation, maintaining contractual sanctity gives greater confidence to investors, driving greater ex-ante participation.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Crowded borrowing

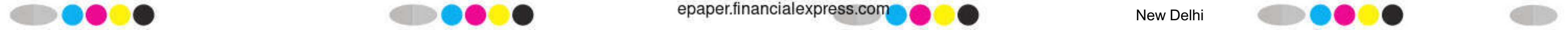
Apropos of "Rate cuts aren't enough" (FE, January 14), the editorial rightly points out that despite the Reserve Bank of India's 125 basis points of repo rate cuts since last year, the 10-year G-sec yield remains stuck around 6.6%, making borrowing costs stubbornly

high. Heavy supply from both Centre and states, combined with moderating state revenue growth (down to about 9.2% in April–November FY26 from 17.4% the previous year) and tepid demand from banks and foreign portfolio investors is keeping the market under pressure. To ease this, the

government should prioritise better coordination on borrowing calendars to avoid bunching of supply, especially from states. Boosting private investment through faster project clearances and incentives could help absorb more liquidity and reduce reliance on public borrowing. The RBI may need to continue

targeted liquidity support until demand picks up. Above all, sustaining fiscal discipline while accelerating capex execution will be key to restoring market confidence and gradually bringing yields down. —SM Jeeva, Chennai

●Write to us at feletters@expressindia.com





OPINION

The
Hindustan Times
ESTABLISHED IN 1924

{ OUR TAKE }

Reel and reality
in Tamil politics

The controversy over a Vijay-starrer may enhance the actor’s appeal as a political outsider

Politics and cinema go hand in hand in Tamil Nadu. So, it is no surprise that the reluctance of the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC) to clear Vijay-starrer *Jana Nayagan* (People’s Leader) has turned into a controversy with Tamil Nadu chief minister (CM) and DMK leader MK Stalin and Congress leader Rahul Gandhi accusing the BJP of weaponising CBFC to achieve political aims.

Vijay has announced that his political start-up, Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam (TVK), will contest the assembly polls due in April; *Jana Nayagan* is to be his screen swansong and, as the title suggests, is meant to carry his political message and launch him as a people’s politician. Though untested in electoral politics, Vijay’s screen popularity has turned established parties restive. In his rallies, Vijay has tried to align with the ideals of the Dravidian Movement while criticising the DMK and AIADMK, the two major political parties that claim the movement’s lineage. With no party or leader in position to decisively swing the elections away from the incumbent, the TVK is now a much sought-after ally (there are reports that both the Congress and the BJP are wooing it), while Vijay has refused to reveal his cards. And, the CBFC has given the actor useful publicity that has shifted the conversation from his disastrous rally in Karur last year, which caused the death of 41 persons. As part of the probe into that tragedy, the CBI has summoned Vijay for questioning on January 19, after previously questioning him on January 12.

Jana Nayagan is not Vijay’s first attempt to mix politics and cinema. Some of his films have directly attacked people/parties in government, leading to run-ins with the establishment. His 2013 *Thalaivaa* (Leader) had the tag line “time to lead”, which irked then CM Jayalalithaa. The film was released only after the tag line was removed. The 2017 *Mersal* had Vijay criticising GST and Digital India initiatives. A 2018 film, *Sarkar*, had a villain named after Jayalalithaa’s birth name, and expectedly, the film was targeted by the AIADMK. In all these, the hero (Vijay) has an anti-establishment persona and works to do public good by challenging the system. This is the playbook that the DMK, and later, MGR, followed in the 1950s and thereafter, as they used cinema as a platform for public outreach and propaganda. A hostile State only embellishes Vijay’s profile as an outsider and anti-establishment figure.

However, Rajinikanth’s experience with a similar strategy in the 1990s and after offers a sobering lesson for those who believe that the path to winning Tamil Nadu lies through cinema. Still, politics in Tamil Nadu is in flux, and politicians, unsure of the public mood, do not want to alienate any potential ally.

Ensuring effective
RTE implementation

The Right to Education (RTE) Act provision of private, unaided schools needing to reserve 25% of seats in Class I for students belonging to economically weaker sections (EWS) was borne of the realisation within policy circles of the many deficiencies of public education in India. The EWS quota was expected to harness private education in a manner where the poor benefitted while the schools were reimbursed by the government for costs incurred. In the 16 years since, however, the significantly low intake of EWS students relative to vacancies, despite a large population of eligible children, underscores a failure in the implementation of the provision. It is in this context that the Supreme Court has ordered the framing of binding rules on EWS admissions across states and Union Territories.

But the challenge is also one of battling mindsets. Integration of EWS students has been a mindissue among schools that have reluctantly implemented the provision. There are several reports of schools discouraging EWS students, through segregated seating in classrooms to separate shifts at inconvenient timings. Several other hurdles are also reported, from disputed documentation to reluctance on the part of schools due to delays in reimbursements from the government. All of this has been exacerbated by learning gaps within nominally integrated classrooms — fostering an “equal-but-separate” atmosphere. Eliminating EWS vacancies will need these issues to be addressed, but it can only play a supplementary role in bridging the accessibility gap. For a truly robust school ecosystem, public schools will need to get better in terms of quality of education and infrastructure — obviating the need for quotas in private schools.

Harnessing technology
to strengthen democracy

The world is witnessing a digital turn in democracy, and New Delhi should serve as the platform where the Commonwealth forges a consensus on how to navigate this transition

As the winter mist settles over New Delhi, the historic Samvidhan Sadan is hosting the custodians of the Commonwealth’s parliamentary traditions. It is with a profound sense of responsibility and pride that I welcome my fellow Speakers and Presiding Officers for the 28th Conference of Speakers and Presiding Officers of the Commonwealth (CSPOC).

We meet at a time when the very nature of our work is being reshaped by forces our predecessors could scarcely have imagined. The gavel and the rulebook, which have long represented our authority, must now work alongside algorithms and Artificial Intelligence (AI). It is fitting, therefore, that we have chosen to focus our deliberations on themes that are of contemporary relevance.

It is with a sense of profound legacy that we recall the genesis of our fraternity in 1969, established through the vision of Lucien Lamou-

reux of Canada to foster impartiality and the development of parliamentary institutions independent of executive influence. Since its inception, with a permanent secretariat in Ottawa, this forum has stood as a guardian of our shared democratic values. India has always been a pillar of this tradition, having had the distinct honour of hosting the Commonwealth family on three previous occasions: The second CSPOC in 1970-71, the eighth in 1986, and the 20th in 2010. We now prepare to convene the 28th CSPOC in January 2026 — marking the fourth time New Delhi welcomes this prestigious gathering, ensuring that our parliamentary institutions continue to evolve in the service of our citizens.

The choice of our venue is deliberate. The Samvidhan Sadan is not merely a building; it is the hallowed ground where India’s Constitution was debated and drafted. It represents the soul of the “Mother of Democracy”. By convening here, we affirm that while our tools may modernise, our foundational values of sovereignty, representation and debate remain immutable.

Yet, we cannot govern the future with the tools of the past. During the recent Standing Committee meeting in Guernsey, I emphasised that India’s emergence as a global hub for technology offers a unique opportu-

nity for the Commonwealth family. We are witnessing a digital turn in democracy, and it is my vision that New Delhi serves as the platform where we forge a consensus on how to navigate this transition.

I am eager to share with my colleagues the strides India has made through our Digital Sansad initiative. We have moved beyond mere digitisation to true digital empowerment. In the Lok Sabha (Lower House), we are deploying advanced AI tools to break down the barriers that distance citizens from their representatives. Foremost among these is the Sansad Bhashini project. In a Commonwealth defined by its rich linguistic diversity, language should never be a gatekeeper to democracy.

By utilising AI for real-time interpretation and transcription, we can ensure that a Member of Parliament can speak in their mother tongue and be understood instantly by their peers and their constituents. Once developed fully, this technology will be in the service of inclusion — a principle I believe is vital for the 2.7 billion citizens of our Commonwealth nations.

I am aware of the capacity constraints faced by many of our sister nations, particularly across the Global South. In many of these jurisdictions, the imperative to undertake high-quality legislative research is



Om Birla



Samvidhan Sadan is not merely a building; it is the hallowed ground where India’s Constitution was debated and drafted.

HT ARCHIVE

often hampered by limitations in time, expertise and financial resources. Therefore, a cornerstone of my vision for the 2026 Conference is to demonstrate how AI can act as a transformative force multiplier. By supporting critical functions — ranging from intricate legislative drafting to the comprehensive analysis of complex budget documents, we can empower our Parliaments to operate with greater efficiency, ultimately advancing the welfare of our people with renewed vigour.

In the spirit of *vasudhaiva kutumbakam* (the world is one family), India stands ready to share its digital public infrastructure with the Commonwealth. We do not see technology as a proprietary asset but as a public good that strengthens democratic resilience across the globe. However, our optimism must be tempered with vigilance.

The rise of social media has brought the Parliament closer to the people, but it has also introduced new vulnerabilities. We must have a candid dialogue about the security and well-being of our members in an era of online harassment and deep-fakes. It is the duty of the Speaker to protect the dignity of the House, and today, that perimeter extends into the digital realm.

The 28th CSPOC represents a convergence of India’s democratic heritage and its technological future. I invite the Speakers of the Commonwealth to New Delhi not just to observe our progress, but to partner in it. Together, let us ensure that the legislatures of the future are efficient, inclusive and above all, anchored in the trust of the people we serve.

Om Birla is Speaker, Lok Sabha. The views expressed are personal

The case for nuance in
the gig economy debate

The recent strike by delivery partners of quick-commerce platforms has once again thrust India’s gig economy into the spotlight. What began as a dispute over incentives, payouts and algorithmic transparency has quickly escalated into a larger moral and economic debate: Are digital platforms exploiting workers by transferring all risks onto them, or are critics demanding employment standards that are unrealistic for businesses that are still struggling to become profitable?

As with most polarised debates, the truth lies somewhere in between. And is made more uncomfortable by the contradictions we, as consumers and citizens, often choose to ignore.

On one side are critics who argue that food delivery and e-commerce platforms operate through opaque algorithms that dictate pay, routes, ratings and penalties, leaving delivery workers with little bargaining power. Gig workers bear the costs of fuel, vehicle maintenance, health risks and idle time, while platforms retain flexibility and scale without assuming traditional employer responsibilities. A labour surplus market like India accentuates the power imbalance. In this view, the gig economy is not innovation but a clever reclassification of labour to evade social security obligations.

On the other side are platforms that point out an inconvenient but important fact: Most of India’s gig platforms are still unprofitable. They operate in hyper-competitive markets with thin margins, price-sensitive consumers and relentless investor scrutiny. Expecting them to offer permanent employment, provident fund contributions, health insurance, paid leave and guaranteed minimum hours, while simultaneously demanding ever-lower prices and faster delivery, ignores economic reality. Start-ups are not legacy public sector undertakings or century-old conglomerates; they are fragile experiments still searching for sustainable business models.

Lost in this shouting match is a third party — the consumer — whose role deserves closer examination.

Urban India has enthusiastically embraced the convenience economy. Together with the convenience of UPI, it’s become our favourite brag. We expect groceries in 10 minutes, hot meals in 20, and instant refunds if anything goes wrong. A delayed order is met with angry tweets, app complaints and one-star ratings that directly affect a delivery partner’s earnings. Yet the same consumer is quick to virtue-signal, taking to social media to demand fairness, dignity and equity for gig workers, without pausing to reflect on how their own behaviour fuels the very pressures they condemn.

This contradiction sits at the heart of India’s gig economy debate. Speed, convenience and rock-bottom prices are not neutral preferences; they shape algorithms, incentive structures and workplace stress. When consumers reward platforms that promise the fastest delivery, platforms respond by pushing that urgency down the chain — to the rider navigating traffic, weather and safety risks. Moral outrage, when disconnected from personal consumption choices, becomes symbolic.

The government’s recent intervention adds a critical dimension to this debate. On Tuesday, Union labour minister Mansukh Mandaviya asked e-commerce and food delivery platforms to remove the “10-minute delivery” promise, citing concerns of delivery workers and the

compromise on safety. It acknowledges that unchecked competition on speed can have human costs, and that the state has a role in setting boundaries where market incentives go too far.

However, regulation alone cannot resolve the structural tensions of the gig economy. Nor can a binary choice be made between “exploitative platforms” and “unsustainable welfare demands”. India needs a middle path — one that recognises the unique nature of gig work while ensuring basic protections.

First, transparency must become non-negotiable. Platforms should be required to clearly disclose how algorithms allocate work, calculate payouts and penalise behaviour. Workers need predictability and the ability to contest unfair outcomes. Algorithmic opacity may be defensible as intellectual property, but its impact on livelihoods makes a strong case for regulatory oversight.

Second, social security must be delinked from traditional employment status. The future of work — especially in a country as young and informal as India — cannot rely on a binary distinction between “employee” and “independent contractor”. A flexible, platform-agnostic benefits framework funded jointly by platforms, workers, and the state could provide health insurance, accident cover and retirement savings without forcing rigid employment structures onto flexible work.

Third, platforms must recalibrate incentive systems away from extreme speed and towards safety and reliability. The government’s pushback on 10-minute delivery is a step in the right direction, but platforms themselves must recognise that long-term trust is built not just on convenience, but on responsible operations. Sustainable service levels may not win viral headlines, but they reduce churn, accidents and worker dissatisfaction. Good businesses take care of all stakeholders — especially partners.

Fourth, consumers must confront their own role. Ethical consumption cannot stop at hashtags. If we truly value fairness, we must accept slightly higher prices, longer delivery windows and fewer “instant” promises. Convenience has a cost; pretending otherwise merely shifts that cost onto the most vulnerable link in the chain.

Finally, the State must act as an enabler rather than an adversary. Instead of imposing one-size-fits-all labour laws designed for factory floors, policymakers should work with platforms, unions and civil society to co-create a gig-specific regulatory framework. India has the opportunity to lead globally by designing labour protections suited to the digital age, rather than importing outdated models from industrial economies.

The gig economy is not inherently exploitative, nor is it a panacea for employment challenges. It is a transitional phase in how work is organised, mediated by technology and shaped by societal choices. Strikes like the one involving Zomato delivery partners should not be seen as disruptions to be managed, but as signals, pointing to unresolved tensions that demand thoughtful, collective solutions.

Fairness, efficiency and innovation need not be mutually exclusive. But achieving that balance will require honesty — from platforms about their practices, from governments about trade-offs, and from consumers about the true price of convenience.



Lloyd Mathias

Lloyd Mathias is a business strategist and independent director. The views expressed are personal

{ GEN UPENDRA DWIVEDI } CHIEF OF THE ARMY STAFF



Our youth are a reservoir of strength that must be channelised with discipline, purpose and national commitment

Speaking at NCC Republic Day camp in Delhi



Judicial course corrections
& the need for judicial finality

A constitutional court exists in a democracy, provokes strong emotions, and functions under the public eye. But there is a difference — crucial and constitutional — between recognising a judgment’s public consequences and letting public opinion shape judicial outcomes. In 2025, that line began to blur.

Over the last year, the Supreme Court reversed eight of its own judgments, a tally rare in recent memory. Several others were recalled, reopened, or substantially modified. Many of these did not emerge from the slow grind of doctrinal reconsideration. Instead, they occurred sometimes within weeks or months, often following waves of media outrage, street-level anxiety, and political discomfort. While each may be defensible on its own, the cumulative effect raises a troubling question: Are judicial course corrections being driven by legal reconsideration, or by public unease?

Some examples stand out. In August 2025, the court ordered authorities to remove stray dogs from public spaces and place them in shelters. But after weeks of public outrage, it allowed their return to the streets under revised guidelines. A November judgment defining the Aravalli hill range was put in abeyance after widespread criticism, with the court setting up a committee to reassess ecological impacts. Earlier in the year, the court had expanded a year-round ban on firecrackers in the asphyxiated Delhi-National Capital Region (NCR) on environmental grounds, but later permitted green firecrackers during Diwali.

In another significant move, the Supreme Court recalled its *Vanashakti* judgment, which had invalidated retrospective environmental clearances under the Environment (Protection) Act. A larger bench held that the earlier order had not adequately considered binding precedents, thereby reopening a settled environmental issue. Other examples include corporate governance cases, such as the Bhushan Power & Steel liquidation plan, a Rajasthan panchayat dispute, and staying the Delhi High Court order in the abominable Unnao rape case.

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The Constitution does not forbid the court from correcting itself. On the contrary, it provides formal mechanisms for this — review petitions, curative petitions, and, in rare cases, recall. But these mechanisms are deliberately narrow, intended to correct clear errors of law,

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The court too has acknowledged this. In November 2025, justices Dipankar Datta and AG Masih warned that reopening and overturning its own rulings — sometimes at the behest of parties seeking a fresh outcome — “undermine(s) the authority and credibility” of the apex court. Justice BV Nagarathna spoke even more plainly: A judgment once rendered must hold its anchor in time for it is “written in ink, not sand”. Judgments cannot be tossed out just because the faces on the bench have changed.

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None of this is to deny judicial fallibility. Every serious legal system accepts that courts can err. Yet, at its core, judicial discipline is about institutional restraint. Departures must be rare and serious. Anything less risks turning constitutional adjudication into judicial musical chairs.

Public outrage is inevitable. Yielding to it is not. In the long-run, the legitimacy of the Supreme Court will rest on its ability to balance urgency with restraint. The greatest courts are not those that never err, but those that err less because they speak more carefully.



Insiyah Vahanvaty



Ashish Bharadwaj

Insiyah Vahanvaty is the author of *The Fearless Judge*. Ashish Bharadwaj is professor & dean of BITS Pilani’s Law School in Mumbai. The views expressed are personal



OPINION

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{ OUR TAKE }

Reel and reality
in Tamil politics

The controversy over a Vijay-starrer may enhance the actor's appeal as a political outsider

Politics and cinema go hand in hand in Tamil Nadu. So, it is no surprise that the reluctance of the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC) to clear Vijay-starrer *Jana Nayagan* (People's Leader) has turned into a controversy with Tamil Nadu chief minister (CM) and DMK leader MK Stalin and Congress leader Rahul Gandhi accusing the BJP of weaponising CBFC to achieve political aims.

Vijay has announced that his political start-up, Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam (TVK), will contest the assembly polls due in April; *Jana Nayagan* is to be his screen swansong and, as the title suggests, is meant to carry his political message and launch him as a people's politician. Though untested in electoral politics, Vijay's screen popularity has turned established parties restive. In his rallies, Vijay has tried to align with the ideals of the Dravidian Movement while criticising the DMK and AIADMK, the two major political parties that claim the movement's lineage. With no party or leader in position to decisively swing the elections away from the incumbent, the TVK is now a much sought-after ally (there are reports that both the Congress and the BJP are wooing it), while Vijay has refused to reveal his cards. And, the CBFC has given the actor useful publicity that has shifted the conversation from his disastrous rally in Karur last year, which caused the death of 41 persons. As part of the probe into that tragedy, the CBI has summoned Vijay for questioning on January 19, after previously questioning him on January 12.

Jana Nayagan is not Vijay's first attempt to mix politics and cinema. Some of his films have directly attacked people/parties in government, leading to run-ins with the establishment. His 2013 *Thalaivaa* (Leader) had the tag line "time to lead", which irked then CM Jayalalithaa. The film was released only after the tag line was removed. The 2017 *Mersal* had Vijay criticising GST and Digital India initiatives. A 2018 film, *Sarkar*, had a villain named after Jayalalithaa's birth name, and expectedly, the film was targeted by the AIADMK. In all these, the hero (Vijay) has an anti-establishment persona and works to do public good by challenging the system. This is the playbook that the DMK, and later, MGR, followed in the 1950s and thereafter, as they used cinema as a platform for public outreach and propaganda. A hostile State only embellishes Vijay's profile as an outsider and anti-establishment figure.

However, Rajinikanth's experience with a similar strategy in the 1990s and after offers a sobering lesson for those who believe that the path to winning Tamil Nadu lies through cinema. Still, politics in Tamil Nadu is in flux, and politicians, unsure of the public mood, do not want to alienate any potential ally.

Ensuring effective
RTE implementation

The Right to Education (RTE) Act provision of private, unaided schools needing to reserve 25% of seats in Class I for students belonging to economically weaker sections (EWS) was borne of the realisation within policy circles of the many deficiencies of public education in India. The EWS quota was expected to harness private education in a manner where the poor benefitted while the schools were reimbursed by the government for costs incurred. In the 16 years since, however, the significantly low intake of EWS students relative to vacancies, despite a large population of eligible children, underscores a failure in the implementation of the provision. It is in this context that the Supreme Court has ordered the framing of binding rules on EWS admissions across states and Union Territories.

But the challenge is also one of battling mindsets. Integration of EWS students has been a mindissue among schools that have reluctantly implemented the provision. There are several reports of schools discouraging EWS students, through segregated seating in classrooms to separate shifts at inconvenient timings. Several other hurdles are also reported, from disputed documentation to reluctance on the part of schools due to delays in reimbursements from the government. All of this has been exacerbated by learning gaps within nominally integrated classrooms — fostering an "equal-but-separate" atmosphere. Eliminating EWS vacancies will need these issues to be addressed, but it can only play a supplementary role in bridging the accessibility gap. For a truly robust school ecosystem, public schools will need to get better in terms of quality of education and infrastructure — obviating the need for quotas in private schools.

Harnessing technology
to strengthen democracy

The world is witnessing a digital turn in democracy, and New Delhi should serve as the platform where the Commonwealth forges a consensus on how to navigate this transition

As the winter mist settles over New Delhi, the historic Samvidhan Sadan is hosting the custodians of the Commonwealth's parliamentary traditions. It is with a profound sense of responsibility and pride that I welcome my fellow Speakers and Presiding Officers for the 28th Conference of Speakers and Presiding Officers of the Commonwealth (CSPOC).

We meet at a time when the very nature of our work is being reshaped by forces our predecessors could scarcely have imagined. The gavel and the rulebook, which have long represented our authority, must now work alongside algorithms and Artificial Intelligence (AI). It is fitting, therefore, that we have chosen to focus our deliberations on themes that are of contemporary relevance.

It is with a sense of profound legacy that we recall the genesis of our fraternity in 1969, established through the vision of Lucien Lamou-

reux of Canada to foster impartiality and the development of parliamentary institutions independent of executive influence. Since its inception, with a permanent secretariat in Ottawa, this forum has stood as a guardian of our shared democratic values. India has always been a pillar of this tradition, having had the distinct honour of hosting the Commonwealth family on three previous occasions: The second CSPOC in 1970-71, the eighth in 1986, and the 20th in 2010. We now prepare to convene the 28th CSPOC in January 2026 — marking the fourth time New Delhi welcomes this prestigious gathering, ensuring that our parliamentary institutions continue to evolve in the service of our citizens.

The choice of our venue is deliberate. The Samvidhan Sadan is not merely a building; it is the hallowed ground where India's Constitution was debated and drafted. It represents the soul of the "Mother of Democracy". By convening here, we affirm that while our tools may modernise, our foundational values of sovereignty, representation and debate remain immutable.

Yet, we cannot govern the future with the tools of the past. During the recent Standing Committee meeting in Guernsey, I emphasised that India's emergence as a global hub for technology offers a unique opportu-

nity for the Commonwealth family. We are witnessing a digital turn in democracy, and it is my vision that New Delhi serves as the platform where we forge a consensus on how to navigate this transition.

I am eager to share with my colleagues the strides India has made through our Digital Sansad initiative. We have moved beyond mere digitisation to true digital empowerment. In the Lok Sabha (Lower House), we are deploying advanced AI tools to break down the barriers that distance citizens from their representatives. Foremost among these is the Sansad Bhashini project. In a Commonwealth defined by its rich linguistic diversity, language should never be a gatekeeper to democracy.

By utilising AI for real-time interpretation and transcription, we can ensure that a Member of Parliament can speak in their mother tongue and be understood instantly by their peers and their constituents. Once developed fully, this technology will be in the service of inclusion — a principle I believe is vital for the 2.7 billion citizens of our Commonwealth nations.

I am aware of the capacity constraints faced by many of our sister nations, particularly across the Global South. In many of these jurisdictions, the imperative to undertake high-quality legislative research is



Om Birla



Samvidhan Sadan is not merely a building; it is the hallowed ground where India's Constitution was debated and drafted.

HT ARCHIVE

often hampered by limitations in time, expertise and financial resources. Therefore, a cornerstone of my vision for the 2026 Conference is to demonstrate how AI can act as a transformative force multiplier. By supporting critical functions — ranging from intricate legislative drafting to the comprehensive analysis of complex budget documents, we can empower our Parliaments to operate with greater efficiency, ultimately advancing the welfare of our people with renewed vigour.

In the spirit of *vasudhaiva kutumbakam* (the world is one family), India stands ready to share its digital public infrastructure with the Commonwealth. We do not see technology as a proprietary asset but as a public good that strengthens democratic resilience across the globe. However, our optimism must be tempered with vigilance.

The rise of social media has brought the Parliament closer to the people, but it has also introduced new vulnerabilities. We must have a candid dialogue about the security and well-being of our members in an era of online harassment and deep-fakes. It is the duty of the Speaker to protect the dignity of the House, and today, that perimeter extends into the digital realm.

The 28th CSPOC represents a convergence of India's democratic heritage and its technological future. I invite the Speakers of the Commonwealth to New Delhi not just to observe our progress, but to partner in it. Together, let us ensure that the legislatures of the future are efficient, inclusive and above all, anchored in the trust of the people we serve.

Om Birla is Speaker, Lok Sabha. The views expressed are personal

The case for nuance in
the gig economy debate

The recent strike by delivery partners of quick-commerce platforms has once again thrust India's gig economy into the spotlight. What began as a dispute over incentives, payouts and algorithmic transparency has quickly escalated into a larger moral and economic debate: Are digital platforms exploiting workers by transferring all risks onto them, or are critics demanding employment standards that are unrealistic for businesses that are still struggling to become profitable?

As with most polarised debates, the truth lies somewhere in between. And is made more uncomfortable by the contradictions we, as consumers and citizens, often choose to ignore.

On one side are critics who argue that food delivery and e-commerce platforms operate through opaque algorithms that dictate pay, routes, ratings and penalties, leaving delivery workers with little bargaining power. Gig workers bear the costs of fuel, vehicle maintenance, health risks and idle time, while platforms retain flexibility and scale without assuming traditional employer responsibilities. A labour surplus market like India accentuates the power imbalance. In this view, the gig economy is not innovation but a clever reclassification of labour to evade social security obligations.

On the other side are platforms that point out an inconvenient but important fact: Most of India's gig platforms are still unprofitable. They operate in hyper-competitive markets with thin margins, price-sensitive consumers and relentless investor scrutiny. Expecting them to offer permanent employment, provident fund contributions, health insurance, paid leave and guaranteed minimum hours, while simultaneously demanding ever-lower prices and faster delivery, ignores economic reality. Start-ups are not legacy public sector undertakings or century-old conglomerates; they are fragile experiments still searching for sustainable business models.

Lost in this shouting match is a third party — the consumer — whose role deserves closer examination.

Urban India has enthusiastically embraced the convenience economy. Together with the convenience of UPI, it's become our favourite brag. We expect groceries in 10 minutes, hot meals in 20, and instant refunds if anything goes wrong. A delayed order is met with angry tweets, app complaints and one-star ratings that directly affect a delivery partner's earnings. Yet the same consumer is quick to virtue-signal, taking to social media to demand fairness, dignity and equity for gig workers, without pausing to reflect on how their own behaviour fuels the very pressures they condemn.

This contradiction sits at the heart of India's gig economy debate. Speed, convenience and rock-bottom prices are not neutral preferences; they shape algorithms, incentive structures and workplace stress. When consumers reward platforms that promise the fastest delivery, platforms respond by pushing that urgency down the chain — to the rider navigating traffic, weather and safety risks. Moral outrage, when disconnected from personal consumption choices, becomes symbolic.

The government's recent intervention adds a critical dimension to this debate. On Tuesday, Union labour minister Mansukh Mandaviya asked e-commerce and food delivery platforms to remove the "10-minute delivery" promise, citing concerns of delivery workers and the

compromise on safety. It acknowledges that unchecked competition on speed can have human costs, and that the state has a role in setting boundaries where market incentives go too far.

However, regulation alone cannot resolve the structural tensions of the gig economy. Nor can a binary choice be made between "exploitative platforms" and "unsustainable welfare demands". India needs a middle path — one that recognises the unique nature of gig work while ensuring basic protections.

First, transparency must become non-negotiable. Platforms should be required to clearly disclose how algorithms allocate work, calculate payouts and penalise behaviour. Workers need predictability and the ability to contest unfair outcomes. Algorithmic opacity may be defensible as intellectual property, but its impact on livelihoods makes a strong case for regulatory oversight.

Second, social security must be delinked from traditional employment status. The future of work — especially in a country as young and informal as India — cannot rely on a binary distinction between "employee" and "independent contractor". A flexible, platform-agnostic benefits framework funded jointly by platforms, workers, and the state could provide health insurance, accident cover and retirement savings without forcing rigid employment structures onto flexible work.

Third, platforms must recalibrate incentive systems away from extreme speed and towards safety and reliability. The government's pushback on 10-minute delivery is a step in the right direction, but platforms themselves must recognise that long-term trust is built not just on convenience, but on responsible operations. Sustainable service levels may not win viral headlines, but they reduce churn, accidents and worker dissatisfaction. Good businesses take care of all stakeholders — especially partners.

Fourth, consumers must confront their own role. Ethical consumption cannot stop at hashtags. If we truly value fairness, we must accept slightly higher prices, longer delivery windows and fewer "instant" promises. Convenience has a cost; pretending otherwise merely shifts that cost onto the most vulnerable link in the chain.

Finally, the State must act as an enabler rather than an adversary. Instead of imposing one-size-fits-all labour laws designed for factory floors, policymakers should work with platforms, unions and civil society to co-create a gig-specific regulatory framework. India has the opportunity to lead globally by designing labour protections suited to the digital age, rather than importing outdated models from industrial economies.

The gig economy is not inherently exploitative, nor is it a panacea for employment challenges. It is a transitional phase in how work is organised, mediated by technology and shaped by societal choices. Strikes like the one involving Zomato delivery partners should not be seen as disruptions to be managed, but as signals, pointing to unresolved tensions that demand thoughtful, collective solutions.

Fairness, efficiency and innovation need not be mutually exclusive. But achieving that balance will require honesty — from platforms about their practices, from governments about trade-offs, and from consumers about the true price of convenience.



Lloyd Mathias

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{ GEN UPENDRA DWIVEDI } CHIEF OF THE ARMY STAFF



Our youth are a reservoir of strength that must be channelised with discipline, purpose and national commitment

Speaking at NCC Republic Day camp in Delhi



Judicial course corrections
& the need for judicial finality

A constitutional court exists in a democracy, provokes strong emotions, and functions under the public eye. But there is a difference — crucial and constitutional — between recognising a judgment's public consequences and letting public opinion shape judicial outcomes. In 2025, that line began to blur.

Over the last year, the Supreme Court reversed eight of its own judgments, a tally rare in recent memory. Several others were recalled, reopened, or substantially modified. Many of these did not emerge from the slow grind of doctrinal reconsideration. Instead, they occurred sometimes within weeks or months, often following waves of media outrage, street-level anxiety, and political discomfort. While each may be defensible on its own, the cumulative effect raises a troubling question: Are judicial course corrections being driven by legal reconsideration, or by public unease?

Some examples stand out. In August 2025, the court ordered authorities to remove stray dogs from public spaces and place them in shelters. But after weeks of public outrage, it allowed their return to the streets under revised guidelines. A November judgment defining the Aravalli hill range was put in abeyance after widespread criticism, with the court setting up a committee to reassess ecological impacts. Earlier in the year, the court had expanded a year-round ban on firecrackers in the asphyxiated Delhi-National Capital Region (NCR) on environmental grounds, but later permitted green firecrackers during Diwali.

In another significant move, the Supreme Court recalled its *Vanashakti* judgment, which had invalidated retrospective environmental clearances under the Environment (Protection) Act. A larger bench held that the earlier order had not adequately considered binding precedents, thereby reopening a settled environmental issue. Other examples include corporate governance cases, such as the Bhushan Power & Steel liquidation plan, a Rajasthan panchayat dispute, and staying the Delhi High Court order in the abominable Unnao rape case.

Together, these episodes suggest more than coincidence. Repeated reversals risk diluting the very quality that gives constitutional adjudication its force: Finality.

The Constitution does not forbid the court from correcting itself. On the contrary, it provides formal mechanisms for this — review petitions, curative petitions, and, in rare cases, recall. But these mechanisms are deliberately narrow, intended to correct clear errors of law,

fact, or procedure. Recalls, especially, are for extraordinary circumstances — fundamental flaws that make the original judgment legally unsustainable. They are not intended as instruments of second thoughts or changed moods. When final judgments are revisited without a clear showing of error, confusion reigns and predictability suffers. So does the authority of the court. Legal observers have expressed unease about recalls and modifications coinciding with changes in bench composition, raising concerns about whether outcomes are becoming contingent on who hears the matter rather than what the law requires.

The court too has acknowledged this. In November 2025, justices Dipankar Datta and AG Masih warned that reopening and overturning its own rulings — sometimes at the behest of parties seeking a fresh outcome — "undermine(s) the authority and credibility" of the apex court. Justice BV Nagarathna spoke even more plainly: A judgment once rendered must hold its anchor in time for it is "written in ink, not sand".

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Insiyah Vahanvaty is the author of *The Fearless Judge*. Ashish Bharadwaj is professor & dean of BITS Pilani's Law School in Mumbai. The views expressed are personal



The most basic issue with any inflation data is that a single figure is expected to capture the variety of price changes that take place across the country. The national inflation number aggregates price levels and movements from districts in Kashmir to villages in Kerala and everywhere in between, for both urban and rural. Naturally it will lose nuances in the process. Further, while this is the natural peril of computing national statistics for a diverse country such as India, the outdated nature of the CPI makes matters significantly worse. The weightages of the various sub-sectors in the index were based on consumption patterns in 2012. People consume very differently now, especially because of various central and State subsidies being offered. Thankfully, on February 12, the government will release the January inflation data based on the new series of the CPI. This series will see the base year updated to 2024, and will incorporate new weights based on the Household Consumption Expenditure Survey 2023-24. It is an update sorely needed.

What began as a localised strike by shopkeepers in Tehran's Grand Bazaar on December 28 over the collapsing rial and soaring inflation has snowballed into the gravest challenge the Islamic Republic has faced since its founding in 1979. The scale and the persistence of protests laid bare deep-seated public resentment towards the state. Iran, long battered by stringent western sanctions, is grappling with entrenched economic distress that worsened after Israel's bombing campaign in June 2025. In December, the government raised fuel prices and rolled back some food subsidies, a move that, combined with surging prices of essentials, ignited public anger. Protests turned violent last week, prompting a brutal state crackdown. Rights groups in the U.S. and Norway claimed that hundreds of protesters were killed, while Iran's state media reported that dozens of security personnel were killed by "rioters". Iran has weathered internal upheavals before and has repeatedly faced external aggression, most recently the Israeli-American attack in June. But what makes the crisis now distinct is the convergence of both: domestic unrest unfolding along with the threat of external intervention. On January 13, U.S. President Donald Trump, who had repeatedly threatened to make a military intervention, urged the protesters to "take over" Iran's institutions and said "help is on its way".

Iran's political and economic system is unsustainable. Repeated protests have exposed structural weaknesses, while the state has shown little capacity to address public grievances. But the solution is not another bombing campaign. While Iran's rulers are under pressure, it is wrong to assume that they are internally isolated. About 30 million people, roughly 50% of the electorate, voted in the 2024 presidential elections. On January 12, thousands of Iranians took to the streets in pro-government rallies. Despite the Israeli bombings, sustained protests and Mr. Trump's threats, there are no visible cracks in the loyalty of the security apparatus. An American attack aimed at forced regime change would risk plunging the region into deeper chaos or throwing Iran into prolonged cycles of violence. Instead of "liberation" from the tyranny of theocracy, a war would bring more suffering to the people. Anyone with even a cursory understanding of U.S. invasions in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya knows that regime change wars do not resolve internal political crises. Yet, the U.S. appears prepared to repeat the discredited and dangerous path. Those genuinely concerned about the well-being of Iran should instead press for engagement with its rulers and encourage meaningful reform. What Iran needs is quick, credible change to address its economic, political and social crises, a task Tehran can undertake only with foreign assistance – not with another imperial war.

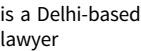


The order of the Supreme Court of India on January 5, 2026, in the Delhi Riots ‘Larger Conspiracy’ Case, where it granted bail to five individuals but denied it to Umar Khalid and Sharjeel Imam has, once again, raised questions about the way in which our legal system deals with crucial questions of personal liberty.

The seven students and activists, who had been involved in protests in Delhi in 2020 against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019 - were arrested and accused of instigating or being involved in the riots that took place after the protests. The veracity of the allegations apart, by the time the case came to the Court, they had spent upwards of five years in jail, without trial (at the time of writing, the trial has yet to commence). Previous judgments of the Court have frequently observed that the right to speedy trial is a constitutionally guaranteed right under Article 21 of the Constitution; only recently, the Court noted that if the state is unable to guarantee a trial within a reasonable period of time, it has no business objecting to a plea for bail. In light of this, one would have thought that half a decade in jail - with the trial yet to commence - is an adequate ground for bail.

While the Court found it an adequate ground for five individuals, it denied bail to Umar Khalid and Sharjeel Imam on the basis that these two individuals had been accused of “conceptualising” or orchestrating the riots, and, therefore, stood on a different footing from the other accused. This reasoning is unconvincing. The accusations against the two, at this stage, are nothing more than accusations, and the right not to be incarcerated for an indefinite period without trial is a human right that belongs to every person. It cannot be that an individual has less of a right to a speedy trial just by virtue of what the state has accused them of.

The Court also noted that the delay in the trial so far was not solely due to the prosecution or the court, but had also been at the instance of the accused. This, also, is unconvincing. Accused individuals cannot control the pace of a trial or the proceedings of a courtroom. It is the judge who does so. The judge is empowered to refuse requests for adjournments, if indeed this was what was happening, and proceed with the trial. The Court also did not consider the likelihood of



The top court's denial of bail to Umar Khalid and Sharjeel Imam raises questions about the way in which India's legal system deals with crucial questions of personal liberty

This creates a situation where, solely on the basis of the state's accusations, individuals can be incarcerated for decades before a final verdict in their cases. One hopes that the Court's observation at the end – namely, that Umar Khalid and Sharjeel Imam can re-apply for bail on grounds of delay after one year – indicates a judicial belief that if five-and-a-half years of imprisonment without trial is not too long, then, at least, six and a half years is. But for that, we will have to wait and see.

The Court's examination of the merits of the bail cases also raises critical issues. Section 15 of the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) defines the offence of terrorism, and after setting out the basic ingredients of the offence (such as the use of violence or weapons), uses the phrase "by any other means". There is a general principle in criminal law that courts will interpret ambiguous or vague phrases narrowly in order to protect the individual from state excess. However, the Court departs from that principle by giving the phrase "by any other means" a broad interpretation, and seemingly including "*chakka jams*" within the ambit of the phrase. This broad reading is problematic for many reasons.

Second, this has a downstream impact on bail. Under Section 43(D)(5) of the UAPA, bail is not to be granted if the court is satisfied – to put it simply – that there is a “prima facie” case against the accused. This provision, which was originally used by the colonial British government to imprison Indian nationalists, is, therefore, closely linked to the substantive provisions of the UAPA, as the question of whether or not there is a “prima facie” case will depend on what exactly the ingredients of the offence are.

By widening the scope of Section 15 of the UAPA, denial of bail becomes far more likely, as it is much easier to establish a “prima facie” case,

which is based entirely on the Prosecution's materials. Once again, there is a long-established principle in criminal law that the more draconian or stringent a law, the more cautiously it should be interpreted, in order to prevent state abuse. The Court's judgment departs from that principle. One hopes that this interpretation – which is, at the moment, provisional, as it was delivered in a bail case – will be revised by the Court in due course.

Finally, the expansive nature of Section 15 apart, the Court's scrutiny of the prosecution's actual case is highly deferential. The actual evidence against Umar Khalid and Sharjeel Imam – evidence on the record – only demonstrates the organisation and facilitation of protests (and, at its highest, *chalka jams*) against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, none of which can be remotely called a “terrorist act”, even under the broadest of definitions. To fill in the gaps, the Prosecution has argued that Umar Khalid and Sharjeel Imam have “managerial responsibility” for the riots, as they were at the head of a “conspiracy” to cause these riots.

The Court notes that such a possibility “cannot be ruled out” and that any deeper scrutiny of the Prosecution’s case would be beyond its remit as it cannot consider possible defences at the stage of bail. However, there is a difference between considering defences and accepting the Prosecution’s inferences that go well beyond the actual record, especially when individual liberty – after five years of incarceration – hangs in the balance.

It is worth remembering that across time, and across space, right from the days of the Dreyfus Affair in 19th century France, the idea of a “conspiracy” has been frequently deployed to compensate for the absence of actual evidence, and to keep people in jail endlessly. The evidence of history should inform the present: allegations of conspiracy, without evidence, deserve searching scrutiny, not deference. At the very least, the absence of direct evidence should not become a reason for an endless imprisonment without trial, and a blurring of the right to protest with acts of violence.

In this context, the continued imprisonment of Umar Khalid and Sharjeel Imam is an injustice; it is an injustice that, one hopes, is remedied sooner rather than later.

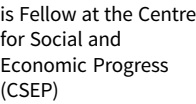
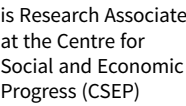
Today, India's clean energy transitions are impossible without imported critical minerals and rare earths. The country needs these minerals now, and China's tightening export controls only heighten the urgency. Just like other countries around the world, India is also committing to diversify mineral trade linkages, promote responsible production and build standards-based markets.

India needs a two-pronged strategy to build long-term capability at home while securing immediate access abroad. Realising this, over the past five years, New Delhi has pursued close to a dozen bilateral and multilateral partnerships across continents while bolstering domestic mineral policies. The question is about what these engagements have delivered to India and whether there is a need for recalibration.

Some partnerships have advanced more meaningfully than others. Australia emerges as reliable, offering political stability, large reserves and a strategic vision. Cooperation here is active with long-term supply discussions, joint research and targeted investments. In 2022 under the India-Australia Critical Minerals Investment Partnership, the two countries identified five target projects for potential investment in lithium and cobalt.

Japan provides a template for resilience, exemplifying an institutional model for long-term planning rather than reactive deals. When China restricted rare earth exports to Tokyo a decade ago, Japan responded with diversification, stockpiling, recycling and sustained research and development. Beyond its long-standing cooperation with Indian Rare Earths Limited, the partnership has now extended into potential joint extraction processing and stockpiling minerals, both bilaterally and in third countries, under a cooperation agreement last year.

African nations, given their long-standing trade linkages with India, offer similar opportunities, with mineral abundance paired with rising demands for local value creation. India's recent agreements with Namibia for lithium, rare earths and uranium as well as asset-acquisition talks in Zambia for copper and cobalt reflect a growing



India must use its country-by-country approach to build resilience across the value chain

Despite previous political enthusiasm around “friend-shoring”, cooperation on critical minerals has struggled to move beyond dialogue with the United States. Recent American tariffs on Indian goods, shifting trade rules and restrictive Inflation Reduction Act incentives complicate stable engagement. The volatility of the U.S.’s trade policy makes it hard for New Delhi to rely on Washington, even though the U.S. could be a significant technology and downstream innovation partner. The Transforming the Relationship Utilizing Strategic Technology (TRUST) Initiative and the Strategic Minerals Recovery Initiative propose frameworks for joint work on rare-earth processing, battery recycling and clean separation technologies.

The European Union (EU)'s Critical Raw Materials Act, the European Battery Alliance and its circular economy agenda show how regulation, sustainability and industrial strategy can reinforce each other. Progress requires India to align with the EU's requirements on transparency, lifecycle standards and environmental norms.

West Asia holds potential but lacks institutional depth and long-term frameworks. The United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia are investing heavily in battery materials, refining capacity and green hydrogen, with sovereign wealth funds acquiring mining stakes across Africa and Latin America. For India, West Asia could become an important midstream partner, processing minerals sourced elsewhere.

Russia's reserves of rare earths, cobalt and lithium are substantial, and scientific ties with India are longstanding. Yet, sanctions, financing challenges and logistical unpredictability constrain reliability. Russia could be an important hedge, not a foundation.

Latin America presents India's new frontiers with expanded engagement in Argentina, Chile, Peru and, increasingly, Brazil. These countries are becoming central to global copper, nickel and rare-earth strategies. There have been substantial

This is only a temporary respite for gig workers. With workers in this sector expected to touch 2.35 crore by 2029-30, they need to get the status of regular employees and have proper health, disability and accident insurance.

Dr. Thomas Palocaren,
Vellore, Tamil Nadu

The proposal of the Supreme Court of India to impose heavy

compensation for dog bites is right. The municipalities concerned should not only pay a heavy compensation for dog bites within their jurisdiction but also meet the entire medical expenses of victims. The street dog population has increased exponentially and it is a case of 'animal terrorism' on the roads. Callous municipalities and irrational dog feeders have compounded a problem

that involves public health and safety. Those who feed street dogs should also be booked and fined heavily. They could display their love for dogs better by adopting one or two of them and keeping them at home. Families that adopt such dogs can be given some sort of cash incentive.

Matthew Adukanil,
Tirupattur, Tamil Nadu

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

Why India needs a mentoring movement

India stands at a pivotal moment. More than 40 million young people are in higher education, and over 10 million are entering the labour market every year. It is crucial that we equip them with the skills, confidence, and networks they need to thrive.

Recent policy initiatives reflect a growing focus on strengthening the education-to-employment pipeline – through upgraded skilling institutions, expanded internship opportunities, and measures to support young people in their first jobs. These are important efforts. But policy and infrastructure alone cannot bridge the gap between learning and livelihood.

This gap is deeply human. It shows up in the fears, uncertainties, and limited exposure that young people, especially first-generation learners, carry as they step into adulthood. It shows up in young women who complete degrees and training but struggle to enter or stay in the workforce because of norms, safety constraints, and low confidence. It shows up in those who possess equal talent but not equal access to opportunity. These challenges have intensified as Artificial Intelligence reshapes entry-level work.

Bridging the gap
We need a way to bridge this gap. LinkedIn data show that employers are increasingly seeking human-centric skills – communication, problem-solving, adaptability, and leadership. How do we cultivate these skills?

The answer lies in mentoring. Around the world, mentoring has proven to be a powerful tool for supporting young people through key transitions. Mentoring bridges the space between what systems provide and what young people need at a personal level: someone who listens, understands their context, helps them articulate aspirations, and navigates uncertainty alongside them.

Mentoring has particular

Aditi Jha,

Executive Director,
Legal and Public
Policy Lead – South
Asia, LinkedIn

Arundhuti Gupta

Founder and CEO,
Mentor Together

Rajeev Gowda

Former Member of
Parliament

Mentoring has
particular
resonance for
India because it
responds
directly to
inequalities in
access to
opportunity

resonance for India because it responds directly to inequalities in access to opportunity. Our work building India's mentoring movement through Mentor Together for over 15 years shows that high-quality mentoring significantly improves career decision-making, social intelligence, self-efficacy beliefs, and gender attitudes around work.

This is especially powerful for young women, who enter higher education on par with men; yet fewer than 40% with advanced qualifications participate in the labour force. LinkedIn data show that the median network strength for men is 8.3 percentile points higher than that of women, and job seekers are four times more likely to secure employment where they already have connections. When young women enhance their networks and meet mentors who understand their realities, it expands their sense of what is possible. Like it did for Bindu, a student at a government engineering college, who found apprenticeship opportunities through mentoring that led to a full-time role at the BT Group. As India strives to increase women's economic participation, mentoring becomes a crucial enabler – for entry into work, retention, and progression.

Governments are beginning to integrate mentoring within mainstream systems. The Union Ministry of Labour and Employment has built mentoring into the National Career Service platform. State governments in Karnataka and Telangana are implementing mentoring at scale across collegiate and technical education. This marks a crucial shift: mentoring is not an extra, but an essential component of building human capability.

A recent gathering of over 400 experts and practitioners at India's second annual Mentoring Summit highlighted the need for a national architecture rooted in quality, inclusion, and intentional design, supported by clear standards for mentor training and conduct,

structured and evidence-aligned curricula, strong monitoring and safeguarding systems, and digital platforms that expand access while preserving human connection.

Towards a nation of mentors

The time is ripe for India to launch a national mentoring movement. This requires massive collective action across a range of stakeholders. Governments can create the policy architecture that enables mentoring to become a structural part of education, skilling, and employment systems. Non-profits build training, safeguarding, and curriculum frameworks; demonstrate what works; and support institutions to implement mentoring consistently and with quality. Corporates can mobilise volunteers and networks – opening pathways many young people would never otherwise access. The LinkedIn Coaches Program is one example: employees volunteer their time to offer one-on-one coaching, networking guidance, and mock interview preparation to young job seekers from underserved backgrounds. Since 2015, this has supported more than one million young adults across tier 2 and tier 3 engineering colleges. When companies embed mentoring within CSR and leadership development strategies, they strengthen young people's access to opportunity while building empathetic, skilled leaders within their own workforce. Philanthropy can fund long-term infrastructure – technology, research, and capacity building. Researchers can test what works, for whom, and at what cost, building evidence that strengthens design, improves outcomes, and informs policy and investment decisions.

Ultimately, mentoring is about people stepping forward to support the next generation. If even a fraction of India's working professionals mentor one young person a year, we could unlock a shift in opportunity and aspiration at a national scale.

The politics of fear in a melting pot

A Mayoral election in the U.S. sparked a debate over a Muslim Mayor in Mumbai

STATE OF PLAY

Vinaya Deshpande Pandit
vinaya.deshpande@thehindu.co.in

As Maharashtra heads to elections today for 29 municipal corporations, all eyes are on Mumbai, where the BJP-Shiv Sena combine is fighting against the Thackerays for control of the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC). This election is being closely watched for many reasons. First, the estranged Thackeray cousins – Raj and Uddhav – have reunited after two decades in the hope of consolidating the Marathi vote bank. Second, unlikely alliances have been formed in Mumbai since the split of the two main regional parties of Maharashtra – the Shiv Sena and the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP).

In this election, both the Senas are fighting against each other, ostensibly for the same vote bank. Eknath Shinde's Shiv Sena is fighting in alliance with the ruling BJP, while the Shiv Sena (Uddhav Balasaheb Thackeray) is fighting against them, bereft of the Congress's support. Meanwhile, both the NCP and the NCP (Sharad Chandra Pawar) are fighting against the BJP, though the NCP led by Ajit Pawar is part of the State government alongside the saffron party.

The election for the BMC is being compared to the recent Mayoral election of New York City (NYC). Mumbai, like NYC, is a financial powerhouse; a cultural melting pot with sizeable migrant populations; a city that never sleeps. Like NYC, it stands on the toil and sweat of several migrants and communities who have contributed to the city's wealth over generations. But during this campaign, the connection ran



deeper. This was clear not only in the BJP's fear-mongering about the possibility of a Muslim becoming Mayor, but also in how Mr. Raj Thackeray inverted NYC Mayor Zohran Mamdani's advocacy of the 'politics of the periphery' as a route to power.

The last Muslim Mayor Mumbai saw was 43 years ago. The fear that the BJP tried to spread in this election was not just about the possibility of a Muslim Mayor; it was also about the changing demography of the city, which the party linked to a lack of safety. "We warn of a particular community's silent demographic and cultural invasion. What happened at Bondi Beach, Australia, could happen at Girgaum Chowpatty tomorrow. Illegal encroachments and infiltration have been backed by political patronage in Mumbai slums. Shiv Sena UBT former Cabinet minister settled Bangladeshis and the Rohingya in Mumbai slums," said Ameet Satam, BJP Mumbai president. "We will not allow the colour of Mumbai to change, and we will not allow the Mamdanisation of Mumbai," he added. Citing a study by the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mr. Satam claimed that the Hindu population in Mumbai dwindled from 88% in 1951 to 66% in 2011, while the Muslim population increased from 8% to 21% in the same period.

All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen leader Waris Path-

an then declared that a burqawali (a burqa-clad woman) would become Mayor. This comment was picked up by the BJP to taunt Mr. Uddhav Thackeray's Shiv Sena. The party claimed that since the Shiv Sena (UBT) did not hit back at the AIMIM, a 'Khan' would become the Mayor of Mumbai if the Shiv Sena (UBT) was voted to power.

The Shiv Sena (UBT), which has been trying to appeal to the minority vote bank, refrained from commenting on the issue. This further emboldened the BJP to target Mr. Uddhav Thackeray. When asked about it, party leader Aaditya Thackeray said, "It is not Zohran Mamdani that the BJP is targeting individually. The party has problems with a leader democratically elected by NYC as its Mayor. Since it does not have the courage to criticise [U.S. President Donald] Trump on his tariff policy, it has targeted Mr. Mamdani. There is no doubt that a Marathi person will become the Mayor of Mumbai."

Meanwhile, Mr. Mamdani's campaign also caught the imagination of Maharashtra Navnirman Sena chief Raj Thackeray. The 'politics of periphery' refers to a political approach that links local issues affecting marginalised communities with broader global struggles. Mr. Mamdani focused on bringing marginalised communities, long overlooked in traditional politics, to the centre of the political discourse. But Mr. Raj Thackeray turned this concept on its head, arguing that the "original" inhabitants of Mumbai have been pushed to the periphery.

A city that thrives on plurality cannot be governed through fear of the 'other' without its social cohesion being undermined.

Over 77% of Rajasthan's illegal mining FIRs filed in Aravalli districts

Recent proposed changes threaten to aggravate the situation by removing protections

DATA POINT

Devvyanshi Bihani

The districts in Rajasthan, which host roughly 70% of the entire Aravalli range, are suffering from a disproportionately high volume of illegal mining, data show. While these Aravalli districts account for less than 45% of the State's mining leases and contribute only 40% of its total mineral output, their share of illegal mining cases exceeds 56%. The Aravalli districts also account for more than 77% of all First Information Reports (FIRs) lodged for illegal mining in the State.

Clearly, the Aravalli landscape is the epicentre of Rajasthan's mining crisis. Recent proposed changes to the legal definition of what constitutes an 'Aravalli hill' threaten to further aggravate this situation by potentially removing protections against mining from vast stretches of the range. Ironically, the changes proposed were actually initiated as a measure to curb illegal mining in the first place.

Legal tussle

The Aravalli hills, among the oldest mountain systems in the world, have become the focus of an ongoing legal and policy dispute over their definition and the rules governing mining activity. While examining issues related to mining in the region, the Supreme Court observed in May 2024 that the lack of a consistent definition of the Aravalli hills and ranges across States has been a key factor enabling illegal mining.

Since 2010, expert agencies, such as the Forest Survey of India (FSI), have identified the Aravalli hills based on a set of physical parameters, including a slope greater than three degrees, a 100-metre foothill buffer, an inter-hill distance or valley width of 500 metres, and an area enclosed by such hills from all sides.

To address the lack of uniformi-

ty in how the range is defined, the Court set up a committee led by the Union Environment Secretary, bringing together officials from the FSI, State Forest Departments, the Geological Survey of India, and the Central Empowered Committee. The panel was mandated to evolve a scientifically robust definition of the Aravallis that could be applied across the country.

The technical committee (comprising officials from scientific agencies and not the Environment Ministry) in 2024 suggested that any landform with a slope of at least 4.57 degrees and a height of at least 30 metres be identified as an Aravalli hill. The Environment Ministry, however, advanced a different approach, suggesting that only landforms in Aravalli districts rising at least 100 metres above the local relief be classified as Aravalli hills, and that hills within 500 metres of each other be treated collectively as part of the Aravalli range. This approach eventually reflected in the Supreme Court's November 2025 order.

Experts including the FSI, which was part of the committee, raised red flags saying this may exclude most of the hills, leaving them potentially open to mining. The amicus curiae, K. Parameswar, also objected to this conclusion, stating that it was too narrow and could open hills below 100 metres to mining, thereby compromising the continuity and integrity of the Aravalli system.

With protests intensifying across the State, the Court subsequently kept the judgment in abeyance, ordering that the stay would remain until the matter reached finality. In the interim, the Union government imposed a freeze on granting new mining leases in the Aravalli landscape.

Impact on Rajasthan

Reclassification carries significant implications for mining regulation. If a landform is no longer classified as part of the Aravallis, it falls outside the specific mining controls

and moratorium linked to the Aravalli framework.

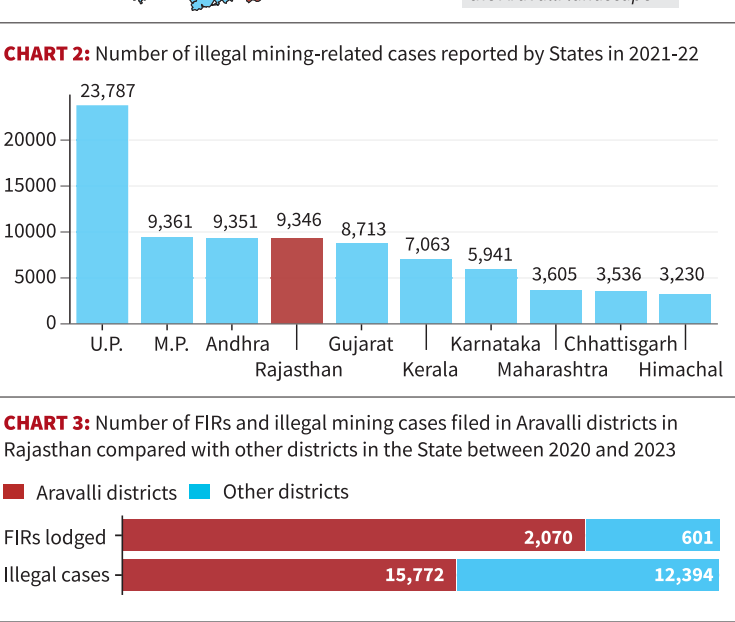
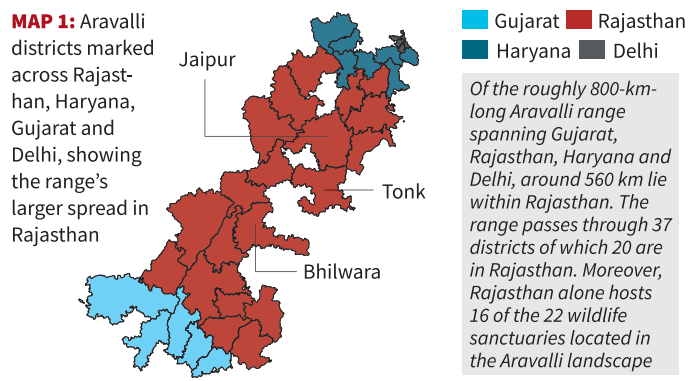
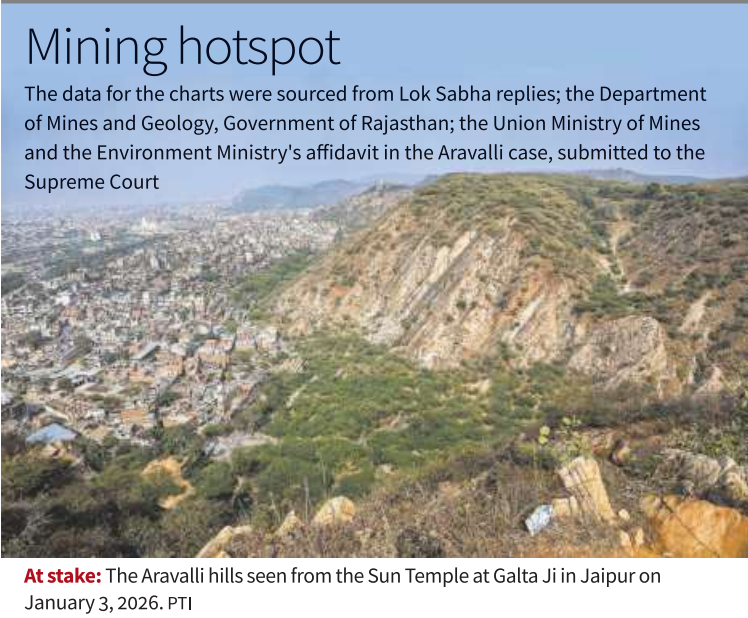
The stakes are particularly high in Rajasthan. Of the roughly 800-km-long Aravalli range, around 560 km lie within Rajasthan. The range passes through 37 districts (**Map 1**) of which 20 are in Rajasthan. Moreover, Rajasthan hosts 16 of the 22 wildlife sanctuaries located in the Aravalli landscape, including three tiger reserves (Ranthambore, Sariska, Mukundra).

In 2021-22, States across India reported 90,173 illegal mining cases. Rajasthan accounted for more than 10% of these cases (**Chart 2**), placing it among the States with the highest number of reported incidents nationally. More importantly, within the State, the burden of these violations falls heavily on one specific geographic region.

Between 2020 and 2023, Rajasthan recorded 28,166 illegal mining cases, of which 15,772 (or 56%) were registered in Aravalli districts, even though these districts account for less than 45% of the State's mining leases issued in the same period. Policing data show that of the 2,671 FIRs related to illegal mining lodged during this period, 2,070 (nearly 77.5%), originated from Aravalli districts between 2020 and 2023 (**Chart 3**).

Moreover, between 2015 and 2022, Aravalli districts produced 918.8 million tonnes of minerals, accounting for only 40.6% of Rajasthan's total output of 2.26 billion tonnes. Together, these figures reveal a stark reality: the Aravallis contribute a smaller portion of the State's legal mineral wealth, but they bear a vastly disproportionate share of its mining-related lawlessness.

Beyond questions of legal classification, the Aravallis are ecologically vital. They slow the spread of sand and dust from the Thar Desert towards eastern Rajasthan, Haryana, and western Uttar Pradesh. They support groundwater recharge in an arid region, stabilise the local climate, and function as an important wildlife corridor.



FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Hindu

FIFTY YEARS AGO JANUARY 15, 1976

Discipline necessary for progress

Panaji, Jan. 14: Discipline, hard work and honesty alone could take the country forward in its march of progress, President Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed said here today.

Japan and West Germany were two great examples of the post-war era which had attained economic prosperity through these principles, he said.

Replying to a civic reception, the President said countries like Britain, France and America, too, found it difficult to compete with Japan and West Germany.

Rights and responsibilities were inseparable and irrespective of religion, language and caste, every citizen had a responsibility tagged on to every right, he said.

The President said discipline was essential in every walk of life, whether at home, at college, or in Government.

He affirmed that an average Indian was as hard-working as anyone else in the United States or in any other country. Unfortunately, while some worked hard, "some sleep", thinking that the work which others did was enough. This attitude, Mr. Ahmed said, was wrong and should be corrected.

The President reminded the civic bodies that they had a big task to discharge. He asked them to undertake works like drainage, roads, cleanliness and other public amenities.

He also cautioned that any programme they undertook should have the full co-operation and involvement of the people for their success.

Referring to the block development scheme, Mr. Ahmed regretted that the amount invested in them "has been wasted". Some blocks had been occupied either by cattle of officials.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO JANUARY 15, 1926

Food crisis in Ceylon

Colombo, Jan. 14: A food crisis in the Batticaloa District is feared as the result of the "Lady McCallum" disaster. Already the Government Agent has instituted a system of control. But there are no early prospects of supplies of foodstuffs being sent to relieve the situation. A vessel left Colombo last night for Trincomalee. But she will not call at Batticaloa; and no other vessel has been arranged for during the month. The land route from Trincomalee to Batticaloa is circuitous, and the cost of transport prohibitive.

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

The goods purchased by China from Japan in December

16.4 In \$ billion, China bought more from Japan in December than at any point in the last three years, customs data showed, even as Beijing's sharper rhetoric over comments out of Tokyo about Taiwan fuelled fears that Beijing could restrict trade ties. REUTERS

India's cotton imports in the month of December

3.1 In million bales, India's cotton imports rose to a record 3.1 million bales in the December quarter after New Delhi allowed duty-free imports, boosting overseas purchases. Higher imports by the world's second-largest cotton producer are expected to support global prices. REUTERS

Number of attacks on doctors and medical staff from 2021-25

149 As many as 149 incidents of violence and assault against doctors and medical staff were reported in government and private hospitals across New Delhi from 2021 to 2025, according to data tabled in the Delhi Assembly, highlighting a rise in the number of such attacks. PTI

The trade deficit between India and China in 2025

116.12 In billion, India's exports to China posted a \$5.5 billion increase compared to last year bucking the declining trend even as the trade deficit hit a record \$116.12 billion, as per the annual trade data released by Chinese customs. PTI

India's wholesale price inflation in December last year

0.83 In per cent. Wholesale price inflation increased for the second month in a row, rising 0.83% in December 2025, driven by an uptick in prices of food, and manufactured items on a month-on-month basis. PTI

COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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What is the Malayalam Language Bill, 2025?

What does the Bill entail? Has a similar Bill been tabled earlier in the Kerala legislature? Why has the Karnataka government opposed the Bill, describing it as 'unconstitutional'? Does the Bill make Malayalam the mandatory first language across all schools in Kerala?

EXPLAINER

Sarath Babu George
Sharath S. Srivatsa

The story so far:

In October 6, 2025, the Kerala government tabled the Malayalam Language Bill, 2025 in the Kerala Legislative Assembly. Three days later, the Bill was passed following scrutiny by the Subject Committee. The Bill now awaits the assent of the Governor. However, the Karnataka Government has expressed concerns over the provisions of the Bill as it could hurt the Kannada linguistic minority in Kerala.

What does the Bill entail?

The Malayalam Language Bill, 2025 seeks to formally adopt Malayalam as the official language of Kerala, and mandates its use across government, education, judiciary, public communication, commerce, and the digital domain, subject to constitutional provisions. Presently, the State recognises both English and Malayalam as official languages. Malayalam will become the compulsory first language in all government and aided schools in Kerala up to Class 10. Steps will also be adopted to translate all judgments and court proceedings in a phased manner. Besides, all Bills and Ordinances will be introduced in Malayalam.

The draft law also intends to rename the existing Personnel and Administrative Reforms (Official Language) department as the Malayalam Language Development department. The government will also constitute a Malayalam Language Development Directorate under the department. The Information Technology department will be entrusted with developing open source software and accessories for the efficient use of Malayalam language in the field of IT.

What prompted its introduction?

Over a decade ago, the Kerala government had introduced the Malayalam Language



Language dispute: A delegation from the Karnataka Border Area Development Authority delegation meets Kerala Governor Rajendra Arlekar in Kasargod on January 7. THE HINDU

(Dissemination and Enrichment) Bill, 2015, which was also intended to adopt Malayalam as the official language and be used for all official purposes. Despite being passed by the Kerala Legislative Assembly, the Bill was referred to the President who withheld assent.

The Bill was reserved for the President's consideration since it contained provisions that contravened the Official Languages Act, 1963. The Central government also raised objections regarding other provisions pertaining to the rights of linguistic minorities; the three language formula in accordance with the national educational curriculum; and provisions in the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009. The new Bill has been introduced after removing such defects.

Why has Karnataka opposed the Bill?

The Karnataka government has opposed the Bill, describing it as "unconstitutional" and contrary to the interests of the Kannada-speaking linguistic minority in Kerala, particularly those residing in the border district of Kasargod. It has raised concerns over the provision that proposes making Malayalam the compulsory first language in all schools across Kerala.

A delegation from the Karnataka Border Area Development Authority submitted a memorandum to Kerala Governor Rajendra Vishwanath Arlekar on behalf of the Karnataka government, seeking his intervention to reject the Bill. The petitioners contended that linguistic minority students in Kasargod and other Kannada-speaking regions of Kerala

currently study Kannada as their first language in schools. The government fears that this set-up will be disrupted. The number of Kannada medium schools in Kasargod district has already come down from 197 to 192 in recent years. The Karnataka government has also expressed apprehension that implementing the Bill in Kasargod could have far-reaching consequences and adversely impact the Kannada language in general.

What has Kerala government said?

Law Minister P. Rajeeve, while tabling the Bill, had emphasised that the Bill seeks to protect the rights of linguistic minorities, including citizens who consider Tamil, Kannada, Tulu and Konkani as their mother tongues. It contains special provisions for linguistic minorities, who will be permitted to use their mother tongues for correspondence with the State government Secretariat, Heads of Department and all local offices of the State government situated in those areas. Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan said that the Bill contains a clear and unambiguous non-obstante clause in Clause 7 that provides special provisions to other State linguistic minorities. He has said that Kerala's Language policy is fully aligned with the Official Languages Act, 1963, and Articles 346 and 347 (Articles which lay out details regarding the language to be used for official purposes).

What has been Karnataka's response?

Karnataka Chief Minister Siddaramaiah has said that Karnataka will oppose the Bill by exercising every constitutional right available if the Bill in the current form is not withdrawn. Kannada and Culture Minister Shivaraj Tangadagi has said that the Chief Minister was likely to meet with the President in this matter.

Meanwhile, the Karnataka Border Area Development Authority has said that it wants amendments to the provisions of the current Bill, the nature of which would explicitly exempt Kannada-speaking areas in Kasargod from the ambit of the Bill.

THE GIST

The Malayalam Language Bill, 2025 seeks to formally adopt Malayalam as the official language of Kerala, and mandates its use across government, education, judiciary, public communication, commerce, and the digital domain, subject to constitutional provisions.

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The Karnataka government has opposed the Bill, describing it as "unconstitutional" and contrary to the interests of the Kannada-speaking linguistic minority in Kerala, particularly those residing in the border district of Kasargod

What is futuristic marine and space biotechnology?

How can India position itself as a leader in biomanufacturing?

Shambhavi Naik

The story so far:

Futuristic space and marine biotechnology research focuses on using underexplored environments, such as the deep oceans and outer space, to develop new biological knowledge, materials, and manufacturing processes. Marine biotechnology involves studying microorganisms, algae, and other marine life to discover bioactive compounds, enzymes, biomaterials, food ingredients, and biostimulants. These organisms have evolved to survive high pressure, salinity, low light, and nutrient-poor conditions. Space biotechnology, meanwhile, studies how microbes, plants, and human biological systems behave under microgravity and radiation.

Why does India need them?

India's long coastline of over 11,000 km

and a vast Exclusive Economic Zone of over 2 million sq. km give it access to rich marine biodiversity and biomass. Yet its share of global marine outputs remains low, indicating significant untapped potential. Investing in marine biomanufacturing can unlock new sources of food, energy, chemicals, and biomaterials, while reducing pressure on land, freshwater, and agricultural systems. Similarly, space biotechnology is critical for India's long-term ambitions in space exploration, enabling safe food production, human health management, and biological manufacturing in extreme environments. Together, futuristic marine and space biotechnology can position India as a leader in biomanufacturing.

Where does India stand today?

India's domestic production of marine biomass such as seaweed remains modest, with an annual cultivated output of around 70,000 tonnes. As a result,

India continues to import seaweed-derived components such as agar, carrageenan, and alginates for use in food, pharmaceuticals, cosmetics, and medical applications. Targeted initiatives under the Blue Economy agenda, the Deep Ocean Mission, and, more recently, the BioE3 are pushing the sector toward integrated marine biomanufacturing, linking cultivation, extraction, and downstream applications. A small number of private players, such as Sea6 Energy and ClimaCrew, along with ICAR-Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute and state-led initiatives such as the Vibrant Gujarat Regional Conference, are exploring pathways to scale marine biomass into high-value ingredients, and bio-based products. In space biotechnology, ISRO's microgravity biology programme is conducting experiments on microbes, algae, and biological systems to study food production, life-support regeneration,

and human health in space. However, private-sector participation is limited as these technologies are still nascent.

What are other countries doing?

The European Union funds large-scale programmes on marine bioprospecting, algae-based biomaterials, and bioactive compounds, supported by shared research infrastructure such as the European Marine Biological Resource Centre. China has rapidly expanded seaweed aquaculture and marine bioprocessing. In space biotechnology, the U.S. leads through NASA and the International Space Station, where research on microbial behaviour, protein crystallisation, stem cells, and closed-loop life-support systems informs drug discovery, regenerative medicine, and long-duration human missions.

What next?

Marine and space biotechnology remain relatively unexplored frontiers, where early movers are likely to gain lasting strategic and technological advantages. The primary risk lies in slow and fragmented progress in research and development. A dedicated roadmap that defines timelines and outcomes for marine and space biotechnology would help channel resources more effectively.

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

THE GIST

Futuristic space and marine biotechnology research focuses on using underexplored environments, such as the deep oceans and outer space, to develop new biological knowledge, materials, and manufacturing processes.

In space biotechnology, ISRO's microgravity biology programme is conducting experiments on microbes, algae, and biological systems to study food production, life-support regeneration, and human health in space.

Marine and space biotechnology remain relatively unexplored frontiers, where early movers are likely to gain lasting strategic and technological advantages.

FULL CONTEXT



GETTY IMAGES

Who pays starting salaries of over ₹2 crore per year to fresh graduates?

High frequency trading firms are offering fresh graduates starting salaries in the ₹2 crore range, reflecting a growing trend of high-paying job offers in India's premier educational institutions. Such jobs offer exciting career opportunities both in terms of money and job satisfaction

O.R.S. Rao

The story so far: Optive, a Netherlands-based global trading company, has offered a starting salary of ₹2.5 crore to a B.Tech (Computer Science) student of IIT Hyderabad.

What is behind the rise of the ₹2-crore recruiter club? Such high starting salaries are not new. Last year, a student at IIT Madras received a record-breaking offer of ₹4.3 crore per year, for the role of a Quantitative Trader in Jane Street, a Wall Street trading firm from the U.S. The competitive landscape of campus placements of over ₹1 crore per year is estimated to have tripled from about 60 offers in 2021 to 180 in 2025. The share of ₹2-crore+ offers, though still small, has been growing steeply. This phenomenon is not a blip any longer. The large-ticket “Day-1” financial trading recruiters of the current placement season at IIT Bombay are reported to have offered salaries ranging from ₹2.2 crore to ₹3.6 crore per year. It clearly shows that the trend will continue, despite the impact of artificial intelligence (AI).

In the last five years, the “₹2-Crore Club” has grown to be a robust technology-driven financial stock trading ecosystem. It is helmed by Quantitative Trading (QT) firms, who leverage technology for quick trades in a fraction of seconds. High Frequency Traders (HFT) further automate the trades, without any need for human intervention, using the power of efficient algorithms. Jane Street and Optiver are not alone. Hudson River Trading (HRT) offered over ₹2.2 crore for an Algorithmic Developer post, whereas Da Vinci Derivatives offered salary packages exceeding ₹2 crore for the role of a Quant Researcher. NK Securities

followed with around ₹1.65 crore while Rubrik has extended ₹1.49-crore offers. Other firms in this league include Citadel Securities, IMC Trading, Graviton Research, APT Portfolio, Atlas Research, Quadeye, Quantbox, The Trade Desk, and others.

Around 70% of them have been repeat recruiters, who view the IITs as their primary talent pipeline globally. A few years back, the hunting ground for these recruiters was limited to first generation IITs, but recent years have seen entry of second generation IITs like Hyderabad, IIT(BHU) and IIITs like Allahabad and Raipur.

How can they afford to pay such high salaries? In order to understand why and how these firms pay such high salaries, one must look at their business model, particularly, of how they make money. Most of them are medium-sized proprietary financial trading houses and earn profits by leveraging price arbitrage, buying and selling stocks between two stock exchanges like NASDAQ and New York Stock Exchange, for tiny profits – as low as \$0.01 per share. By executing millions of such trades in seconds they make massive profits. A software developer at an HFT firm, who can reduce even a few microseconds in execution of a program can generate an extra profit of millions of dollars in a month. As the intellectual efforts of the developer are directly and quickly translated into profit, it is not difficult for the firm to share a part of the profit. This is why these firms hire the best of engineers to optimise every line of the program. These firms are lean with low overheads, with only 200-500 employees, which allows them to distribute a significant portion of their trading profit as bonuses to the employees. A significant

portion of the “2 crore” packages, going up to 40%, is the performance bonus.

What are the roles offered and skills needed? A quantitative trader takes trading decisions in a live trading desk, using game theory and probability. A quantitative researcher analyses historical data to find patterns or “signals” that predict future price movements and devise trading strategies using advanced Statistics, Stochastic Calculus, and Machine Learning. A low-latency developer builds the ultra-fast engines that execute the trades, leveraging the mastery of low-latency expertise in areas like memory management and concurrency.

Typically, these firms look for people with a deep knowledge of algorithms, low level systems and mastery in areas like probability, linear algebra, and game theory. While financial literacy is not always mandatory, an understanding of the financial market microstructure and derivatives is an advantage.

Prior work experience is not essential for these roles, as the firms look for youngsters with exceptional quantitative aptitude, deep conceptual understanding of Mathematics, proficiency in programming, and smart problem-solving abilities. Most firms prefer fresh graduates for their innovative and out-of-the-box thinking ability. In terms of behavioural traits, they look for people that can work under pressure, without losing balance of mind.

Generally, the aspirants go through multiple rounds of rigorous interviews, involving “Brainteaser” rounds, probability puzzles and low-latency C++ coding skills. Most Quant and HFT firms prefer the Pre-Placement Offer (PPO) route for recruitment, where students are selected after a rigorous internship of

eight weeks.

What are domestic posting salaries? Total compensation called Cost-To-Company (CTC) often includes base salary, guaranteed/target bonus, relocation/sign-on bonus, and Restricted Stock Units (RSUs) as employee stock options, and profit-sharing bonus. Because most of the roles are based abroad, in locations like Amsterdam, Dublin, Hong Kong, London and New York, the salary packages convert into Indian Rupees of 2 crore or more. Some companies offer domestic postings, with salaries ranging from ₹60 lakh to ₹1.2 crore.

A ₹2 crore international offer (based in Europe) is roughly equal to a ₹60 lakh offer in India in terms of lifestyle and savings, considering the cost of living and taxes. Students need to keep this in mind, while comparing international offers with domestic offers.

Are there career growth avenues? Such jobs offer exciting career opportunities both in terms of money and job satisfaction, particularly for students that are strong in mathematics and enjoy solving probability brainteasers. However, there will be intense day-to-day job pressure, due to the live trading environment, which does not tolerate even small mistakes. Besides burn-out, career growth may be limited to the financial technology sector. While the volume of entry-level roles in traditional IT services is shrinking, due to AI-driven automation, the demand for specialised talent is growing. The Quant and High-Frequency Trading sector is just one example of competitive bidding for the natural human intelligence needed to solve problems that AI is yet to master. O.R.S. Rao is Chancellor of the ICFAI university, Sikkim. Views are personal.

THE DAILY QUIZ

Following the failure of the PSLV-C62 mission, here’s a quiz remembering the storied history of ISRO’s PSLV rocket

Vasudevan Mukunth

QUESTION 1 The liquid-fuelled second stage of the PSLV rocket uses the Vikas engine, which is based on the French Viking engine. In 1974, rather than pay cash, ISRO acquired this technology from France in exchange for 100 man-years of engineering work, helping produce parts for the European _____ rocket, and thousands of pressure transducers. Fill in the blank.

QUESTION 2 To steer the massive first stage, the PSLV doesn’t gimbal, or tilt, the main engine nozzle. Instead, it injects a chemical solution of X into one side of the nozzle’s exhaust flow to create an asymmetric thrust that pushes the rocket in the desired direction. This is its Secondary Injection Thrust Vector Control. Name X.

QUESTION 3 In February 2017, the PSLV-C37 mission set a world record by launching 104 satellites in a single flight. This required a complex deployment sequence where satellites were deployed in pairs at precise angles to keep them from colliding. Which SpaceX mission broke this record in 2021?

QUESTION 4 Instead of discarding the PSLV’s fourth stage (PS4) as debris, ISRO often repurposes it as a stabilised orbital platform called POEM. It remains active in orbit for months, hosting student payloads and scientific experiments, thus serving as a temporary satellite. What does POEM stand for?

QUESTION 5 The PSLV rocket’s first stage solid motor is encased in _____ steel, an ultra-high-strength alloy whose name is a portmanteau of ‘martensitic’ and ‘ageing’. Because international export controls restricted access to this material, ISRO had to develop the ability to make this steel indigenously. Fill in the blank.



Visual question: Between the SLV and the PSLV programmes, ISRO ran the Y programme for seven years. Name Y (in its full form), one of whose launches is shown here. ISRO

Questions and Answers to the previous day’s daily quiz: 1. The birthplace of Mahasweta Devi. **Ans: Dacca, Bengal Presidency, British India (now Dhaka, Bangladesh)** 2. The title of Mahasweta Devi’s first published novel. **Ans: Jhansir Rani (The Queen of Jhansi)** 3. The English translation of her novel Aranyer Adhikar. **Ans: The Right of the Forest** 4. The distinguished international award she received in 1997. **Ans: Ramon Magsaysay Award** 5. The prestigious Indian literary prize she won in 1996. **Ans: Jnanpith Award** 6. Devi’s short stories were translated into English by this scholar. **Ans: Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak** 7. She received this civil award in 1986. **Ans: Padma Shri** Visual: Name this 1998 movie directed by Govind Nihalani. **Ans: Hajjar Churashir Maa** **Early Birds:** K.N. Viswanathan| Tamal Biswas| Arun Kumar Singh| Sonali Das| Dodo Jayaditya



FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know your English

S. Upendran

What is the meaning of the expression “Catch 22”? (A. Shanmuga Sundaram, Chitlapakam, Chennai) “Catch 22” is the title of a novel written in the early 1960s by the American novelist Joseph Heller. The story is set in the Second World War and it deals with a group of Air Force pilots who are sent on dangerous bombing missions. After completing a certain number of missions, it was possible for these airmen to request for release from combat duty. But in order to be relieved, the pilots had to prove they were insane and therefore unfit for combat duty. The very fact that they pleaded insanity showed they were sane because only sane people would wish to avoid combat duty! As the pilots couldn’t prove they were insane, they had no option but to continue with their bombing missions. The pilots were caught in a no win situation. In order to stop flying missions, they had to plead insanity, but once they pleaded insanity they were adjudged sane and therefore not released. That was the hidden trick or the catch! The expression “catch 22” when used in everyday contexts has come to mean a no win situation; no matter what you do, you will fail. A “catch 22” is a dilemma; you are caught in circumstances from which there is no escape. Here are a few examples: These days the big companies are hiring only people with experience. But how can one get experience without a job? It’s a real “catch 22” situation. Getting a famous star to act in your film is a “catch 22”. He will never act in your film unless you are a well known director; and you will never be a well known director unless you have made hit movies with famous stars. Getting an agent is a “catch 22”. You won’t get one unless you have published and you cannot publish unless you have one!

What is the difference in meaning between “possible” and “probable”? (S. Vidyadharan, Hyderabad) When you say that something is “possible”, what you are implying is that it may happen. You are not really sure if it will happen, but there is a chance of it happening. For example, when the weatherman says that “rain is possible”, what he means is that it may rain. But he is not certain of it; for all you know, it may not rain. “Probable”, on the other hand, is much more stronger in meaning than “possible”. When you say that something is “probable”, you are pretty sure that it will happen or is likely to happen. There are so many indications of it happening that you strongly believe that it will happen. The day before the team for any sporting event is announced, newspapers list the “probable” players. The list consists of those players that the reporters are sure will be selected. Similarly, when you say that rain is probable, what you are implying is that it is likely to rain. There is evidence of it in the sky; perhaps it is very cloudy. There is not 100 per cent certainty in either possible or probable, but “probable” carries greater evidence of certainty than “possible”. Published in The Hindu on April 27, 1999.

Word of the day

Extempore: without prior preparation; with little or no preparation or forethought

Synonyms: ad-lib, impromptu, off-the-cuff, offhand, unrehearsed

Usage: It was an extempore skit.

Pronunciation: newsth.live/extemporepro

International Phonetic Alphabet: /ek'stempəɪ/, /tks'tempəɪ/

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

Setbacks and a sobering moment

The failure of the 64th mission of the Polar Satellite Launch Vehicle (PSLV-C62) is a major disappointment and a setback to the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) and the country's space programme. Questions on risks and reliability have been raised around the PSLV – considered ISRO's work-horse launcher – following two consecutive failures. The rocket carried EOS-NI, an earth observation satellite, and 15 other payloads, including some from Spain, Brazil, and Nepal. Developed by ISRO, the EOS-NI had hyperspectral imaging capabilities and was to be used for civilian and strategic purposes, including advanced surveillance. All the payloads have been lost with the rocket. This setback comes eight months after the failed PSLV-C61 mission, which carried a remote-sensing satellite, EOS-09. It has been observed that both missions failed because of anomalies during the third stage of the flight.

Following the failed May 2025 mission, a pressure drop in the combustion chamber of the third-stage engine was cited as a reason for the anomaly. With the PSLV-C62 mission, ISRO has initiated a detailed analysis on the issues observed at the end of the PS3 (third stage) of the vehicle. There is much that rides on ISRO's launches – reputation, commercial interests, and scientific and engineering ideas that are upgraded and fine-tuned after each mission. Over the years, the space agency has learnt from its failures and improved its performance. But repeated malfunctions will dent the reliability and credibility of the organisation. Satellites are conceived and designed for specific purposes and are aligned with timelines. Relaunching them will involve extensive planning and execution. ISRO's reputation has significantly risen with its recent spate of successful high-profile missions and its ability to undertake cost-effective launches. Governments and private companies around the world are increasingly leveraging space exploration across sectors. While the demand is steadily increasing, the launch capability remains limited. ISRO should not lose its stature in the global market and miss the opportunities.

ISRO must address the doubts with an assurance that it can correct the mistakes, as it has done in the past, and that these failures would not define the way forward. It has lined up important missions, including the human spaceflight programme, Gaganyaan, and the setting up of an international space station. The PSLV was behind 64 of ISRO's 105 launch missions; only five of them have failed. The space agency needs to realign itself with the harsh reality that while success is often taken for granted, failures invite thorough and critical scrutiny.

ISRO must confront the two consecutive PSLV failures with a renewed focus on reliability

Parks should not be spaces of exclusion

In June 2024, Deputy Chief Minister D K Shivakumar assured Bengalureans that all parks would remain open through the day. In a dense, polluted city gasping for green space, the promise felt like a breath of fresh air. Yet, as January 2026 unfolds, that assurance rings hollow. Most neighbourhood parks never truly complied with the all-day directive. Gates continued to be shut between late morning and evening, often under local pressure. Now, the newly constituted Bengaluru South City Corporation has formalised this exclusion, issuing an official notification restricting park access to two windows – 5 am to 11 am and 4 pm to 8 pm. The move has triggered widespread public outrage, and rightly so. These truncated timings expose a deep bias in how public spaces are imagined. They cater almost exclusively to morning and evening walkers, while systematically excluding everyone else.

This policy disproportionately punishes the city's most vulnerable – the gig workers, domestic helpers, and daily-wage labourers. For them, parks are not leisure luxuries but essential shaded places to rest aching bodies, eat a packed lunch with dignity, or wait for the next job. Students, especially those living in cramped paying guest accommodations, lose vital spaces to study or simply breathe. Among the worst-affected are homemakers, whose mornings and evenings are consumed by household responsibilities, and who are free only during the midday hours, precisely when park gates are locked. For many women, that short afternoon walk or conversation with neighbours is not an indulgence but a necessary mental health break.

Greater Bengaluru Authority (GBA) officers and Resident Welfare Associations (RWAs) cite familiar justifications: misuse, local opposition, maintenance challenges, and manpower shortage. None withstands scrutiny. The charge of misuse is frequently a euphemism for moral policing, targeting young people, couples, or anyone who does not fit a narrow social template. If security is the concern, the solution is obvious: appoint adequate security guards. Maintenance is an even weaker excuse. Lalbagh and Cubbon Park – open from dawn to dusk – are also maintained daily, without curtailing public access. The uncomfortable truth is that RWAs treat taxpayer-funded parks as private enclaves. These are public assets for Bengaluru's 1.4 crore residents, not gated backyards for the vocal few. A city that locks its parks during the day is not maintaining order; it is rationing dignity. This travesty must be reversed immediately, and timings extended from dawn to dusk. Bengaluru deserves green spaces that unite, not divide. Lock the excuses; unlock the gates.

Truncated timings limit access of workers, women, and students to public green spaces

COMMENT

A RIGHT TO INCOMPETENCE

The commanding heights or the common man?

When public authorities like the BDA evade regulation, it undermines the rule of law and legitimises State inefficiency

K P KRISHNAN

A curious bit of news recently emanated from the corridors of the Karnataka High Court. The Bangalore Development Authority (BDA), that venerable behemoth of urban planning, has filed a case against the Karnataka Real Estate Regulatory Authority (K-RERA). The BDA's contention is as simple as it is audacious: as a "public authority" performing sovereign functions of planning and development, it should be exempt, even for the non-sovereign activities, from the "rigorous" provisions of the RERA Act.

The issue under adjudication was the inordinate delay in developing the Nadaprabhu Kempegowda Layout (NPKL). The BDA's argument for seeking exemption is that there are likely to be significant financial constraints for the BDA to act as per RERA norms.

To the uninitiated, this might sound like a technical turf war between two wings of the State. But to an observer of Indian public policy, it is a depressing sense of *déjà vu*. We have seen this movie before, and it usually ends with the consumer – the very citizen for whom the State exists – getting the short end of the stick.

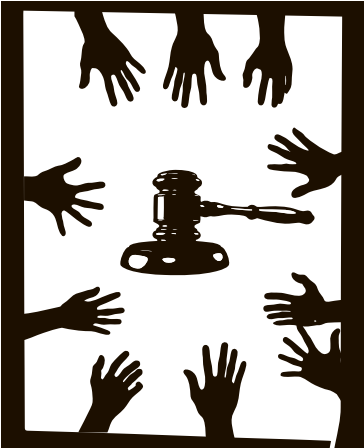
The BDA's argument rests on a fundamental misconception that has plagued Indian governance for decades: the idea that the nature of the *entity* (public ownership) determines the need for *regulation*. The underlying but unarticulated logic is that since a public body – whether statutory or a company-style undertaking – is not driven by the motive of profit maximisation but by "public welfare," it cannot, *ipso facto*, mistreat its consumers/citizens. Therefore, subjecting it to an independent regulator is an unnecessary and "hindering" redundancy.

This logic is not unique to the BDA. In the financial sector, public sector banks and insurance companies and their owner, the Government of India (GOI), have historically sought, and received, "special treatment" from the relevant sectoral regulators. Whether

it is laxer capital adequacy norms or softer governance standards, the entities and the owner often argue that these entities are instruments of social policy and should not be shackled by the same rules that apply to the "greedy" private sector.

We see this same song being sung in the electricity sector. Public utilities frequently argue that because they are State-owned and serve the poor, they should be exempt from the stringent performance standards or tariff disciplines imposed by State Electricity Regulatory Commissions (SERCs).

From the perspective of economic theory and public law, this argument is not just wrong; it is dangerous. Regulation by statutory regulatory au-



thorities (SRAs) is not a punishment for being private or for-profit. It is a response to correct the consequences of market failure.

In sectors such as real estate, banking, or utilities, we observe two classic market failures: information asymmetry and concentration of economic power. That is exactly why an empowered SRA was created in these sectors. As a consumer, I am not "happy" if I am cheated by a public sector entity than by a private developer. A delay of ten years in getting a plot or a house hurts just as much, whether the perpetrator is a private builder or a State authority. In fact, it hurts more when it is the State, because the power imbalance is more lopsided. The "nature of ownership" is irrelevant to the "nature of the harm".

History is a harsh teacher, and we have the scars to prove it. Consider the case of the Unit Trust of India (UTI). For years, UTI operated exactly like a mutual fund but was kept outside the

jurisdiction of the Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI), precisely because it was a "statutory" body. We know that mutual funds – whoever runs them – need to be transparent and solvent. Yet, we ignored the principle. The result? The US-64 crisis in the early 2000s, where millions of small savers saw their dreams evaporate, leading to a massive taxpayer-funded bailout.

Contrast this with the pharmaceutical sector. No one, not even the most ardent socialist, argues that a cough syrup made by a PSU should be exempt from the standards of the Drugs Controller General. We understand that a sub-standard drug is a sub-standard drug, regardless of who owns the factory. Why should a sub-standard house or a sub-standard bank, or a hugely delayed plot, be any different?

Rules apply, no exceptions

The lesson for the Karnataka legislature and the Parliament is clear. It is entirely within the realm of public policy to decide whether there is a need for a PSU in a particular sector. If the State believes that only the BDA can provide affordable housing, so be it. It is the same State and the legislature that have put in place the K-RERA to protect the consumers in the real estate sector. Hence, it is *not* open to that public authority or the State to argue that it should be kept out of the regulatory net.

Once the State enters the "market-place" to provide a service for a consideration (as the BDA does when it sells sites), it must play by the same rules of transparency, accountability, and time-bound delivery that apply to everyone else.

The BDA's attempt to use its "sovereign" status as a shield against RERA is a regressive step. It seeks to undo the very "rule of law" that SRAs were designed to uphold. If we allow this exception, we are effectively but formally saying that the State has a "right to be inefficient" at the citizen's expense.

Statutory regulators must be at "arms-length" from the executive precisely because the executive is often the owner of the largest players in the market. To internalise this is the first step toward a mature 21st-century economy. The pernicious stand of the BDA must not only be defeated in court but should be repudiated by a clear policy mandate: Regulation follows the activity, not the owner.

(The writer is a former civil servant)

RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE

When faith walked the streets at dawn

Dhanur Masa rituals once bound an entire village together

GEETA DHANANKAR

We moved to Marandahalli in the early nineties, in the quiet month of November, soon after my father retired. It is a small village of barely a thousand souls in Mulbagal taluk, where life moves at an unhurried pace and time seems to pause.

Until my grandmother was alive, the village had been a place of holidays and brief visits. Living there was different. Slowly, almost shyly, we began to understand its silences, its sounds, and its simple rhythms. What once felt unfamiliar soon began to feel like home.

December arrived, and with it came Dhanur Masa. The first morning startled us awake in a way we had never known before. At our doorstep stood an elderly man leading a group of 20 children, a torch flickering in his hand and casting light on their eager faces. In their hands were a tabla, harmonium

and other musical instruments; in their voices, devotion. They sang in chorus, offering their early-morning prayers to Lord Rama.

We opened the door unsure, unprepared, and slightly bewildered. We stood there silently, watching this sacred little procession unfold. It was our house help who gently guided us, reminding us of tradition—to offer rice and a few coins.

This ritual marked the celebration of the newly arrived crop, a season of gratitude when the very first share of the harvest was offered to the lord before it reached any home or hearth.

The next morning, they returned. This time, we were ready. Rice, a few coins, groundnuts and whatever else our farm had yielded were kept aside the night before. As the days passed, the group grew larger and their voices stronger. My mother, moved by their sincerity, began adding chocolates and homemade snacks to our offering.

We waited eagerly for those dawn visits—listening, watching, and once the singing faded down the street, slipping back under our blankets, carrying the warmth of those moments into sleep.

For an entire month, those songs became the rhythm of our mornings.

On the final day of Dhanur Masa, all that had been collected—rice, lentils, grains, and offerings from every home—was brought together. A single meal was cooked and shared as *prasada*, binding the village once again in devotion and gratitude.

Recently, I returned to Marandahalli during the same season. The change was unmistakable. Only a handful of children came, and even they arrived only when requested. Once, every house had opened its doors willingly. Rangolis bloomed at thresholds, coffee simmered on stoves, and freshly cooked food awaited these young messengers of faith.

Today, village life too has begun its drift towards urbanisation, leaving behind age-old traditions. What once bound the entire village together now survives largely in memory and story. Yet, in some quiet corner of the heart, the echo of those early-morning *bhajans* still lingers—soft, sincere, and full of devotion—reminding us of a time when faith was simple, doors were always open, and togetherness was a way of life.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

The world must push back against US' coercive politics

The Trump administration in the United States is increasingly seen as a destabilising force because of its erratic policies and coercive diplomacy. Neighbouring countries and adversaries are pressured through tariffs, threats, or actions that disregard national sovereignty, as seen in recent confrontational moves against countries such as Venezuela, Iran, and Cuba, and even in the casual talk of acquiring territories like Greenland. Such conduct reflects a troubling return to expansionist thinking,

where power is asserted through intimidation rather than dialogue. Iran's warning of serious consequences in the event of an attack underlines the grave risks of escalation and wider conflict. The international community must not remain silent. Expansionism and coercion are unacceptable in the 21st century. A firm, collective stand is needed to uphold sovereignty, international law, and a rules-based global order.

S Sundara Pandian, Bengaluru

on its way' and tells Iranians to keep protesting' (Jan 14) raises serious human rights concerns. Encouraging protests without ensuring protection or accountability puts civilians at risk. Human rights shouldn't be used as a foreign policy tool. International responses should prioritise de-escalation, civilian protection, and diplomatic efforts, not inflammatory rhetoric.

Saisha Verma, Bengaluru

Our readers are welcome to email letters to: letters@deccanherald.co.in (only letters emailed – not handwritten – will be accepted). All letters must carry the sender's postal address and phone number.

Prioritise diplomacy

The report 'Trump promises 'help is

SPEAK OUT

The United States needs Greenland for the purpose of national security. It is vital for the Golden Dome that we are building...NATO becomes far more formidable and effective with Greenland in the hands of the United States...



Donald Trump, US President

Political language is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind.

George Orwell

TO BE PRECISE



IN PERSPECTIVE

Tax cuts and a Rs-3 trillion hole

Last year's giveaways have failed to boost consumption and hindered the government's tax revenue growth

SUBHASH CHANDRA GARG

The Government of India is facing severe headwinds on the tax revenue front as it prepares the Union Budget 2026-2027.

For 2025-2026, the government budgeted gross tax receipts (GTRs) – the total receipts from all central taxes – at Rs 42.7 trillion, estimating a growth of 11.1% over the 2024-2025 revised estimates (RE) of Rs 38.53 trillion. Until November 2025, for which official data is available, the government received the GTRs of Rs 23.36 trillion, which is 55% less than the budgeted estimates (BEs).

The government made two big tax giveaways in 2025. Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman, in her Budget speech, primarily to woo middle-class voters before the Delhi elections, made two big income tax concessions. Income tax on incomes up to Rs 12 lakh a year was effectively abolished, and tax rates for income slabs up to Rs 30 lakh were significantly reduced.

On her own admission, these tax concessions – aimed at empowering the middle-class to boost consumption – were to cost Rs 1 trillion in income tax losses. Despite this fiscal concession of almost 8% of income-tax receipts, she naively believed that the receipts would grow by over 14% in 2025-2026 over the RE of Rs 12.57 trillion. Instead, income tax growth tanked. Till November, income-tax receipts, at Rs 7.48 trillion, grew by only 6.78%.

The second tax giveaway came out of the blue before the Bihar polls. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, in his Independence Day Speech, announced a 'double Diwali GST bonanza'. Following his announcement, the GST Council delivered a massive reduction in GST rates for hundreds of goods. The GST slab of 12% was abandoned, and goods subject to that were either exempted from GST or taken to the 5% slab. For many products of middle-class aspirations – cars, televisions, etc. – the tax went down from 28% to 18%. Despite this bonanza, the gross GST collections (including compensation cess) at Rs 5.46 trillion increased by only 0.52% in the October-December quarter.

The NSO's 2025-2026 advance GDP estimates, released on January 7, put consumption growth at only

7%, slower than the 7.2% seen in 2024-2025. Clearly, both the big tax cuts have failed to boost consumption while jolting government tax revenues.

A big shortfall

The situation is likely to become worse in the last quarter of 2025-2026 (January to March). The government is staring at a substantial reduction in estimated receipts of both income taxes and central GST receipts for 2025-2026.

Taking the income-tax collections in eight months (April to November) and the current trends, it will be imprudent to factor in a growth of more than 6% over the 2024-2025 provisional receipts of Rs 11.82 trillion. This leads to a 2025-2026 RE income tax of Rs 12.52 trillion – a loss of about Rs 1.85 trillion. The net GST (Rs 15.13 trillion) growth, after refunds, is only 4.7% at the end of December. The central GST receipts for 2025-2026 are, therefore, unlikely to exceed 5% over provisional receipts of Rs 10.26 trillion in 2024-2025. This gives GST receipts of Rs 10.77 trillion, which is another loss of about Rs 1 trillion.

Separately, analysts are pegging the profitability growth of the NSE50 companies between 2-4% for the December quarter, which is the lowest in the last six quarters. As corporate taxes have grown at about 7.8% in the first eight months and lower profit growth lies ahead, it will be safer to pencil in a growth of 7% over provisional receipts of Rs 9.87 trillion in 2024-2025, resulting in lesser receipts of Rs 25,000 crore. Overall, the government is staring at a shortfall of about Rs 3 trillion in gross tax collections in 2025-2026.

There are no major reasons or drivers to bring in marked optimism in tax growth for FY2027. The government is planning an overhaul of customs duties, which is unlikely to raise customs duty revenues. On the contrary, the adverse effects of GST rate cuts will continue to show up in 2026-2027. Learning from the experience, the government is unlikely to embark on another misadventure by further cutting corporate and personal income taxes or GST rates.

It will be prudent to assume a GTR growth of ₹7-8% for 2026-2027. As the 2025-2026 GTRs are expected to be Rs 39.7 trillion (i.e. Rs 42.7 trillion minus Rs 3 trillion), building in 8% growth, the government might be well advised to keep the 2026-2027 GTR estimates at Rs 42.9 trillion.

A longer version of the article is on www.deccanherald.com

(The writer is a former Finance and Economic Affairs Secretary)

Censorship or coercion? The politics around Vijay’s *Jana Nayagan*

DATELINE Chennai

E T B SIVAPRIYAN

On January 9, Justice P T Asha of the Madras High Court directed the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC) to issue an ‘U/A 16+’ certificate to *Jana Nayagan*, actor Vijay’s cinematic swansong. Within minutes of the order, the CBFC rushed to the first bench of Chief Justice M M Shrivastava and Justice G Arul Murugan, seeking an urgent hearing and a stay on the single judge’s order. The stay was granted.

On January 12, the CBFC filed a caveat in the Supreme Court of India seeking to be heard before passing orders on the appeal filed by KVN Productions against the division bench’s order.

The controversy began earlier. After in-

itially agreeing to issue a U/A certificate, the CBFC made a volte-face on January 5, referring the film to a revising committee. This prompted the producers to approach the High Court to secure the film’s release on January 9 as scheduled.

The alacrity shown by the CBFC – the case in the High Court was argued by Solicitor General Tushar Mehta – on *Jana Nayagan* has fuelled allegations of political interference. Critics have been quick to suggest that the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party at the Centre was behind the move to stall the film.

The legal battle over *Jana Nayagan* coincides with Vijay’s questioning by the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) in New Delhi in connection with the Karur stampede case. The film’s release was also timed perfectly to bolster the actor’s political profile ahead of the electoral debut of his party, Tamilaga Vetri Kazhagam (TVK), in the Assembly elections.

Trouble over film releases is not new for Vijay. His 2013 film *Thalaiyava* was stalled in Tamil Nadu while it was released in other markets; *Mersal* (2017) faced protests from the BJP over references to the GST; and *Sarkar* (2018) was forced to undergo cuts after censor clearance following objections from the AIADMK to several scenes and even the name of a character.

This, however, is the first time one of his movies has been stuck at the CBFC, with no clarity on when it will hit the theatres.

The stalling of the movie and the CBI inquiry come at a time when Vijay has reportedly rejected overtures from the BJP to join the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) in Tamil Nadu to take on the DMK, especially after the Karur stampede, in which 41 people were killed. Critics, however, claim that Vijay has softened his stance towards the BJP since the incident. Vijay has previously described the BJP as his “ideological enemy” and the DMK as his “political enemy”.

As Vijay faces trouble, the Leader of the Opposition in Lok Sabha, Rahul Gandhi—whose Congress party views the actor as an “anti-BJP” force and might not be averse to doing business with him in the future—framed the controversy as an attack on Tamil culture and directly accused Prime Minister Narendra Modi of stalling the movie.

The DMK, too, questioned the BJP on the need for the CBI to summon Vijay to New Delhi, alleging that the move was intended to coerce him into joining the NDA. However, amid the political crossfire, Vijay has maintained a stoic silence, even as the spotlight on him intensifies.

Political analyst Maalan Narayanan believes the controversy surrounding the movie is ‘apolitical’ and sees the appeals by the CBFC only as the organisation’s way of asserting itself and defending its decision to send *Jana Nayagan* to the revising committee.

“Even Vijay has not said this is politically

motivated. It is only political parties like DMK and Congress who will be affected by Vijay’s political entry who are making it political to create anti-BJP sentiments in Tamil Nadu. It is the DMK which is trying to politicise the issue,” he added.

However, senior journalist R Bhagwan Singh feels the BJP may be using multiple agencies to pressure Vijay into aligning with the NDA.

“People are openly discussing the possibility of Vijay joining the NDA. And the truth is the whip is in the hands of the BJP. The AIADMK-BJP combine feels unless Vijay joins the NDA, they won’t stand any chance against the DMK. That’s why Vijay is being pressured,” he told *DI*.

Narayanan felt the CBI questioning Vijay is aimed at ensuring that the Karur stampede becomes an election issue, with the BJP continuing to blame the lapses of the state government for the incident. “They want this to be used against the DMK. I

think the CBI will come out with some kind of a report on the issue close to the elections to corner the DMK,” he said.

Having opposed the BJP and even calling it an “ideological enemy”, Vijay will find it extremely difficult to join the NDA, political analysts say, and they warn that such a decision has the potential to end his political career. Warming up to the NDA will ensure consolidation of the minorities towards the DMK, alienate TVK from “secular forces” and also from a section of the electorate who support Vijay for his novelty, they feel.

Singh said he was unsure whether Vijay would yield to the pulls and pressure exerted on him. “The point that the AIADMK-BJP makes here is that the end justifies the means, as Vijay also wants the DMK to be vanquished. But if Vijay continues to resist the pressure, he will not just gain sympathy but also people’s trust,” he added.

DHNS

Its security forces have brutally defended the Islamic Republic, but the protests show that many Iranians consider it stagnant and ideologically hollow

STEVEN ERLANGER

The protests in Iran against the Islamic Republic appear broader and more combative than ever before. The government crackdown is also more violent.

The regime and its 86-year-old supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, see the spreading protests as an existential threat, experts and analysts said, and they have responded with force to protect the government and their own institutional interests.

After the government’s nearly 50 years in power, many in Iran have come to see it as having betrayed its promise of a better life for all Iranians. They have turned out in large numbers across the country demanding an end to the regime.

Though many would like these protests to overthrow the government, much as the shah of Iran was overthrown in 1979, there is a degree of wishful thinking involved, the analysts suggested. The government is likely to quash the current unrest, they said, even as the demonstrations expose popular discontent that may be impossible to suppress in the longer term.

“The regime felt an existential angst and brought down the iron fist, so I feel this round is probably done,” Ali Vaez, Iran project director for the International Crisis Group, a research institution, said of the protests. “But since the regime can only suppress and not address the underlying causes, it is only buying time until the next round of confrontation between the state and society.”

With the Internet blackout of Iran, it is hard to get a clear picture of the protests or a sense of the death toll. But public fury will persist, predicted Vali Nasr, an Iran expert at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies in Washington. “The protests were extremely significant, and even if they dissipate, the anger that they produced has not gone away,” he said in a briefing for the Quincy Institute, a Washington-based research organisation.

The wild card, as ever, is President Donald Trump. He has threatened to attack the Iranian government for its harsh crackdown on the protests and is said to be considering a range of options, from airstrikes to cyberattacks, having just proposed economic sanctions against companies dealing with Iran.

Yet Trump also appears to be interested in renewed negotiations with Iran, which could be an off-ramp for the government if it can secure some sanctions relief and help assuage some of the public outrage.

The protests show that many Iranians may now believe that the Islamic Revolution of 1979 has failed to address their everyday economic needs and has instead focused on extending its military might through its nuclear enrichment and proxy forces in the region.

At the same time, the government retains a monopoly on the use of force and has shown its willingness to use it to crush this challenge. The powerful Revolutionary Guard is constitutionally obligated to protect the Islamic Republic — its revolution, ideology and supreme leader — with political and theological foundations in the revolution that cast off Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi and his Westernizing, secular government.

And the corps also is deeply embedded in the economic system, including oil, defense and smuggling.

There have been no serious defections



DH ILLUSTRATION: DEEPAK HARICHANDAN

With crackdown on protests, Iran’s govt is only buying time

from the security services or the army to the opposition. The opposition remains divided, and it’s not clear what kind of support it has. Among its aspiring leaders are Reza Pahlavi, the son of the former shah, who lives in exile.

His father left Iran for exile 47 years ago Friday, noted Sanam Vakil, director of the Middle East and North Africa program at Chatham House. That may be a rallying point for further protest and support for Pahlavi, who presents himself as an unlikely new leader of a different Iran.

During the revolution, the shah pulled back from using overwhelming force, the military and elite split, and there was a popular figure to head the opposition — Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini — who had a fervent following among both the clergy and the poor.

This time, the collapse of the rial currency — first gradually, then suddenly last month — prompted an outcry from the powerful merchant class. It quickly spread to thousands of Iranians who could no longer afford the basics of daily life. Iran’s economy is subject to harsh sanctions imposed by much of the world over its nuclear program. The country is also running out of water.

At first, the government responded to the unrest with emollient words about listening to grievances and by firing the head of the Central Bank. When the moves did little to quell public anger, the regime shifted to violence and accusations of terrorism. Khamenei vowed to defend the revolution and accused the United States and Israel of instigating and paying for the protests.

Trump’s threats to intervene appear to have only solidified the government’s conviction that the demonstrations are a

danger that needs to be extinguished. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of people have been killed, according to rights groups and an Iranian health official.

“The radicalism among the protesters, and how quickly it has turned violent on both sides, is a testament to a bipolar country,” said Ellie Geranmayeh, an Iran expert at the European Council on Foreign Relations. “The regime and the security services see this as an extension of the U.S.-Israeli war and feel they must go full force to get to the terrorists.”

The June war and the protests seem to have reduced previous tensions between the Revolutionary Guard and the military, she said.

If the regime may not be ending, the Islamic Revolution appears to have run its course. After nearly 50 years, its efforts to spread revolt through the Middle East have failed, and a new generation has different aims and less of a willingness to live by strict Islamic laws that the elite violate.

The new threats from Washington prompted Iranian officials to say they would like to renew and intensify their on-again, off-again talks with U.S. officials about Iran’s nuclear program and the protests.

Though difficult politically, if Iran were to finally agree to stop enriching uranium under international monitoring — after the bombings of last summer, it no longer seems to be enriching in any case — then Trump would likely respond by lifting some important economic sanctions, Vakil said. The government could present that outcome to Iranians as economic progress.

There is also the question of the future of Khamenei, who has been unwilling to make tough decisions for change. Geranmayeh

predicted that the protests will intensify any debate over his role.

Succession is coming regardless, given the ayatollah’s age. “The odds of regime transformation are much higher than of regime change,” Vaez said.

Meanwhile, a hemisphere away, the installment of the vice president of Venezuela, Delcy Rodríguez, as its leader after the United States seized President Nicolás Maduro demonstrates that Washington is willing to live with the same structure if it has a different head, he noted.

Sustainable reform in Iran ultimately requires a bargain with Washington, Geranmayeh said.

“Even if these protests ultimately lead to a new power structure, only a comprehensive deal with Washington will remove the constant shadow of war and sanctions under which too many generations of Iranians have lived.”

Iran’s unrest underscores a paradox that has long defined the Islamic Republic: a state strong enough to crush dissent in the short term, yet too rigid to resolve the grievances that repeatedly fuel it. The current protests may ebb under repression, but they have further eroded the moral and political legitimacy of a revolution already hollowed out by economic failure, social control and generational change. As succession looms and external pressure mounts, the regime faces a narrowing set of choices — cosmetic adjustments, negotiated relief with Washington, or deeper coercion. None promises stability. What is certain is that the gulf between state and society has widened, making confrontation not an aberration, but an enduring feature of Iran’s future.

The New York Times

India’s shift from anchors to influencers

ISHAYU GUPTA AND
NEELATPHAL CHANDA

Whoever controls the media, controls the mind.

Asilent yet radical transformation of India’s media ecosystem is under way. Television news continues to dominate primetime ratings, but its grip on public discourse is weakening, slowly yet surely. In its place, digital influencers are emerging as key actors in public communication, often with explicit institutional endorsement. This is not merely a new outreach strategy; it marks a deeper reconfiguration of how credibility, visibility, and authority are created in India’s digital public sphere.

For decades, the news anchor served as an intermediary between the State and the citizen. Anchors framed political narratives, facilitated debate, and, at least nominally, held power to account. Today, that model appears exhausted. Public distrust, politics of ideology, performative debates and spectacle-driven formats have pushed audiences away. Influencers, by contrast, thrive within the logic of digital platforms, where attention, authenticity, and affect matter more than institutional authority.

Government collaboration with influencers signals a decisive shift. The Ministry of Information and Broadcasting’s campaigns — such as *Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav* and *WAVES* (World Audio Visual and Entertainment Summit) — demonstrate that influencer-led communication is strategic rather than incidental. The Ministry of Tourism’s *Dekho Apna Desh* campaign has relied heavily on travel and lifestyle influencers to promote domestic tourism, generating greater traction on national news media coverage. During and after the Covid-19 pandemic, the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare similarly partnered with fitness influencers, Instagram doctors and regional creators to disseminate behavioural guidelines.

What the State is leveraging here is not merely reach, but legitimacy. As attention shifts from scheduled broadcasts to personalised feeds, the State understands that the key to communication has little to do with the media and everything to do with algorithms. Influencers offer access to demographically and linguistically specific audiences that traditional news outlets struggle to reach.

This shift should not be read as the simple decline of journalism. Rather, it reflects a structural shift of journalism from State-media relations to platform-driven media culture. Public discourse is now shaped by infrastructures that no longer depend on journalistic norms for

the co-construction of reality.

Influencers succeed where television news anchors falter for three key reasons. First, they are native to platform logics. Their content is designed for brevity, emotion and immediacy. Unlike television anchors bound by newsroom hierarchies and rigid formats, influencers communicate in a language perceived as authentic — even when messages are scripted or aligned with government communications. Regional creators on YouTube, in languages such as Hindi, Tamil, Telugu, or Bengali, have been particularly effective.

Second, influencers benefit from a paradox of credence. At a time when institutional media faces widespread scepticism, the very absence of overt institutional affiliation lends their messages greater trust. A lifestyle YouTuber promoting a government cleanliness drive, or an investment influencer explaining digital payments under the Digital India initiative, may appear more believable than a television correspondent delivering the same message.

Third, influencers blur the boundary between the private and the political. Public messaging is embedded within stories about everyday life — such as travel vlogs showcasing tourist destinations, fitness channels endorsing health initiatives or financial bloggers normalising digital transactions. While this enhances the transparency of governance communication, it also reduces opportunities for critical scrutiny.

This transformation, however, creates an imperative concerning democratic accountability. Influencers operate outside the ethical frameworks that govern journalism. Additionally, disclosure norms for institutional ties remain weak, and regulatory oversight is limited. The public is rarely informed about the terms under which influencers engage with public institutions. Algorithmic biases further amplify certain identities, languages and urbanities, while marginalising others.

The question, therefore, is not whether influencers should be part of public communication, but on what terms. A democratic media ecosystem requires transparency about power, sponsorship, and intent. The challenge ahead involves striking a balance between reach and responsibility, while also fostering innovation and promoting democratic accountability. This is particularly important given the shift from traditional newsrooms to personal feeds, which is changing the discourse in India.

(Ishayu is with the School of Media and Communication, University of Leeds, UK, and Neelatphal is a faculty member in the Department of Media Studies, Christ University)

OUR PAGES OF HISTORY

50 YEARS AGO: JANUARY 1976

DMK Govt evading responsibility: PM

Madras, January 14
Prime Minister Indira Gandhi today accused the ruling DMK in Tamil Nadu of going out of their way to blame the Centre and trying to evade responsibility for their own acts of commission and omission. Addressing Congress workers here, Mrs. Gandhi quoted figures to challenge Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M. Karunanidhi’s claim that the State’s Plan and development expenditure had been substantial and that its actual per capita Plan outlay was higher than the figure decided on the basis of approved outlay.

25 YEARS AGO: JANUARY 2001

Farooq Abdullah survives grenade attack

Srinagar, Jan 14
Chief Minister Dr Farooq Abdullah escaped a bid on his life in the old city Habakadal locality when militants fired two grenades towards the public meeting he was addressing. He crawled to a blind lane where he laid prostrate for sometime with his security encircling him. After the order was restored and the people were encouraged to return, Dr Abdullah said he will not be cowed down by bullets and bombs. “Nothing will deter me from the path of restoring normalcy in the state”, he said.

On living the examined life

Life is full of questions about right and wrong and good and bad that stalk our conscience throughout our brief sojourn on this earth. The important questions are not those we ask of the world but of ourselves, the questions that prompt us to look inwards and embark on a journey of interrogation and self-exploration.

The essence of self-enquiry and the importance of personal reflection heightens our understanding of ourselves and the world around us. While external queries and pursuit of knowledge are important, the questions that prompt us to look inwards are crucial for understanding our beliefs and motivation and an awareness that makes for meaningful choices and a fulfilled life.

Socrates was philosophy’s patron saint. The King of the Question. To him “the unexamined life was not worth living”. He was forever asking questions and eliciting answers, an unsparing auditor who held people accountable for their beliefs and lives. We must question our existence, our purposes, our values, our decisions and the moral and ethical dimensions of our actions, which would result in increased self-aware-

ness, better emotional intelligence and improved mental health.

Through self-dialogue, we can confront our fears and doubts, understand our desires and look at our goals with more clarity. Socrates believed all wisdom starts with wonder, and in the childlike wonder where a child has a million questions, we need to ask and answer our own questions to become better individuals. Why am I doing what I am doing?

As Ovid says, “In all creation nothing endures; all is in endless flux,” and today’s certainties may well be

tomorrow’s misgivings. To see things in the proper perspective, we need to examine the right and wrong of our intended actions before we embark on them. Many times we may be proved wrong, but that would only teach us to be more circumspect or thoughtful the next time round and be more accountable for our actions.

When Socrates was sentenced to death by an Athenian court on charges of impiety and corrupting the youth around him, he left us with a question. “The hour of departure has arrived, and we go our ways – I to die and you to live. Which is better? God only knows.”





Sergio Gor's arrival signals that a reset of India-US ties is within reach



THAROORTHINK
BY SHASHI THAROOR

AS SERGIO Gor officially presents his credentials as the United States Ambassador to India this week, he doesn't merely walk into a diplomatic mission; he enters a crucible. At 38, Gor represents a new breed of diplomat — one less interested in the lofty platitudes of shared values and more focused on the hard arithmetic of shared interests. In the current climate, where diplomacy as traditionally understood has been supplanted by deal-making, Gor possesses the unique Trumpian currency: Direct access.

As a trusted member of US President Donald Trump's inner circle, Gor's presence in New Delhi gives India a valuable advantage in the challenge of navigating a revival of the much-vaunted strategic partnership, which seemed to be shuddering to a halt amid trade friction, insulting rhetoric, an indefinitely postponed Quad summit and the calculated snub of India's omission from the initial list of members of the new Pax Silica supply-chain partnership. Gor's arrival marks a pivot from traditional diplomacy to a more transactional, high-stakes deal-making approach. His youth and proximity to President Trump may be exactly what the bilateral relationship requires to overcome its most turbulent period in decades. India must work with him to strike a deal.

However, Gor inherits a relationship currently defined by friction. The 50 per cent punitive tariffs (which rose to this level in August 2025 due to a combination of reciprocal trade measures and penalties for India's Russian oil imports) have caused a 28.5 per cent drop in Indian exports to the US. Even peace in Ukraine, if it leaves India at 25 per cent, gives Indian exporters a significant disadvantage against rivals like Thailand, Vietnam, Indonesia and Bangladesh, who are tariffed between 15 and 19 per



ILLUSTRATION: C.R. SASIKUMAR

cent. While other officials are conducting the trade negotiations, his primary challenge as ambassador is to resolve this tariff war in ways that his hosts can accept, but without appearing to compromise on Trump's "America First" agenda.

The challenges are undeniably steep. The tariff wall, along with disputes over market access and India's pragmatic energy ties with Russia, has transformed the economic landscape from one of cooperation to one of caution. For Gor, the immediate priority is clear: He must act as the chief restructuring officer of the relationship, shifting the focus from perceived punishment to persistent partnership. However, his arrival signals that the path to a grand reset is within reach — and Washington holds the keys to a few significant wins that could define Gor's tenure as a success from the outset.

On his first day in New Delhi as ambassador, he announced a quick win — the inclusion of India as a full member of Pax Silica. India's original omission had been a slight, and no doubt an intended one, but as America's most obvious technology partner in the global AI race, with obvious complementary ties, India's exclusion meant the US was shooting

The tariff wall, along with disputes over market access and India's pragmatic energy ties with Russia, has transformed the economic landscape from one of cooperation to one of caution.

Gor must act as the chief restructuring officer

itself in the foot. Gor's statement makes rapid amends and will be greeted with relief not just by New Delhi but by the other participating countries.

Second, the revival of the Quad Summit in India offers a profound symbolic opportunity. India's turn at hosting the summit, delayed amidst the trade tensions of 2025, must come if the Quad is to remain the primary vehicle for Indo-Pacific stability. A commitment from President Trump to visit India for this summit is essential. Gor's remark that this would happen "hopefully in a year or two" cast an avoidable dampener on the prospects. A Trump visit would allow him and Modi — two leaders who once shared a well-documented personal chemistry that surely can be revived — to rise above the technicalities of trade and reaffirm a strategic vision that spans defence, critical minerals, and "Pax Silica" technology initiatives.

Third, and most important, is the conclusion of a comprehensive bilateral trade deal that ends the punitive tariffs and brings them closer to the 15 per cent that Britain enjoys. Such a deal would signal that the US views India not as a target for correction, but as a pillar of a stable, alternative supply chain to

China. Only then does the dollar-for-barrel proposal — swapping discounted Russian crude for US LNG and Permian oil — become viable. But with a trade deal in hand and a presidential visit on the horizon, Gor will find the political capital for such a shift by India becomes much easier to find.

There are, of course, other challenges. The recent US warming to Pakistan has ruffled a few feathers in an India long used to being patted on the back for its democracy while Pakistan's quasi-military state was merely tolerated for its utility. But President Trump's embrace of his "favourite field marshal", whom he has hosted three times in America, together with reports of US (and Trump family) interest in Pakistani cryptocurrency and rare-earth minerals, and most recently the Pakistani offer of the port of Pasni on the Balochistan coast, have not gone unnoticed here. Ambassador Gor's second hat as special envoy for the region may place him in an advantageous position to resolve these irritants. But it could also create a conflict of interest for him, if promoting good relations with Pakistan is seen as being as vital a part of his brief as strengthening relations with India.

Gor kicked off his first day on the right note: "No partner is more essential than India," he declared, stressing that "it is my goal as ambassador to pursue a very ambitious agenda. We will do this as true strategic partners, each bringing strength, respect and leadership to the table." Gor spoke pointedly of "a relationship anchored at the highest levels. Real friends can disagree, but always resolve their differences in the end."

To turn this optimism into reality, he must move beyond the role of a messenger and become the architect of a deal that ends the trade war (which might instead worsen if another 25 per cent is imposed because of India's trade with Iran). If Washington can quickly grant these two strategic wins — the tariff relief and the Quad visit — Gor will not just be a successful envoy; he will, in his own words, be securing "the century's most consequential partnership".

The writer is Member of Parliament for Thiruvananthapuram, Lok Sabha, and chairman, Parliamentary Standing Committee on External Affairs

Kashi & Tamil Sangamam: A celebration of unity



NARENDRA MODI

AFEW days ago, I was in the sacred land of Somnath to be part of the Somnath Swabhiman Parv, marking a thousand years since the first attack on Somnath, which took place in 1026. People from all across India had come to be part of this moment of remembrance, united by a shared reverence for history, culture and the enduring spirit of the people of India. During the programme, I met a few people who had previously come to Somnath during the Saurashtra-Tamil Sangamam and had been to Kashi during the Kashi-Tamil Sangamam. Their words of appreciation for such platforms touched me and so, I thought of sharing a few thoughts on this subject.

During one of the *Mann Ki Baat* programmes, I had said that not learning Tamil is a major regret of my life. Fortunately, our government has had several opportunities to further popularise Tamil culture across India and to deepen the spirit of "Ek Bharat, Shreshtha Bharat". A prime example of such an effort is the Kashi-Tamil Sangamam. In our ethos, *sangam* or confluence has a special place. The Kashi-Tamil Sangamam stands out as a truly distinctive initiative, one that celebrates the living unity of India's many traditions while honouring their unique identities.

And what can be a better place than Kashi to host such a Sangamam. The same Kashi, which has remained a civilisational anchor from time immemorial; where, for thousands of years, people from all over have come in search of knowledge, meaning and *moksha*.

Kashi's connection with Tamil people and culture is very deep. It is in Kashi that Baba Vishwanath resides, while Tamil Nadu has Rameswaram. Tenkasi in Tamil Nadu is known as Kashi of the south or Dakshin Kashi. Saint Kumaraguruparar Swamikal forged a lasting link between Kashi and Tamil Nadu through his spirituality, scholarship and institution-building. Mahakavi Subramania Bharati, one of Tamil Nadu's greatest sons, found in Kashi a space of intellectual growth and spiritual awakening.

The first edition of Kashi-Tamil Sangamam took place in 2022. Scholars, artisans, students, farmers, writers, professionals and many others from Tamil Nadu travelled to Kashi, Prayagraj and Ayodhya. Subsequent editions expanded the scale and depth of this effort. In the second edition in 2023, technology was used on a larger scale to ensure that language does not become a barrier for people. In the third edition, the focus was on Indian knowledge systems.

The fourth edition of the Kashi Tamil Sangamam commenced on December 2, 2025. The theme was very interesting — Tamil Karkalam — Learn Tamil. It presented a unique opportunity for people in Kashi and other parts to learn the beautiful Tamil language. Teachers came from Tamil Nadu and the students of Kashi had a very memorable experience!

One of the things that makes me happy about the Kashi-Tamil Sangamam is the participation of youngsters. It illustrates the passion among our Yuva Shakti to deepen their connect with our roots. It is a brilliant platform for them to showcase their talent and creativity.

In addition to the Sangamam, efforts have been made to make the journey to Kashi memorable for the participants. The Indian Railways operated special trains to take people from Tamil Nadu to Uttar Pradesh. Here, I would also like to appreciate my sisters and brothers of Kashi and UP for their warmth and hospitality shown to the delegates of the various Kashi-Tamil Sangamams. Several people opened the doors of their homes. The local administration worked round the clock to ensure the guests had a seamless experience. As the MP from Varanasi, I could not be prouder!

The Kashi Tamil Sangamam has delivered meaningful outcomes like strengthening cultural understanding, fostering academic and people-to-people exchanges and creating lasting bonds between parts of the country that share a civilisational ethos. Most importantly, it has furthered the spirit of "Ek Bharat, Shreshtha Bharat".

This time of the year is very auspicious for people across the length and breadth of India. People are enthusiastically marking various festivals like Sankranti, Uttarayan, Pongal, Magh Bihu, which are associated with the Sun, nature and farming. These festivals bring people together and deepen the spirit of harmony in our society. I convey my best wishes for these festivals and hope they continue to inspire us to deepen national unity through our shared heritage and collective participation.

The writer is the Prime Minister of India

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Communism's decline

THE DECAY of Indian communism did not arise from incoherence, cultural neglect, or excessive debate on communalism ('Communism in India is let down by its own incoherence', *IE*, January 14). Its principal cause was revisionism. After Soviet leader Joseph Stalin's death, the leadership of the Communist Party of India abandoned the revolutionary line and embraced parliamentary politics as an end in itself. Class struggle was replaced by electoral arithmetic, and revolution by gradual reform within the bourgeois state.

Manu Kant, Chandigarh

Against imperialism

THE RENEWED discussion around Greenland reveals more than strategic interest; it exposes a troubling mindset in global politics ('Greenlanders are not chess pieces on a board', *IE*, January 14). Treating a land and its people as a geopolitical asset reflects an outdated, power-driven worldview. Greenland's importance in Arctic security and resources is undeniable, but strategic relevance cannot override sovereignty and democratic choice. Any narrative that normalises control, purchase, or pressure undermines international norms and the rights of smaller nations.

Kyamudin Ansari, Mumbai

Welcome move

THE LABOUR ministry has done well to ask major e-commerce and food delivery platforms to stop advertising 10-minute delivery services ('Govt tells quick commerce firms to drop "10-min delivery"', *IE*, January 14). The practice of quick commerce and consumption has crept into today's hectic life over the years. Quick commerce thrives on the craving for instant delivery. Observably, placing orders online to get food, groceries, and household goods in the shortest possible time has become a fad.

David Milton, Maruthancode



ROOPA KUDVA

INDIA'S AMBITION to become a \$7-10 trillion economy over the next decade and a developed economy by 2047 is now central to the economic agenda. The key question is how to finance this growth in a durable, stable and efficient way.

The debate is often framed as a question of how much capital India can mobilise. That framing is incomplete. The central risk in India's growth strategy is dependence on short-term capital combined with persistent execution frictions. Four priorities stand out.

First, rebuild long-term domestic savings. This is the binding constraint. India's growth model ultimately rests on domestic savings. Government balance sheets cannot expand indefinitely, banks are structurally unsuited to long-tenor financing, and foreign capital is volatile. Household savings remain the largest component of India's savings pool, but recent trends are worrying. Net household financial savings reached a multi-decade low of around 5.3 per cent of GDP in FY2023, while household debt has risen to over 40 per cent. Borrowing is increasingly financing consumption, housing, and education rather than long-term asset creation.

While financialisation has increased through mutual funds and equities, this has not compensated for the decline in stable, long-term savings flowing into pensions, insurance, and debt instruments. Long-term growth cannot be fi-

The debate is often framed as a question of how much capital India can mobilise. That is incomplete. The central risk in India's growth strategy is dependence on short-term capital combined with persistent execution frictions

nanced sustainably through leverage or public balance sheets alone. Rebuilding domestic savings is the foundation on which all other financing strategies rest.

Second, shift long-tenor financing from banks to markets. India's banking system is in its strongest position in over a decade. But banks' liabilities are short- to medium-term deposits, while growth requires long-gestation capital. Banks are well suited to working capital, retail credit, and MSMEs. They cannot be the primary financiers of infrastructure and manufacturing. Market-based financing is therefore essential. India's corporate bond market has expanded significantly, but remains shallow relative to the GDP, concentrated in highly rated issuers, and dominated by private placements. Secondary market liquidity is limited, retail participation is low, and long-term institutional investors are cautious about longer-tenor and lower-rated bonds. Alternative investment funds have emerged as providers of patient capital, but scale remains constrained by governance, liquidity, and incentive-alignment issues. Deepening bond markets and expanding the role of pensions and insurance matter more for long-term growth than incremental banking reforms.

Third, improve capital efficiency. With an incremental capital-output ratio of roughly 4-5.5, sustaining high growth places

pressure on savings and fiscal resources. Improving capital efficiency is therefore a first-order growth strategy. The largest gains lie in project execution. Faster approvals, clearer contracts, predictable regulation, and quicker dispute resolution reduce the capital required to sustain growth. Without this, higher investment will deliver diminishing returns.

Fourth, use start-ups and deep tech to bend the capital-output curve. The macro-economic role of India's start-up ecosystem is underappreciated. Technology-driven and knowledge-intensive firms can generate higher output with lower capital intensity, raising productivity. The real opportunity lies in start-ups and deep-tech firms that improve efficiency across logistics, manufacturing, healthcare, energy, and public services. Supporting these sectors requires patient risk capital, longer investment horizons and stronger industry-academia linkages, and policy frameworks that recognise longer gestation periods.

India's growth ambition is achievable if financing shifts from a focus on quantity to quality. Rebuilding domestic savings, shifting long-term financing toward markets, improving capital efficiency, and leveraging start-ups are parallel and mutually reinforcing priorities. Together, they form the backbone of the next reform agenda and are central to India's 2047 vision.

The writer headed Crisil and ONI

To become a developed economy, four reforms



SHASHANK JOSHI AND SHAMBO SAMRAT SAMAJDAR

FEAR IS perhaps the most democratic of human experiences. It visits the powerful and the powerless alike. It appears in different disguises — fear of failure, loss, death, rejection — but its core remains the same: A sense of inner insecurity.

Modern psychology describes fear as a survival mechanism. Neuroscience locates it in neural circuits. Yet despite scientific progress, fear continues to shape decisions, relationships, and even public life. The ancient Indian wisdom texts — the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita — approach fear not as a pathology

but as a misunderstanding. Their message is strikingly contemporary.

The Upanishads make a bold assertion: Fear arises when there is a sense of "the other". It emerges the moment we identify ourselves exclusively with what is limited — the body, status, possessions, roles, or opinions. Anything limited can be threatened. And what can be threatened generates fear. The Upanishadic solution is not denial of the world, but expansion of identity — recognising that beneath changing roles and experiences lies a deeper, stable awareness. Fear, in this view, is not the enemy. Mistaken identity is.

The Bhagavad Gita opens on a battlefield — an intentional metaphor. Arjuna's fear is deeply human. He trembles, his

mouth dries, his limbs weaken. This is anxiety described with clinical precision. Krishna does not dismiss Arjuna's fear. He reframes the question: "Who are you, really?" The Gita teaches that fear intensifies when action is tied to outcomes and ego. When the mind constantly asks, "What will happen to me?", fear multiplies. The remedy offered is not withdrawal, but right action without inner bondage. Fear loses its grip when action flows from clarity.

Courage is often celebrated as the opposite of fear. The Upanishads propose something subtler: Knowledge of what is permanent dissolves fear at its root. When a person recognises that experiences come and go, but awareness remains, fear gradually loses its authority.

IN GOOD
faith

Fear is misunderstanding, knowledge its remedy

Much of modern fear arises from the illusion that life must be controlled completely. The Gita offers an alternative ethic: Participation without panic. One is asked to engage in life wholeheartedly while recognising that outcomes are shaped by forces larger than individual will. When control loosens, fear loosens with it.

Perhaps the most radical teaching shared by the Upanishads and the Gita is their treatment of death — not as annihilation, but as transition. While this need not be taken as literal belief, its psychological implication is profound. When death is not viewed as total negation, the fear surrounding life decisions diminishes. People live more honestly, take meaningful risks, and act with greater compassion.

The wisdom of these texts invites reflection: Am I afraid because something essen-

tial is threatened or because something temporary is changing? Is this fear protecting life or an image of myself? Can I act rightly without demanding certainty? When such questions are lived, fear begins to transform.

The Upanishads and the Gita do not promise a fear-free life but something more realistic and humane: Freedom from being ruled by fear. Fear may still arise, but it no longer decides. Uncertainty may remain, but it no longer paralyses. Life continues, but with greater depth and dignity. In a world driven by anxiety, this ancient wisdom feels less like philosophy and more like quiet revolution.

Joshi is a Mumbai-based endocrinologist. Samajdar is clinical pharmacologist and diabetes and allergy-asthma therapeutics specialist in Kolkata

Why Himachal’s first satellite township has run into protests

Saurabh Parashar
Shimla, January 14

RESIDENTS OF Bagi gram panchayat in Himachal Pradesh have opposed a satellite township that is proposed to come up near Shimla. At a gram sabha meeting last week, they passed a resolution saying they would not give up their land, which includes at least eight revenue villages marked for acquisition. According to residents, the proposed acquisition of land for the Jathiya Devi satellite township would lead to displacement and loss of livelihood. The much-delayed project was first conceived in 2014 by the state government with the approval of the Centre.

The project
The proposed township is supposed to be built at Jathiya Devi, which comes under the Bagi gram panchayat, located about 14 km from Shimla. It aims to decongest the state capital, create new economic hubs, and promote sustainable, disaster-resilient urban growth. The project will span around 249 hectares, of which 35 hectares are government-owned land, according to a Social Impact Assessment (SIA) study held in November 2025. The proposed land use includes residential zones, commercial areas, non-polluting industrial zones, recreational and green zones, and river development areas (16.56 ha). Widened roads (13.78 ha), utility services, smart transport systems, helipad connectivity and an eco-sensitive planning area were other features of the township. The land was to be acquired from eight villages within the Bagi gram panchayat, and a village in Mamlig tehsil, Solan district. The acquisition will directly affect 386 households, with 158 households facing potential livelihood disruption, according to the SIA study.

WHAT’S NEXT
● The Jathiya Devi satellite township, near Shimla, has already faced repeated delays due to funding constraints.
● Whether the project moves forward will depend on how authorities address local resistance, compensation concerns, and environmental safeguards.

placing people who have lived here for generations,” Neeraj Thakur, a resident, told *The Indian Express*.

Naresh Kumar Thakur, pradhan of Bagi gram panchayat, said: “A long time back, HIMUDA had acquired more than 250 bighas for the mountain township. So far, not a single brick has been laid on the acquired land. That land was infertile. But this time, the government says it will acquire agricultural land along with the houses of residents.”

There are also concerns about the amount of compensation that the authorities would pay to those who would lose their land. Hira Singh Thakur, who lives in Bagi, said: “My brothers and I own 12 bighas collectively. After division among sons and grandsons, how much will each get? The government must clarify compensation before moving ahead.”

The Himachal Pradesh Housing and Urban Development Authority (HIMUDA), which will execute the project, has said that the compensation will be paid on the basis of current land prices and collector rates in the area.

HIMUDA CEO and Secretary Suren Kumar Vashisht also said that no land will be acquired forcibly. “A middle path is being explored so that fertile land and houses can be excluded,” he said.

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9 Lucknow	16 जनवरी सुबह 11:30 बजे	16 Jan 11:30 AM
9 Prayagraj	27 जनवरी सुबह 11:15 बजे	27 Jan 11:30 AM
9 Ranchi	15 जनवरी सुबह 11:30 बजे	16 Jan 8:00 AM
9 Patna	15 जनवरी सुबह 8:00 बजे	16 Jan 5:30 PM
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US options in Iran could unsettle region, hurt India



SHUBHAJIT ROY

WITH US President Donald Trump’s state-mission promising that “help is on its way”, war drums have gotten louder in Iran amid raging street protests. More than 2,500 people have been killed since the latest round of protests broke out on December 28, according to a human rights group.

The most brutal crackdown has been witnessed since last Thursday, as more people poured out on the streets and the Iranian regime responded with force and a communications blackout.

The big question is what options the US administration can exercise — and what impact will that have on India’s diplomatic approach to Iran. The Indian embassy in Iran on January 14 asked Indians in the country to leave.

Diplomacy
The first option will be diplomacy. Iranian officials are known to be extremely adept at reading crisis situations and engaging with their counterparts, even in the most hostile circumstances. That was on display when the US under the Barack Obama administration tightened the screws through massive sanctions on Iran, and the Iranian regime decided to negotiate the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) nuclear deal.

The Iranian regime may have many chinks in its armour and many divisions within its fold — the moderates looking for engagement and diplomacy, while the conservative hardliners are much more confrontational. But what all of them agree on is the survival of the Iranian regime, helmed by the Supreme leader. So, negotiating and talking their way out of tight spots has been one of their strengths.

The US, too, is focused on the diplomacy aspect, going by what has been con-



veyed in the public domain.

On Monday, after Trump said Iran’s leadership had been in touch to negotiate, the administration suggested it was again leaning towards diplomacy. “Diplomacy is always the first option for the President,” White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt said. The messages Iran is conveying “privately” are “quite different” from what the regime is saying publicly, “and I think the President has an interest in exploring those messages,” she said. But, Leavitt added, the President is “unafraid to use military options if and when he deems necessary, and nobody knows that better than Iran.”

Calibrated attacks
Analysts and experts say that the Trump administration, along with Israel, could target Iran. The targets could include Iranian military and Revolutionary Guards’ infrastructure, command and control centres, and warehouses of weapons and supplies used by the government and its militias. A higher threshold will be attacks on senior Iranian leaders — as was witnessed

An anti-government protest in Tehran on January 9. AP FILE

Action, reaction
US ground involvement in Iran will be unpopular with the MAGA base.
● But strikes from the air or ships won’t be enough. A diplomat said: ‘It’s difficult to do regime change from 30,000 feet above.’

during Trump’s first term, when the US killed commander Qassem Soleimani. The US President had last year said he could also target Iran’s supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

Whether that is possible or not, Iran’s conventional military weakness stands exposed with last June’s 12-day war, where the American and Israeli air strikes decapitated their air defence systems. The Israeli air strikes made it much easier for the American B-2 bombers to strike the heavily fortified Iranian nuclear facilities buried deep under the ground.

The US Central Command, which looks after the Middle East region, has already stationed six naval vessels in the region, according to reports. USS Mitchell and USS McFaul are in the Arabian Gulf, while the USS Roosevelt is in the Red Sea. Another three, USS Canberra, USS Tulsa and USS Santa Barbara, are also in the Arabian Gulf.

Five US naval vessels in the Arabian Gulf is an aggressive posture towards Iran, taking advantage of the US-friendly neighbours Saudi Arabia, UAE and Pakistan.

India will find it difficult to support the US if it launches a military intervention in Iran. A stable West Asia is crucial for New Delhi

But all these options mean that the US operates away from the territory of Iran.

The conventional wisdom is that a American intervention leading to an outcome — where the Iranian regime is ousted — cannot be guaranteed by air strikes by fighter aircraft or firing from naval vessels. A senior diplomat said, “It is very difficult to do a regime change from 30,000 feet above.”

Ground offensive possibility
So, that leaves the next option of putting American boots on the ground.

US forces captured Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro earlier this month, with minimum damage to American forces. Parallels are being drawn on whether the US can pull off a Maduro-like capture in Iran. Given the strong command and control structure of the Revolutionary Guards, this would be extremely difficult, without facing a strong pushback in terms of casualties.

A US-Iranian combat forces face-off on the ground, and casualties on both sides, might mean a full-scale invasion and war if the US needs to establish its dominance.

This will meet with a definite pushback from Trump’s MAGA base, which has been against US misadventures in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Where India stands
In case of an attack by the US on Iran, India will be impacted again in its immediate neighbourhood, much like the Afghanistan war. Diplomatically, India will find it difficult to support the US actions if there are air strikes and military intervention inside Iran. Economically, Delhi has almost zeroed out the oil import from Iran because of the US sanctions from Trump 1.0.

Another complexity will occur if Iran chooses to attack US bases in the region, in Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Qatar among others. In that event, if the West Asian region goes into turmoil, Delhi will be on tenterhooks. It has about 8-9 million Indians living and working in this region. In addition, almost 60% of India’s energy needs are met from West Asia. Any instability in the region threatens India’s energy security, which would have an inflationary impact.

Graft law: Shielding honest officers vs unmasking the corrupt

Vineet Bhalla
New Delhi, January 14

A TWO-JUDGE bench of the Supreme Court delivered a split verdict Tuesday in a petition challenging the constitutionality of Section 17A of the Prevention of Corruption Act, 1988 (PCA).

The provision, introduced in 2018, mandates that police officers must seek the government’s approval before probing a public servant for offences related to recommendations made or decisions taken in the discharge of official duties.

The petitioner had argued that the section allows the government to block investigations against its officials.

While Justice K V Viswanathan upheld the provision by “reading it down” to include an independent screening mechanism via the Lokpal, Justice B V Nagarathna struck it down entirely as unconstitutional. The matter has been referred to the Chief Justice of India to constitute a larger bench.

The judgment brings into focus a tension in administrative law: empowering agencies to catch the corrupt versus safeguarding the honest civil servant from harassment.

‘Play it safe’ syndrome

Section 17A was introduced by the legislature to curb the “policy paralysis” that might arise when bureaucrats hesitate to take bold decisions due to fear that an error might later be construed as a corrupt act.

Justice Viswanathan, in his opinion, said without a basic assurance of protection, “public servants will resort to a play it safe syndrome”. He acknowledged a flaw in the operation of Section 17A: The power to grant or refuse approval lies with the government. This, he said, violates the principle of independence required in corruption probes.

So, he ruled that while the requirement for prior approval is valid, the decision cannot rest solely with the government. Instead, he directed that the “screening” of complaints must be done by an independent body — the Lokpal at the Centre and Lokayuktas in the States. This mechanism, he argued, aligns the law with the need for independent scrutiny while retaining protection for officers.

Protection of the corrupt

Justice Nagarathna, in contrast, held that Section 17A is “contrary to the object

‘Policy paralysis’

● At the heart of the matter is Section 17A of the Prevention of Corruption Act, introduced in 2018 to curb ‘policy paralysis’

● The provision says police officers must seek the government’s approval before probing a public servant for offences related to recommendations made or decisions taken in the discharge of official duties.

and purpose” of the PCA. She argued that the provision “forestalls an enquiry and thereby in substance protects the corrupt rather than seeking to protect the honest”.

Justice Nagarathna criticised the idea that the government could be an impartial arbiter in granting approval. She noted that if a decision involves high-ranking officials or ministers, a subordinate officer cannot be expected to impartially grant approval.

She also said the court cannot substitute the word “Government” in the statute with “Lokpal”. She dismissed the government’s contention that Section 17A is a “gatekeeper” provision to filter out baseless allegations. According to her, without a preliminary enquiry by the police, it is impossible to know if a complaint is genuine or frivolous.

She warned that the provision allows the government to hold a “Damocles’ Sword” over officials, forcing them to align with political executives or face the threat of investigation approval being granted.

Different interpretations

A key point of contention in the split verdict was how the judges interpreted two landmark Supreme Court judgments: *Vineet Narain v. Union of India* from 1998 and *Subramanian Swamy v. CBI* from 2014.

neeet Narain v. Union of India from 1998 and *Subramanian Swamy v. CBI* from 2014.

In *Narain*, a three-judge SC bench struck down an executive order that required the CBI to seek permission before investigating officers of the rank of Joint Secretary and above. In *Swamy*, a Constitution Bench of the court struck down Section 6A of the Delhi Special Police Establishment (DSPE) Act that had codified a similar protection for senior officers.

Justice Nagarathna viewed Section 17A as a resurrection of the provisions struck down in the earlier cases. She argued that the core holding of *Swamy* was that a “fetter” on the preliminary enquiry subverts the investigation process.

Justice Viswanathan argued that *Swamy* struck down Section 6A primarily because it discriminated between officers based on their rank. Section 17A, he wrote, applies to all public servants, removing the vice of discrimination. He argued that the “spirit and essence” of *Narain* and *Swamy* was that the executive should not control the investigation. By introducing the Lokpal as the independent screener, he argued that this concern is addressed.

● ECONOMICS

Trump tariffs cut China’s surplus with US, and made it the world’s headache



UDIT MISRA

THE LATEST data coming out of China shows that its trade surplus hit a record high of \$1.2 trillion in 2025. This is noteworthy because successive US administrations since 2016-17 (led by both Donald Trump and Joe Biden) have been trying to arrest this rise.

Trade surplus is the situation that arises when a country’s earnings through its goods exports are greater than what it pays for its imports. China’s trade balance has been in surplus for a while now because it has become a manufacturing powerhouse that exports all kinds of goods to the rest of the world. Because Chinese goods are cheap, they have tended to capture markets. Up to a point, this is a win-win for everyone: People in the rest of the world get something cheaper and China can pull millions out of poverty by earning that money.

But, as can be seen from the chart alongside, China’s trade surplus started increasing significantly since 2005. Over the past two decades, it has increased 10 times in

size. Since 2017, the trade surplus has tripled despite US administrations openly targeting China over this very issue.

What does the data show?

The latest data from China’s official sources shows that China’s trade surplus went from just under a trillion dollars (\$993 billion to be exact) in 2024 to \$1.2 trillion at the end of 2025. This appears odd, considering that Donald Trump, since taking over as President for the second time in January 2025, slapped tariffs as high as 145% on Chinese imports to contain its trade dominance.

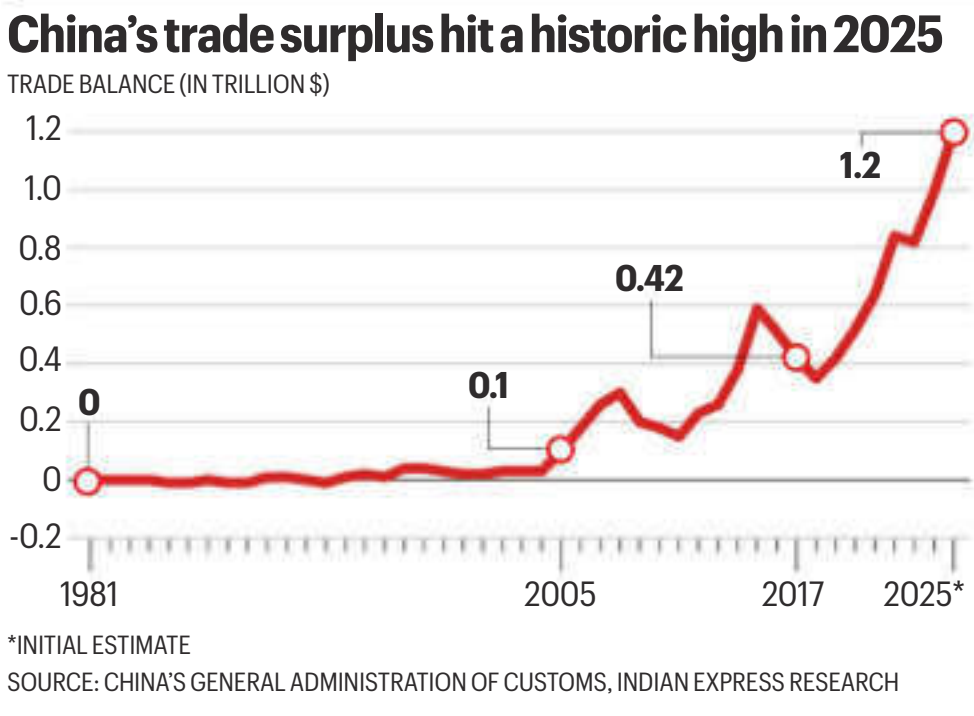
So, have Trump’s tariffs failed?

No, and yes. No, because if one looks only at the trade surplus China enjoyed with the US, Trump can justify that his tariffs have worked very well.

That’s because China’s trade surplus with the US fell from \$327 billion in November-end 2024 to \$257 billion in November-end 2025 (disaggregated data is only available up to November). At one level, this was not surprising. When a country (in this case, the US) imposes tariffs on imports (in this case, China), the prices of those imports go up and the demand (in the US for Chinese goods) falls in response.

This is exactly what happened when Trump imposed tariffs, which now stand at a base rate of 10% after a truce was signed.

China’s trade surplus hit a historic high in 2025



China had exported goods worth more than \$475 billion in 2024 (till November). This fell to \$386 billion in 2025 (till November).

But it can also be argued that Trump’s tariffs have been a colossal failure.

That’s because China’s overall trade surplus — that is the trade surplus with the whole world put together — has actually gone up by more than 20% in just one year.

Given that Trump had always prefaced his tariff actions by pointing to China’s trade surplus with the whole world — “trillion-dollar surplus” — his tariffs have not only failed in reducing that figure but resulted in the

country gaining greater global dominance. This came even as US consumers ended up paying more for their imports from China or went without them altogether. Not to mention the hit US exports to China took following Beijing’s tariffs. They fell from \$149 billion in 2024 to \$129 billion in 2025.

Does China’s surplus matter?

Up to a point, it doesn’t. The fact is that free international trade is hugely beneficial for consumers everywhere. It enables the delivery of the best product at the lowest price across the world and addresses de-

Trade balance improved with everyone but US

REGION/COUNTRY	2024	2025	CHANGE
TOTAL	885	1,076	191
Asia	317	443	126
India	93	106	12
Africa	52	89	37
Europe	222	284	62
Latin America	31	45	14
Venezuela	3	4	1
North America	329	263	-66
Canada	2	6	4
US	327	257	-70
Oceania	-65	-47	17

mand-supply mismatches.

Of course, this involves a country running a trade deficit with one country and a surplus with another. These trade deficits and surpluses tend to cancel each other out. But this free trade “utopia” has hit a massive roadblock because one country has started dominating trade against every other country and in almost every commodity.

For instance, US actions only led to Chinese goods flooding other markets. As the chart shows, China increased its trade surplus in all the regions across the world.

This level of dominance creates three

specific problems.

First, a problem of finances. Where is the money to buy Chinese goods? Typically, consumers sell to Country A, get the foreign exchange and use that to buy goods from Country B. This model starts to creak if everyone buys from only one country. How long can each country run a trade deficit? India’s foreign exchange reserves, for instance, are high enough to finance imports for a full year, even if no additional money comes into the country. But this comfort zone shrinks considerably if a country keeps importing far more than what it exports.

Second, a macroeconomic problem. If China alone makes all the cars and steel and toys, and so on, what happens to the domestic producers of other countries? Where do people work? Where do they earn the money to buy things?

The first two problems combine to turn high trade imbalances into the third problem — a political one. This is being witnessed across the world in the form of a deep resentment against globalisation, liberalisation of trade and immigration.

Experts say China wins because it doesn’t follow the rules of the free market — it keeps its wages low and exchange rate weak to make exports “cheaper”. Similarly, there are question marks over the Chinese government’s role in financing its private sector through massive subsidies.

Weak animal spirits

Strong balance sheets are not leading to higher investment

Unlisted companies in India are financially stronger than they have been in decades. An analysis of the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE) data, published in this newspaper, showed their debt burden was at a 35-year low, with high interest coverage and healthy profits. These firms, which account for a large share of output, employment, and private investment, include many large, wealthy enterprises such as family-owned industrial groups, infrastructure companies, and Indian arms of global multinationals. Many clearly have the balance-sheet capacity to borrow and invest far more than they currently do. Yet, where these firms are borrowing, it is often to refinance older loans rather than expand capacity. If firms with strong profits, low leverage, and easy access to credit are unwilling to take risks, the problem clearly lies beyond finance.

An analysis by Icra, released earlier last year, covering 8,000 unlisted companies alongside 4,500 listed ones, shows that unlisted companies are mainly responsible for the slowdown in overall private capex. This caution is, however, not confined to unlisted companies. Across corporate India, profits are strong but investment appetite is weak. Non-financial companies are sitting on cash worth around 11 per cent of their assets. They are increasingly earning from passive sources rather than from core business activities. The share of passive income, including capital gains and other non-operating income, has nearly doubled over the past decade. Among large non-financial firms, the share of physical assets such as plants, machinery, and projects under construction has steadily declined, while financial assets have risen. In other words, profitable firms are choosing to park surpluses in financial markets rather than deploy them in factories, infrastructure, or new capacity.

This behaviour marks a sharp contrast with India's earlier investment slowdown. During the 2010s, growth was held back by the twin balance-sheet problem — over leveraged companies and stressed banks. Today, corporate balance sheets are clean, banks are well capitalised, non-performing assets are low, and credit is readily available. However, private investment remains hesitant. Several factors explain this. Demand remains uneven. Urban consumption has softened, rural recovery has been slow, exports are muted, and cheap imports, especially from China, have squeezed margins in some sectors. Notably, companies will invest only if they expect sustained returns, not just strong short-term profits. Further, a growing number of business heirs appear comfortable managing wealth rather than expanding capacity. Besides, usual problems remain. Delays in land acquisition, environmental clearances, and litigation can lock up capital for years. Against this backdrop, buoyant capital markets have made financial investment look safer and more rewarding than investment in the real sector.

With private investment slow to revive, the burden of sustaining economic momentum has fallen disproportionately on the government. Public capital expenditure, particularly in infrastructure, is doing much of the heavy lifting. However, this cannot continue for very long. The World Bank estimates that to reach high-income status by 2047, India needs to raise investment to around 40 per cent of gross domestic product. That seems impossible without a decisive revival in private capex. The challenge now is not incentives or credit availability but restoring confidence in demand, policy stability, and execution.

A necessary slowdown

Dropping 10-minute delivery addresses safety concerns

The nudge by the Union Ministry of Labour and Employment to quick-commerce platforms to move away from the “10-minute delivery” promise signals a shift in India's e-commerce landscape. By urging platforms to abandon an ultra-tight delivery benchmark, the government has acknowledged that hyper-fast delivery targets create perverse incentives that can compromise road safety and impose extreme stress on delivery partners. In that limited but crucial sense, the move, which follows a nationwide strike by gig workers last month, addresses a genuine and visible concern.

India's fascination with instant delivery is not unique. It took root during the pandemic, when lockdowns made rapid doorstep access to essentials a necessity. In many Western markets, however, the frenzy cooled once normal shopping resumed. Several quick-commerce players in the United States (US) shut shop or faded away owing to high costs and poor unit economics. India took a different turn. Delivery timelines kept shrinking, and product catalogues expanded from groceries to gadgets and even prescription drugs. Capital worth billions of dollars was poured into the maintenance of dense networks of dark stores. Though platforms insist that speed is enabled by dark-store density and algorithmic planning rather than faster riding, incentive structures, declining per-order payouts, and milestone-based bonuses mean delivery partners often internalise the pressure to hurry. Further, delays translate into poor ratings, reprimands, or financial penalties. In cities already notorious for congestion, poor road quality, pollution, and high accident rates, the pressure is real. Thus, removing the 10-minute delivery promise signals that worker safety cannot be an acceptable casualty of competitive differentiation in a market where products and prices are largely similar. At the same time, quick commerce is now deeply embedded in urban India's consumption patterns. Millions depend on it for income, however imperfect. Investors, too, are watching closely. If regulation forces consumers to slow down or workers to be less desperate, does the business model unravel before it turns profitable? Surely, India cannot afford to kill an ecosystem that has the potential to absorb large numbers of workers at a time when formal job creation remains sluggish.

India's newly notified labour Codes, extending social security, mandating aggregator contributions, and capping work hours provide a framework to ensure registration, enforce aggregator contributions to the social-security fund, align incentive structures with a 48-hour workweek, payment of overtime, and prevent algorithmic practices that penalise rest, illness, or dissent. Implementation, however, will be the real test. Global experience suggests that quick commerce does not need a hard 10-minute promise to survive; delivery windows can be flexible, speed can be priced transparently, and safety can be built into platform design rather than being left to individual risk-taking. Thus for companies, the message is clear. Growth cannot rely indefinitely on compressing time and cost at the worker's expense. In fact, what is needed is a clear e-commerce policy, which puts down the basic framework transparently. It can also make provisions for an independent regulator, which can address the interests of all stakeholders. The e-commerce space is expected to grow rapidly; India needs to be prepared.

Pundits stumbled badly in 2025

There's no shortage of forecasts for 2026, but 2025 shows why we should treat them with scepticism



ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

A New Year has begun. With it come forecasts for what we might expect this year. We need to view these forecasts with more than ordinary scepticism.

Forecasters, in general, have a terrible record; in 2025, they stumbled badly in multiple areas. Just look at what the pundits — economists, military analysts, foreign policy experts and others — predicted during the year or what they failed to foresee. What follows is a limited sample.

Trump's tariffs and US economic growth

Last April, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) forecast growth of 1.8 per cent for the United States' gross domestic product (GDP) in 2025 and 1.6 per cent in 2026, down from 2.8 per cent in 2024. Last October, it revised its forecasts to 2 per cent and 2.1 per cent, respectively. As everybody now acknowledges, the apocalypse that was forecast for the US ain't happening.

Economists are now trying to explain away their misses. The increase in tariffs has not been as high as feared earlier — as though an increase in the weighted average tariff from just under 3 per cent to around 17 per cent is not bad enough. Exporters frontloaded their exports to the US — surely, this should have been anticipated and built into forecasts? The artificial intelligence (AI) boom has obscured weaknesses in the economy — well, US GDP growth of 4.3 per cent in the third quarter of 2025 was driven by consumer spending and exports, not business investment.

The real shocker for economists is that the setbacks to the US economy as a result of Donald Trump's tariffs don't seem to be materialising in 2026 either, going by current forecasts. Goldman Sachs forecasts US GDP growth of 2.8 per cent for 2026!

India's GDP growth in FY26

President Trump announced his Liberation Day tariffs last April, with a “reciprocal tariff” of 25 per cent on India. In August, he slapped an additional 25 per cent punitive tariff in response to India's imports of oil from Russia. Last April, the Reserve Bank of India revised its GDP growth forecast for FY26 downwards to 6.5 per cent, from the 6.7 per cent forecast earlier. Following the

punitive tariff of August 2025, some private agencies said India's GDP growth could fall below 6 per cent.

Nobody could have imagined that in a year in which Indian exports to the US faced tariffs of over 50 per cent for more than half the financial year, India's GDP growth would be 7.4 per cent, higher than the previous year's 6.5 per cent. Now, many agencies see growth momentum being maintained in FY27 at 7-7.5 per cent.

Note that no economist or agency had given India any chance of attaining growth of over 7 per cent over a four- or five-year period without it meeting the well-known laundry list of reforms: A fiscal deficit close to 3.3 per cent, privatisation, speedier land acquisition, an overhaul of agricultural laws, hire and fire on a much bigger scale than even the latest labour Codes promise, among others.



FINGER ON THE PULSE

T T RAM MOHAN

Anti-Indian sentiment in the US

When Mr Trump won the elections in 2024, it was assumed that the India-US relationship would move to an even higher trajectory. The way the relationship has unfolded since has come as a shock to the establishment.

Pundits used to say that, whatever the equations between the two governments at any point, the people-to-people relationship between India and the US was an underlying positive. That no longer seems true. It appears that anti-India sentiment in the Trump administration is an aspect of a wider anti-Indian sentiment in the *Maga* (Make America Great Again) community.

Several elements have contributed to the souring of sentiments towards Indians. The misuse of H-1B visas intended for highly skilled persons to ferret out low-cost labour is one factor. The very success of Indians in different walks of life is another: On social media, Americans ask whether the US needs Indians to head corporations such as Microsoft, Google and IBM; and whether a Vivek Ramaswamy is American enough to run for high office. Non-resident Indians flaunting their religiosity have evoked angry responses: An 85-foot statue of Hanuman in Texas, the noisy celebrations of Indian festivals in prominent suburbs, etc. No pundit saw the negativity towards India or the Indian community in the US coming.

Hidden risks of India's hedged external debt

The recent real depreciation of the Indian rupee has been widely welcomed by commentators. The dominant narrative is comforting: A weaker real exchange rate improves export competitiveness, supports manufacturing, and provides a growth impulse amid global uncertainty. It is also argued that depreciation helps offset higher external tariffs faced by Indian exporters. In this view, the depreciation is not a problem but an opportunity. This narrative, however, overlooks an important aspect: The impact on borrowers of foreign currency debt. Ignoring it risks an overly comfortable macroeconomic interpretation and an underappreciation of key policy challenges.

India's total external debt exceeds \$700 billion, with close to two-thirds owed by private financial institutions and non-financial corporations. A depreciation of the rupee raises debt-servicing burdens in domestic-currency terms. Assessments of vulnerability typically emphasise three mitigating factors: Borrower hedging, the adequacy of foreign exchange reserves, and the fact that external debt, at roughly 18-19 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP), is low by international standards.

These assumptions warrant closer scrutiny. Hedging is often treated as full insurance against currency movements. When borrowers claim to be largely hedged, it is commonly assumed that the rupee cost of servicing foreign currency debt will not rise with depreciation. In practice, plain vanilla hedges are expensive. Borrowers, therefore, adopt cost-reducing strategies that provide protection only up to a point while assuming risk beyond that point. Premiums earned from selling protection offset the cost of buying protection, and in some cases the notional amount of protection sold exceeds that purchased, creating non-linear exposures.

A simple example illustrates the risk. A borrower

buys options that cap rupee depreciation at 2 per cent, at a cost of 2 per cent of the loan amount. To reduce this cost, the borrower sells insurance on twice the loan amount against depreciation beyond 3 per cent, earning a premium of 1 per cent. The net hedging cost falls to 1 per cent, and the borrower remains protected as long as depreciation stays below 3 per cent. If the rupee depreciates by, say, 7 per cent, however, the insurance sold is triggered as well. Because the notional value of protection sold exceeds that purchased, losses on the sold positions dominate, and the borrower incurs net losses despite being classified as hedged. The risk is amplified further when borrowers sell multiple contracts for every one purchased.

These strategies rely on an implicit assumption about central bank behaviour — that the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) will prevent sudden exchange rate moves while allowing gradual adjustment. When the rupee depreciates sharply over a short period, this assumption can fail. A move of more than 5 per cent raises concerns that embedded thresholds have been breached, leaving borrowers exposed precisely when currency risk is most severe. The problem is compounded by the fact that many external liabilities are hedged through the dollar rather than directly against the rupee, exposing borrowers to cross-currency basis risk when global dollar conditions tighten.

The broader implication is clear. Without detailed information on the structure, scale, and trigger points of hedging strategies, it is difficult to assess borrowers' true exposure to exchange rate movements. Current disclosures lack the required granularity. As a result, even borrowers reported as hedged may incur significant losses when the rupee depreciates sharply.

What, then, of the comfort drawn from India's large foreign exchange reserves and external debt-



PRASANNA TANTRI & SARATH RAMAKRISHNAN

Pakistan's resurgence on the world stage

Pakistan was in the doghouse when Mr Trump returned to office last January. Its resurgence in the world of diplomacy in 2025 was truly remarkable.

Following the Pahalgam massacre and the Indo-Pak skirmish of last May, Pakistan did not quite draw any international condemnation. On the contrary, it used the skirmish to restore itself in Mr Trump's favour by, among other things, repeatedly giving Mr Trump credit for bringing the hostilities to an end. Thereafter, Pakistan's army chief, General Asim Munir, was welcomed twice to the White House, perhaps a unique first for any serving general.

In late 2025, the US approved a \$686 million package for Pakistan for maintenance and upgrades of F-16 aircraft. Pakistan also signed a mutual defence pact with Saudi Arabia, something that could not have happened without Washington's blessings. Pakistan's Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif claims with some justification that Pakistan is on good terms with three major powers, namely, China, Russia and the US. The turnaround in Pakistan's international standing has left foreign policy experts bewildered.

Israel's dominance of West Asia

On October 7, 2023, Hamas launched a surprise attack on Israel. A brutal response from Israel followed. In late 2024, Israel extended its operations in a bigger way in Lebanon. Commentators warned that Hezbollah was not Hamas; it had more than 100,000 missiles at its disposal and had the capacity to raze Israel's cities. PM Benjamin Netanyahu was leading Israel towards disaster.

What the pundits did not know was that Israel had accumulated intelligence on Hezbollah hideouts for its personnel as well as its missiles. Israel proceeded to decapitate the Hezbollah leadership and decimate 80 per cent of Hezbollah's missile capabilities. The militia is today a pale shadow of its former self.

In December 2024, a new front opened in Syria with a rebel outfit moving to topple the Assad regime in days, with the help of Israel and Türkiye. Last June, Israel and the US attacked and substantially incapacitated Iran's nuclear facilities. Pundits, who had warned that Israel's PM Netanyahu had over-extended himself, had to eat their words. Israel's dominance of West Asia increased in 2025.

There is no dearth of forecasts for 2026. The Epstein files will prove Mr Trump's undoing (perhaps already proved wrong). Venezuela will turn out to be Mr Trump's quagmire (looking dicey even now). The Republican Party will lose badly in this year's US polls, the AI bubble will burst, the full effect of tariffs on inflation in the US will be felt in 2026 (hmmm).

In *Intellectuals*, a lengthy diatribe against the cerebral types, historian Paul Johnson writes, “A dozen people picked at random on the street are at least as likely to offer sensible views on moral and political matters as a cross-section of the intelligentsia.... beware intellectuals.” For “intellectuals” one might well substitute “experts”.

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The institutional scaffolding of the Emergency



BOOK REVIEW

ADITI PHADNIS

The Emergency was a defining moment in India's history. It has been justified: The Communist Party of India was the only political party that supported it. David Lockwood's 2016 book, *The Communist Party of India and the Indian Emergency* describes why. It has been explained extensively: More than a dozen books, ranging from David Selbourne's *An Eye to India* to Christophe Jaffrelot and Pratinav Anil's deeply researched work. It has been recalled by many through their experiences, such as in L K Advani's *My Prison Diaries* and the latest, *The Conscience Network* by Sugata

Srinivasaraju, and analysed in books too numerous to cite.

But this volume is a bit different. It not only explores how the Emergency could be imposed in a democracy like India but also the many fine strands spun by the 18-month interregnum. Some of these skeins have become muscular narratives, like Hindutva (that, according to Kalpana Kannabiran emerged as a full-fledged force during the Emergency) while the fierce defence and support of civil rights honed by the Emergency by the likes of Justice V M Tarkunde has been supplanted by a grotesque form of nationalism that conflates the Indian nation with the Indian state. At the heart of the book is the unstated question: Despite all the pledges that an Emergency will never happen again, is India worse off today than it was when fundamental rights were suspended, freedom of speech was curtailed and the state could intrude

in every aspect of a citizen's life?

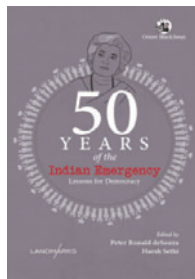
The book explores the administrative, judicial, political, economic and international scaffolding that kept the Emergency alive. A sparkling introduction says failure of institutions was responsible for the Emergency. From this, we learn that institutions can fail again and how all the forces that routinely criticise the “black period” in India's history have either done nothing to repeal the conditions that led to it or have actively collaborated to reinforce them. “Many of these tendencies are apparent today. In this sense, 2025 represents a continuity,” the book warns.

Over time, myths have been created about what caused the Emergency and who resisted it. Anand Kumar says the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) was banned and its members were sent to prison. But *Sarsangchalak* Balasahab Deoras wrote three letters to Prime Minister Indira Gandhi between

August 22, 1975 and July 16, 1976. In November 1976, over 30 leaders of the RSS led by Madhavrao Mule, Dattopant Thengadi and Moropant Pingle wrote to Indira Gandhi, promising support for the Emergency if all RSS workers were released from prison. No one from the Sangh has contested this assertion.

In his essay, “The economic roots of the Emergency” Errol D'Souza goes beyond the “ship to mouth” PL 480 wheat that kept Indians fed, to describe India's economic crisis from the mid-1960s to 1976. The oil shock in 1973, resultant high prices and inflation contributed to an overall sense of betrayal, especially as “Garibi Hatao” was the slogan of the day but poverty continued. Dr D'Souza says amid the strikes and demonstrations, the Nav Nirman movement in Gujarat was triggered after chief minister Chimanbhai Patel lifted regulation on the price of groundnut oil to “help” oil traders who transferred a substantial part of their

profits to the Congress party — which in turn had won 83 per cent of the seats in the 1972 Assembly elections. This hike in prices led to an increase in food prices in college canteens and dining halls — hence the rebellion of the youth that became a potent force in the decision to impose the Emergency. This was only part of the larger economic crisis that had India in its grip as a result of the mismanagement of banking regulations, the strangulation of private business, and the lack of industrial growth. Pamela Philipose's essay of fetters on journalism is interesting. The chapters on the poetry and literature of this period have a fragrance all their own. Varun Sahni's detailed essay on geopolitics investigates if there was ever a “foreign hand”, and concluding this was “an artful fabrication”. A chapter on a centre of resistance: Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) is included.




50 Years of the Indian Emergency: Lessons for Democracy
by Peter Ronald deSouza and Harsh Sethi (edited)
Published by Orient Blackswan
338 pages ₹1,025

The most provocative chapter has to be by Gopal Guru who argues that from the Dalit point of view, a strong state means a greater guarantee of freedom from local structures of exploitation and discrimination: Whether in terms of caste exploitation or through a crackdown on moneylenders. The Emergency was an exceptional moment for Dalits. Gyan Prakash's essay, based on letters exchanged between India's former railway minister, Madhu Dandavate and his wife, Pramila, when they were both prisoners introduces an element of tenderness. Peter

deSouza's essay, “Why did She Impose It and Why Did She Lift It?” is masterful.

This volume reminds us that what has happened could happen again because leaders need to feed their vanity even if it means upending systems. Anyone who is interested in India must read this superb book.



A thought for today

If it's true that our species is alone in the universe, then I'd have to say the universe aimed rather low and settled for very little

GEORGE CARLIN

Soft(ware) Power

Phones to cars, software is key product differentiator now. India should focus on taking the lead in this space

It's 15 years since venture capitalist Marc Andreessen said, "software is eating the world", and he couldn't have been more right. We have an app for everything now – multiple apps actually. So, in a nod to Darwin, software has been eating software. Take for example the news that Google's Gemini AI models will power Apple's Siri virtual assistant. This marks the end of a race that started in 2010 when Google's Android OS, and Apple, acquired voice command capabilities almost simultaneously. Amazon's Alexa and Microsoft's Cortana were also hot contenders at one point. But a Gemini-powered Siri in 2026 proves that software matters more than hardware.

Thanks to the Apple deal, Google's parent Alphabet has cracked the \$4tn valuation club, populated by just one other entity currently – Nvidia. Of course, markets are fickle. Microsoft and Apple were there, slipped out, and may be back anytime. What matters is value measured in terms of life-changing impact. And there's no doubt the world is much more livable thanks to software. Everything from food to rides and flights is a click away. We can connect with friends on foreign shores for free. We can have our fill of movies and songs for small monthly fees. Software makes it possible for anyone, anywhere to get the best education. It's improved healthcare. Farmers get better weather forecasts and market news. Factories are safer, and product quality better, again thanks to software. Even war is now software's playground. Israel's Lavender targeting system can identify Hamas operatives; Ukraine's Op Spider Web was a modern take on the Trojan horse.

Hardware still matters – ask Boeing. But software is the key differentiator, the game changer. German carmakers have struggled against the Chinese not because their motors and chassis are inferior, but because the Chinese make slicker OS and interfaces for EVs, thanks to their extensive experience of making smartphones. With its vast pool of tech talent, India can also be a software powerhouse. After all, Alphabet and Microsoft have been helmed by Indian-origin engineers for years. To make software, we don't need lithium and cobalt mines. We already write a lot of code for MNCs at our GCCs, and that's great, but what we need are brands of our own. Our own world-beating products powered by our own software.

Death Of A Jackal

Zoos promise animals good care in exchange for captivity. But what if what they dish out is torture?

Our relationship with animals is complicated. We understand them no more than they us, and they may think we are beasts just as we think of them, pointed out Montaigne all the way back in the 16th century. Jackals who escaped their Delhi zoo enclosure last Nov certainly have reason to think us brutes. As a complaint before the environment ministry says, one of them who hid in a bear's burrow, was chased with chilli powder and fire, cruel death followed by a clandestine disposal of the body. The question is whether this time zoo authorities will be investigated with more seriousness than in the past, because this is not the first complaint of unscientific and unlawful practices. And every such episode vitiates the 'social contract' that gives zoos their moral veneer, thin as it is.

Zoos jail healthy animals. None of us seriously believes that these animals would choose captivity over walking, running, flying, swimming in the wild. So how do we justify zoos? A recent Central Zoo Authority evaluation underlines that this is ex-situ conservation, integral to offset the loss of biodiversity and spread awareness about it. This does not mean that there won't be a lot of suffering, including widely documented zoonosis, where animals show signs of mental anguish, in addition to physical tribulations. But that we will provide "the best possible standard of care".

Amidst clear signs that this is far from the case, environment ministry must properly audit the country's zoos, beginning with the 155 recognised by Central Zoo Authority, and then take the strongest possible remedial actions. Just last year, Shankar, Delhi zoo's lone African Elephant, died of ardent-borne virus, after spending 13 years in solitary confinement. As did Mishiti, a giraffe belonging to a threatened species, who was translocated from Alipore to Ranchi while pregnant. And 31 blackbucks, whose medical care was unconsciously delayed in Belagavi. We can barely justify taking away their freedom, but no one should get away with torturing them.

Join the arty-party

Lessons for the philistine neta

Bachi Karkaria

Opening the Art of India exhibition in New Delhi last Friday, lawyer-MP Abhishek Manu Singhvi confessed that the more he examined his credentials for this task, 'the more unqualified and without locus I found myself'. *Netas* are manifestly not even qualified for the diverse portfolios plonked on them. But here's a primer for whenever they need to talk on art. I'll simplify it with political analogies.

Botticelli is not a variation of vermicelli *kheer*, just as Modigliani is not an Italian (or Sindh) PM. The 't' being silent, Monet and Manet are not estranged Maharashtra cousins uniting for today's BMC election. It would be unwise to 'minoritise' Husain and Souza though the former was targeted. More of that anon.

Mercifully Old Masters in art get better treatment than some past political greats. When Leonardo da Vinci said 'Art is never completed, it is simply abandoned', he wasn't referring to municipal repairs. No, no, this is not the similarly named *banda* who acted in recently awarded *One Battle After Another* and *Catch Me If You Can*. *Neta-log* are used to both scripts, na?

Now techniques. 'Gouache' refers to the use of a thick water-based paint, which too you may find familiar since it is as opaque as a politician's motives. Shape-shifter politicians can also understand 'chiaroscuro', an interplay of light and dark.

'Impasto' isn't about imposters among you, but, in it paint is applied as thickly as you guys lay on flattery. It was used by the Impressionists – who didn't get that name because they tried impressing PM/CM.

'Egg tempera' is not the tantrum thrown by 'Pure Veg' politicians. It's a complex method using dry pigments mixed with an emulsion of egg yolk and wine/vinegar.

Nude studies are high art, not to be confused with Grok's low-life nudifying feature. Husain's Saraswati was vandalised for being 'blasphemous' despite the countless unclad deities in ancient Indian sculpture. The nude wasn't rude in several famed sacred spaces. But then, unlike art, politics is never about the naked truth.

Alec Smart said: "Fake post? Trump's always an 'acting' president."

THE TIMES OF INDIA
THURSDAY, JANUARY 15, 2026

The 10-Minute Drama

Govt intervention in quick commerce misreads why delivery personnel are in a rush. It's not about the 'promise' to consumers, but because their income's tied to the number of completed orders per day

Anupam Manur

In India, time is a nebulous concept that is elastic and can bend like monsoon rubber, stretched endlessly without a whisper of a protest. Yet, here we are, strangely stuck in a national debate over grocery deliveries in 10 minutes. The Union labour minister has quietly asked quick commerce companies to move away from the explicit "10-minute delivery" advertising taglines. While it is heartening to know that India has suddenly woken up to the concept of road safety, a hitherto alien concept to most road users, changing marketing timelines is mere policy theatre.

Indian quick commerce companies' promise of 10-minute delivery is more of a marketing tagline than a legal commitment or even a liable customer promise. Unlike the erstwhile Domino commitment of 30 minutes or free, there are no explicit consequences for not delivering in 10 minutes.

Yes, there are implicit pressures that such a tagline can create because customers would expect delivery in a timeframe. But now that customer expectations are anchored around a specific number, changing the tagline might not make a difference. Marketing departments can remove the 10-minute promise, even as they come up with innovative taglines rooted in the same anchored effect. Such as, "delivery before your chai cools down" or "at your door before the ad break ends."

The ultra-fast delivery promise is kept not by making delivery agents speed across the city and cover vast distances, but by strategic use of data, cheap labour, and ability to locate warehouses in dense urban areas. Using demand data, quick commerce companies have strategically situated dark stores or warehouses in localities where they can service many customers in short periods of time. Further, many of the deliveries are done on e-scooters, which have an inherent speed cap.

On the algorithm side, the actual delivery time shown to customers is never fixed at 10 minutes. It is dynamic and is based on dark store distance, traffic conditions, time of day, weather and real-time rider availability.

More importantly, riders are not shown the delivery

time promised to customers and are thus not pressurised to meet the deadlines. The real reason for the rush is the nature of gig work itself. Riders are paid for each gig they complete and will therefore want to complete one delivery as quickly as possible, in order to be able to do another one. This will remain true irrespective of whether the delivery time promised is 10 or 30 minutes.

The equation for workers in the gig industry in India is very different from their counterparts elsewhere. Most of them do not view this as a freelancing project, taken up to supplement income. Instead, earnings from gig work are the primary source of income for most people involved in it. Therefore, the biggest



Image: AI

incentive is to maximise income in a limited time.

It would be unfair to place the entire burden of the failure of the Indian economy to produce jobs and livelihoods on one sector, a sector that is in fact providing income and livelihoods to millions. It might be far from ideal to have the burgeoning youth of the country doing unskilled gig work that has no career trajectory, but there is something problematic about demanding Scandinavian labour standards in a country that just cannot generate enough jobs.

During the recent festive period, calls for greater govt intervention to rein in quick commerce surfaced in response to the strikes by workers who felt they were inadequately compensated or protected. Simultaneously,

thousands of other workers fulfilled holiday orders across India in record numbers, showing their revealed preference, albeit in a constrained choice environment. Gig workers too have agency and will choose this until something better comes along.

Back to road safety, though Deepinder Goyal's comments on X a few days back were shot down as deflection and lack of accountability, these had more than an element of truth. Traffic rules in India are viewed as optional suggestions and not as mandatory diktats. Thus, the breaking of traffic rules is a pan-India, society-wide problem. Indeed, it is not uncommon for police personnel to be seen driving in the wrong way. Enforcement is weak and rule-breaking is the norm rather than the exception.

Delivery personnel with clearly marked uniforms visually stand out as the primary culprits. But in the absence of disaggregated, publicly available data, it is premature to single out delivery personnel as uniquely culpable. It would also be naive to believe that delivery personnel will magically be transformed into model road users with the removal of delivery time limits.

The road safety conversation is not the problem. The performative way it is being conducted is. We should demand that companies have lesser opacity in their algorithms – be transparent about the penalties for late deliveries.

More importantly, companies are in a unique position to track riders and their road use patterns and thus, have the greatest amount of power to influence behaviour.

Companies should monitor and actively disincentivise rule-breaking (such as riding in the wrong way). They can also proactively publish accident rates among their delivery partners, which would allow analysts to check if these are higher than societal averages.

Asking companies to change taglines is a low-friction, high-visibility intervention that allows the state to be seen as acting without engaging in the politically harder work of enforcement, infra reform, or police accountability. Through it all lies the danger of moral licencing, where the removal of the 10-minute marketing slogan will seem like fixing the problem, though it will do little to change on-ground realities.

The writer is economics professor, Takshashila Institution, Bengaluru

In IndiGo Crisis, DGCA Slept And CCI Didn't Bark

India's competition watchdog is known for its hands-off approach & botched probes. Nobody's surprised that it remained a mute spectator while the dominant airline showed signs of misusing its dominance

Kaustubh Chaturvedi

Amid all the flak aviation regulator DGCA has drawn for its handling of last month's IndiGo crisis, the role of another regulator – Competition Commission of India – has gone relatively unnoticed.

CCI was set up to promote and sustain competition in markets, and is tasked with curbing anti-competitive practices across sectors. It is CCI's job to hold dominant companies accountable when they choose to misuse that dominance in a way that is detrimental to consumers. To that end, it has been endowed with sweeping powers of enquiry and adjudication, including the power to suo motu investigate any activity it finds suspicious.

The seeming inability of IndiGo, India's dominant carrier, to adhere to DGCA's updated FDTL – flight duty time limitations – norms is certainly suspicious. Numerous pilots have claimed they were not assigned any duty when they were available to fly – a possibly deliberate attempt to manufacture a crisis and show the world that the new FDTL norms are unworkable.

While it is possible that the sudden cancellation of thousands of flights resulted from poor planning and an overly optimised cost structure with no redundancies built in, DGCA's response raises doubts. The four-member committee it formed to investigate the case submitted its report over a fortnight ago, yet it has remained quiet and not taken any action. So, it falls to CCI to get to the truth.

In all fairness, condemning CCI for allowing IndiGo to become too big to fail – for allowing it to achieve a 60% market share and for letting a once-competitive airline sector reduce to a duopoly – is misguided. That criticism – being made widely and trenchantly in the backdrop of an obvious market failure – lacks

an appreciation of the nature of CCI as a body and the law underpinning it.

The days of pre-liberalisation India, when Monopolistic and Restrictive Trade Practices Act served as a real check on big businesses getting bigger, are long gone. Post-liberalisation, India has the Competition Act, a fundamentally neoliberal legislation which has accepted that big isn't necessarily bad, and that dominance is only really a problem when abused. Critics, therefore, should lay the blame for IndiGo's dominance on the legislature, rather than CCI.

That said, CCI does seem to have forgotten that it is



meant to step in at the first sign of a dominant company misusing its dominance. It must remember that it is intended to function as a proactive market regulator, not a quasi-judicial tribunal for resolving disputes brought before it.

CCI can take cognisance of anti-competitive practices on its own; it can and should respond to changing market dynamics without waiting for a complaint to be lodged before it. Yet, the only time it demonstrates any appetite for doing so is when it

comes to Big Tech – with WhatsApp and with Amazon. Other markets are ignored unless a public-spirited informant or a competitor with a bone to pick approaches CCI and requests its intervention.

This needs to change. No other regulator takes such a hands-off approach, or is nearly as reliant on third parties to take action. Information asymmetry can hardly be an excuse when in possible cases of abuse of dominance, such as the present IndiGo crisis, the perpetrators are corporate behemoths whose sins often play out publicly. CCI must, at the very least, look to act on these potential infractions, if not more actively seek out those hidden from the public eye. Mere internal conversations are not enough – it must send a notice, take a prima facie view, and initiate an investigation when something seems wrong.

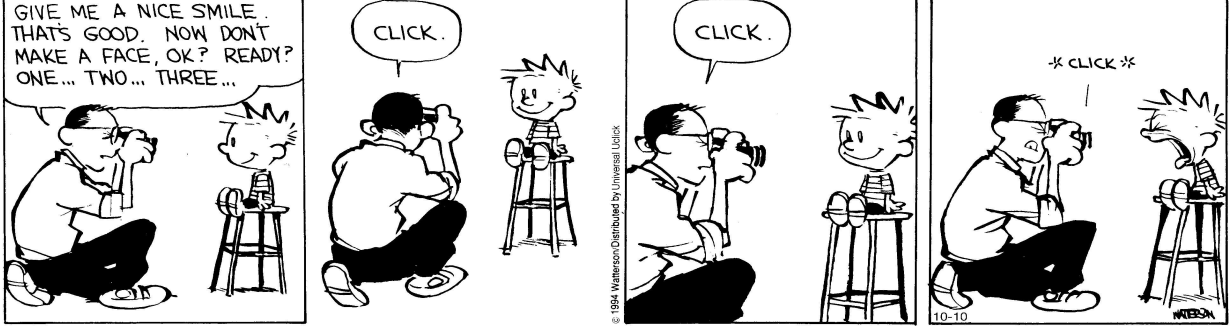
Unfortunately, not much happens even when a complaint is lodged and CCI does investigate a matter. The vast majority of its investigations lie stalled, with probes lasting several years and often concluding only when market structures have already been damaged beyond belief.

These delays are in part often CCI's fault – the result of strictures imposed by appellate authorities in response to procedural errors of various stripes committed by it. The investigation into Apple stalled because CCI erroneously included Apple's confidential data in a non-confidential report; the investigation into Swiggy stalled because CCI erroneously gave the informant access to Swiggy's confidential data. The list of mistakes goes on and on, showing a regulator that is either careless or improperly staffed.

It is little surprise, then, that fear of the competition watchdog is not deterring dominant companies from acting as if they're beyond the reach of the law. CCI needs to get its act together, and start both proactively remedying market distortions, and effectively investigating cases pending before it.

The writer is an advocate at Supreme Court and Delhi HC

Calvin & Hobbes



Triad Of Ego States: Parent, Adult, And Child

Ullhas Pagey

Eric Berne, a Canadian psychiatrist, unveiled a sacred triad of ego states: Parent, Adult, and Child as portals to our scripted destinies. In the esoteric extensions of Transactional Analysis – which Berne created – these ego states crystallise into three archetypal concepts of life: the Taught, Felt, and Thought. This triune progression transcends mere psychology; it unfolds as a mystical pilgrimage from heavy chains of inherited karmic injunctions towards the union with the divine physis, that innate growth force pulsing through every seeking heart.

Behold the Taught concept of life, enshrined within the Parent ego state. This is a vast repository of external impositions etched into the tender neural mandala of childhood. Here dwells the dogmatic exoskeleton – rigid cultural scripts, authoritarian religious commandments, and familial 'shoulds' that masquerade as immutable divine law. This is the domain of projected authority where a soul absorbs the collective shadow. Berne identified these as life scripts:

preconscious, deterministic narratives dictating trajectories of winning, losing, or hopeless futility.

When contamination reigns, the Parent intrudes upon the Adult, poisoning present awareness with prejudice. Spiritually, this manifests as profound alienation. A soul trapped in performative piety finds authentic communion with the divine supplanted by the terror of 'wrathful deities. The spirit languishes in duality, projecting omniscience onto external institutions while forsaking inner gnosis and perpetuating cycles of spiritual bypassing.

Yet, beneath this oppressive armature stirs the Felt concept of life, the visceral, untamed symphony of the Child ego state. This is the primal reservoir of internal events and emotions. Here erupts the soul's innate longing: childlike wonder at the cosmos, visceral terror of abandonment, and ecstatic bliss. This is embodied, Anand, the intuitive divine spark yearning for nondual intimacy.

Berne affirmed humanity's birthright

as fundamentally 'OK', princes and princesses of the spirit dethroned by civilising traumas, yet eternally vibrant in this inner sanctum. Unintegrated, however, the Child overwhelms the Adult with archaic fears, devolving into reactive turbulence and dramatic emotional games.

From this intense alchemical crucible emerges the Thought concept of life, a sovereign and luminous domain of the Adult ego state. This is discerning, here-and-now awareness that meticulously decontaminates intrusions from Parent and Child, weaving them into enlightened harmony. This is no sterile rationality but awakened gnosis; present-centred cognition testing inherited beliefs and emotional impulses against direct, unfiltered reality. In this visionary framework, the Thought heralds true transcendence: awareness as profound mindfulness, spontaneity as liberated response, and intimacy as communion with self, others, and the cosmos. Free from the shadows of contamination, this integrated state

Sacred space

When you call yourself an Indian or a Muslim or a Christian or a European or anything else, you are being violent. Do you see why it is violent? Because you are separating yourself from the rest of mankind.

J Krishnamurti



THE SPEAKING TREE

INDIA & EUROPE NEED RULES-BASED TIES AMID COERCIVE GEOPOLITICS

NDIA'S engagement with Europe is entering a consequential phase. A flurry of high-level visits, expanding trade ties and shared anxiety about global instability all point to a recognition that this partnership must move beyond symbolism and become a pillar of economic and strategic resilience.

Trade remains the anchor: The European Union is India's largest trading partner in goods, absorbing roughly 17 percent of Indian exports. What is changing is the breadth of this relationship. The big European powers remain central, but countries such as Spain, Belgium and Poland are emerging as fast-growing destinations for Indian exports, broadening India's commercial footprint across the 27-nation bloc. A long-delayed India-EU free trade agreement, if concluded, could further boost competitiveness in garments, pharmaceuticals and engineering goods at a time of demand uncertainty worldwide.

Yet, the relationship is no longer defined by trade alone. Europe's turn towards strategic autonomy has made it a more serious geopolitical actor: This creates space for deeper cooperation with India in critical technologies, clean energy, digital governance, artificial intelligence and resilient supply chains. For Europe, India offers scale, growth and credibility in the Indo-Pacific. For India, Europe offers capital, technology and regulatory depth without the volatility of some other major powers.

The India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor, launched at the G20 summit in New Delhi, gives this convergence a physical form. Built on the three pillars of transport, energy and digital connectivity, IMEC aims to integrate rail, port, power and fibre-optic networks across the continents. By cutting Asia-Europe transit times by about 40 percent and generating an estimated \$5.4 billion in annual trade savings, the corridor, whose future is now obscured by regional conflicts, promises to offer a broader alternative to single-country initiatives such as China's Belt and Road.

This alignment, however, is not without friction, most notably on Russia. Europe's approach is shaped by proximity to war, sanctions and a hardening view of Moscow as a direct security threat. India's stance is far from it. This divergence is real, but it need not be disqualifying. What matters is that India and Europe increasingly agree on strategic realism—that the broader objective is to prevent a fragmented global order dominated by coercion and closed blocs. As power shifts, India needs scale, technology and rules-based partners. Europe fits that bill. A decisive India-EU partnership can shape a resilient, balanced global order.

PROBE THOSE WHO CASHED IN ON GRABBED INFRA LAND

THREE decades after its conception, the Karnataka High Court has directed the state government to scrap the Bangalore-Mysore Infrastructure Corridor project and undertake a comprehensive review. The court was unsparing in its assessment: since the project was conceptualised in 1996, barely 1 km of the proposed 111-km expressway has been built and none of the five planned townships has materialised. A technical report submitted in August 1995 had envisaged an expressway between Bengaluru and Mysuru, peripheral roads connecting national highways, and residential, industrial and commercial hubs, along with five self-sustaining townships from Bidadi to Srirangapatna. Nandi Infrastructure Corridor Enterprise (NICE), the concessionaire, did construct tolled roads linking the city to its outskirts. However, vast tracts of land acquired at negligible rates from farmers lie unused even decades later.

That five successive governments allowed the project to drift reflects sustained political and administrative abdication cutting across parties. Conceived during a JD(S) regime, the corridor was presented as a development catalyst in the Vokkaliga belt, but successive governments failed to either enforce contractual obligations or protect landowners' interests. While JD(S) leaders H D Deve Gowda and H D Kumaraswamy later highlighted the distress of farmers who sold land that has since become prime real estate, these concerns emerged long after the damage was done. NICE was entitled to acquire only 13,237 acres of private land, yet 29,267 acres were notified. Of these, 13,404 acres remained under preliminary notification for 25 years, freezing livelihoods. A 2016 House committee detailed serious irregularities involving NICE, its promoter Ashok Kheny and officials: land acquired at throwaway prices, stamp duty exemptions for 14,337 acres, illegal allotment of 20 lakes, and repeated violations of concession terms, including sale and mortgaging of unused land.

Recent interventions have begun to correct the record. In July 2025, the high court quashed acquisition notifications issued between 1998 and 2009, granting relief to landowners. The state cabinet has proposed returning 13,418 acres to farmers, while other notified parcels remain under review. Yet, such measures alone are insufficient. The project stands exposed as a large-scale land grab enabled by political patronage and bureaucratic complicity across regimes. Those who profited from it must now be identified, investigated and held accountable. Only then can the state claim to have closed a chapter marked by dispossession and institutional failure.

QUICK TAKE

ABANDON KITE ARMS RACE

WHILE kite festivals are being celebrated, several deaths are being reported from throats slit by barely-visible manja threads strung across roads. After two such deaths within 45 days in Indore, the Madhya Pradesh High Court has banned the sale and use of the razor-sharp 'Chinese nylon manja'. Accidents have been reported in Karnataka, Telangana and Uttar Pradesh, too. Indians have been using manja—a paste of abrasive materials like finely-crushed glass—for centuries. Even the use of nylon threads is decades old. What has changed in recent years is the explosive growth in population and two-wheelers. Charging parents with deadly negligence if nylon manja is used could be a deterrent. Beyond that, let's enjoy the sight of soaring kites, abandon this silly 'arms race' and go back to simple, brittle cotton threads.

DURING the past 10 days that shook the world, two fault lines have appeared in international politics—principally, the regime change project of the US President Donald Trump in Venezuela and, two, a potential break-up of the Western alliance.

If only the celebrated Latin American literary giant Gabriel García Márquez were alive today, this would have been a fitting moment in his tumultuous career—marking the entry of magical realism, a literary genre blending the mundane with the fantastic, into the realm of geopolitics.

Herein lies a paradox. While Trump may have missed the Nobel Peace Prize, he can still claim a legacy of making magical realism a global phenomenon in politics—a potentially more enduring legacy for some. He has succeeded in situating us onlookers in a predominantly realistic setting while his fantasies are rolling out in an unreal world, with unreal characters. He brings alive García Márquez's powerful metaphor of cows wandering through and eating the curtains inside a deposed dictator's home.

The regime change in Venezuela had an easy explanation—it is a vivid display of the Trump administration's prioritisation of the Western hemisphere in its foreign policy strategies, as outlined in the recent National Security Strategy released by the White House. This hypothesis was articulated, albeit somewhat crudely, by Secretary of State Marco Rubio, the most experienced top diplomat in the entire Trump team, when he spoke to a TV network on Sunday. "This is the Western hemisphere. This is where we live—and we're not going to allow it to be a base of operations for adversaries, competitors and rivals of the United States."

All sorts of atavistic fears appear to be swirling in Rubio's subconscious mind, vaguely hinting that the US, like an ageing lion losing its mane, is coming home for better cooling and hunting in a thorny terrain, but where it also has to contend with predators who appeared to settle old scores—Russia, China and Iran in particular.

Venezuela is synonymous with energy security. If China accounts for around 80 percent of Venezuela's oil exports in recent years, Russia and Iran are Caracas's team-mates in the Great Game over the petrodollar. If China has quietly 'de-dollarised' its oil trade with Venezuela, Russia and Iran are world champions in beating American sanctions. All this has been going on right under the nose of the Amer-

By forcing brute American power on Latin America, Trump is blending reality with the surreal. None of it is likely to go according to plan in this diverse region

A CHRONICLE OF MAGIC REALISM FORETOLD

M K BHADRAKUMAR

Former diplomat



MANDAR PARDIKAR

icans, who couldn't do anything about it.

To be sure, there's a long haul ahead for Trump. Mexico, for instance, is a challenge equivalent to Venezuela multiplied by at least five—with a 2,000-mile long land border with the US, its political economy rests firmly on a bizarre institutionalised bonding between its leftist ruling elite and the mafiosi (with collaborators in the US). President Claudia Sheinbaum is seeking a settlement with Trump, had a "good conversation" with him and even ruled out a US invasion.

On the other hand, Cuban President Miguel Díaz-Canel remains defiant, unimpressed by the shock and awe of the US's secret strategic weapon (sourced from microwave generators) generating ultra-high-frequency electromagnetic radiation.

Trump cannot emulate *Ali Baba* and

the Forty Thieves by simply chanting the magical phrase 'Open Sesame' to lure the regional states to come over to his side. Ever since the US transitioned in the mid-20th century to a more proactive international strategy—with the state department officially declaring the end of the Monroe Doctrine era—the Western hemisphere has transformed beyond recognition. Trump himself admitted as much when, on January 3, he rechristened it as the 'Donroe Doctrine'.

Simply put, it is impossible to make a chastity belt to lock the elected leaders of such a vast, uncontrollable continent teeming with poets and guerrillas, or neutralise Chinese and Russian influence in the region—and, all this is to be completed by 2028. What was done to Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro will only increase

HUMAN COST OF NEED FOR SPEED

TULSI JAYAKUMAR

Professor, finance and economics, and Executive Director, Centre for Family Business and Entrepreneurship at Bhavan's SPIIMR

gorithmic systems. Our cities are not spreadsheets, and the friction that defines everyday urban life is rarely captured in neat delivery-time calculations.

Platforms rely on automated metrics, not human supervision, to determine workers' access to future orders. Thus, they shape worker behaviour while denying employer obligations. The lack of transparency makes it difficult for workers to contest penalties or understand how to improve their standing.



As companies are rethinking 10-minute deliveries, we must understand the result of such promises. Opaque, algorithm-based incentives compel workers to imperil themselves to improve ratings and earnings. The new labour codes do not help. We need an independent fairness index for gig platforms

This opacity has material consequences. Research by the Centre for Sustainable Employment and the ILO shows that platform workers often experience income instability even during periods of high demand, as incentive structures shift unpredictably and penalties are imposed retroactively. In such conditions, workers may prioritise speed over safety as a rational response.

In India, the Code on Social Security, 2020 recognises gig and platform workers as a distinct category—an important conceptual step. Yet, the recognition has not translated into robust protection. By linking eligibility for insurance and benefits to minimum engagement thresholds—90 days on one platform or 120 days across several—the State has

inadvertently mirrored the logic of the platforms themselves.

In a system marked by high churn, unpredictability and frequent account deactivations, many workers will never remain visible long enough to qualify. The continued classification of workers as independent contractors further allows platforms to shift operational risks outwards. Fuel price volatility, insurance gaps and the absence of paid leave are treated as individual problems rather than systemic features. This fragmentation weakens collective voice even as dependence on platform income deepens. What emerges is a new kind of urban buffer class—present when demand surges, absent when liabilities arise. Flexibility, once framed as empowerment, increasingly resembles instability by design.

If India is to preserve both innovation and dignity, the next phase of platform regulation must prioritise transparency over speed. One practical step would be the creation of a publicly-visible fairness index for gig platforms—an independently governed rating system that evaluates companies on labour integrity rather than delivery velocity. Much like energy efficiency labels or food safety standards, it would allow consumers, regulators and investors to see what currently remains hidden.

The index's key dimensions could include income viability (net earnings meeting local living wages), time realism (delivery promises adjusted dynamically for traffic, weather and peak congestion), due process (a human-led mechanism to contest suspensions and penalties), and social protection (insurance and accident cover from the first day of work).

The goal is not to halt innovation, but to re-anchor it in social reality. The protests should be read as a warning signal. They point to a widening gap between the speed promised to customers and worker security. India needs to re-think its quick-commerce terms. If platform growth is to align with broader development goals, attention must shift from headline innovation metrics to the everyday working conditions. Convenience, after all, is a design choice—not a natural law.

(Views are personal)

anti-American sentiment, complicating the Donroe Doctrine. Presidential elections are coming up in Colombia and Brazil, where left-wing forces are predicted to win.

Russia is not the Soviet Union, and Moscow and Beijing have no misconceptions that Trump's military operation in Venezuela aims to establish unlimited control over the country's natural resources and assert Washington's hegemonic ambitions in Latin America. Over and above, it remains an 'unknown unknown' how Trump's experimentation in creating a new oligarchy in Caracas will end up. What if a 'new Maduro' emerges at the top of the heap eventually?

Again, the plain truth is that the countries in the region that are committed to cooperation with Beijing are themselves reluctant to reorient themselves towards Washington. Trump's abacus may tell him that the combined oil reserves of Venezuela, Guyana and the US will give him sway over almost 30 percent of the global total—and put him in a commanding position over international oil markets. But the oil market has hidden charms, too, as Russian President Vladimir Putin or Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman know only too well. Simply put, the oil market is such that while Saudi Arabia can pump crude at a cost of less than \$10 a barrel, his kingdom needs prices above \$100 to bring its fiscal deficit down to zero. Therein hangs a tale.

Big Oil cold-shouldered Trump when he graciously proposed that the industry should invest at least \$100 billion to rebuild Venezuela's energy sector with US security guarantees. It emerges from reportage that it was a stormy meeting, as most CEOs told Trump that Venezuela would need big changes to attract investment. ExxonMobil CEO Darren Woods said point-blank that the country is "un-investable" in the current state. ConocoPhillips CEO Ryan Lance said Venezuela's energy system needed to be restructured first. Chevron, the only US oil major operating in Venezuela through joint ventures with the State-owned Petróleos de Venezuela, responded that the company may be able to increase production "within our own disciplined investment schemes by about 50 percent just in the next 18 to 24 months".

Trump has since threatened to punish ExxonMobil—historically, a veritable state within the US in its scale, global reach and immense economic power, which allows it to function like a sovereign entity and operate across jurisdictions and regulations due to its integrated operations.

(Views are personal)

MAILBAG

WRITE TO: letters@newindianexpress.com

Isro's silence

Ref: *Isro failure to dent aspirations* (Jan 14). The tactical silence on the part of Isro's board about the anomalies have only compounded the mystery. Our cost-effective independent innovation needs introspection of quality assurance and maybe, even further refinement. The failure analysis committee constituted after the failure of the M3 mission seems to have faltered.

Biju C Mathew, Thiruvananthapuram

Convenience politics

Ref: *Game of thrones* (Jan 14). Opportunistic alliances and rampant horse-trading have reduced local elections in Maharashtra to a mere game. Instead of strengthening self-governance, shifting loyalties and delayed polls weaken democratic accountability. Urban governance deserves principle.

Aabha Sarda, email

Past mistakes

Ref: *Making sense of the present* (Jan 14). Correcting past mistakes paves the way for a better future although history cannot be erased. Roll revisions, on the other hand, should be seen with an open mind as democratically warranted. Vulnerability of minorities—which stems from the belief of 'some more equal than others'—remains a universal feature across demographics.

Jaikishan N, Kengeri

History's judgement

Ref: *Perils of milquetoast diplomacy* (Jan 14). During Nehru's time, India lost considerable territory to China, while his much-vaunted diplomacy failed to secure any meaningful help. Leaders should not worry how history would perceive them, and prioritise public interests. Effects of current leaders' milquetoast stand is yet to be seen.

S Sundareswara Pandiyan, Chennai

Confronting US

If India invokes the principles of strategic autonomy in its stand on Nicolás Maduro's abduction, it would involve walking a diplomatic tightrope. While keen on protecting sovereign interests, India cannot afford to confront superpowers. It should not be seen supporting colonialism too.

N Rama Rao, email

Exploiting workers

Ref: *No more 10-minute delivery* (Jan 14). For too long, quick-commerce giants have prioritised convenience at the expense of gig workers with a psychological whip. The government must ensure that the Social Security Code isn't just paper-deep. We must evolve from a per-packet exploitation model.

Vijaykumar H K, Raichur

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Nudging q-commerce cos on 10-min rule is bang on

In the normal course, state intervention in the economy is bad. Sometimes, however, an exception can be made to the rule; the government's nudge to quick commerce companies to halt hyping '10-minute' delivery services is one such occasion when the intervention is justified. The 10-minute delivery promise has had its ill effects, the most obvious being rash driving by riders, who are incentivized to take the goods to customers in a short time. Their low remuneration in a booming sector, estimated to be worth \$11.5 billion, is another issue. Labour Minister Mansukh Mandaviya met quick commerce bosses on Saturday. A Ministry official was quoted as saying, "Amidst

concerns over security of gig workers, the Minister discussed greater safety and improved working conditions for delivery partners. Companies were nudged to move away from ultra-fast delivery branding practices. No official order has been issued, but we are positive regarding compliance by platforms." An aside: 'Nudge' is the Narendra Modi government's favorite term in economic governance. It nudges states to slash revenue expenditure. The tax authorities urge taxpayers to declare foreign assets. To be sure, it is better than executive fiat, which are seen as overbearing commands and are often resisted. But when the Union government nudges a state or the tycoons

of a sector, it is a kind of advisory that is backed with force—sort of 'carrot and stick' tactic. The receiving party knows that the nudge could become an order if there is no change in behaviour. In the present instant, there will be little impact on the q-commerce companies like Blinkit and Zepto if the 10-minute promise is dropped; the customer will not lose much if they wait for 15 or 20 minutes. But this relaxation will mean a lot for the delivery boys; they don't have to risk their lives by rash driving. Evidently, the industry is of a similar opinion. An industry executive aware of the discussions opined that "The Labour Minister is not against the business model, but he wants the companies to tone

down their advertisements claiming 10-minute deliveries. When the promise of 10-minute delivery goes away, the delivery partners will not come under pressure and consumers will also not have any grievances if their orders do not reach them in 10 minutes." The government was sensible enough not to raise the matter of low wages of gig workers. This is despite Left liberals and bleeding-heart activists screaming about the scant earnings of the delivery boys. To be sure, this is saddening and is something the government can do little about—and therefore should do nothing directly to improve their lot. It is only when the government doesn't meddle in the economy that investors pour in

their money, thus creating jobs and, consequently, augmenting real wages. Direct government action, that is raising wages by decree, militates against the spirit of liberalisation. Mandated wage floors or rigid employment classifications raise costs of companies, thus deterring investment and potentially shrinking the very platforms that provide livelihoods to lakhs of workers. Well-meaning regulation, in such cases, often ends up destroying opportunities rather than improving them. Seen in this light, the government's approach to quick commerce is commendable and balanced. It has meaningfully intervened, while resisting the temptation to overreach into wage-setting.

MEDLEY



LETTERS

End outrageous religion-based education system

Education is a fundamental right, and it must be accessed by every citizen, irrespective of one's religion, caste or creed. In this context, the National Medical Commission's (NMC) decision to withdraw permission for the 2025–26 MBBS batch at the Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Institute of Medical Excellence in Jammu and Kashmir raises serious constitutional and ethical concerns. The withdrawal is deeply troubling as the institution had received approval just four months back for meeting all academic, infrastructural, and clinical standards. Such a sudden reversal, driven by protests over religious identity, cannot be defended as an academic decision. Incidentally, of the 50 students to get admission, 42 were Muslims, who had secured their seats on merit after having cleared NEET examination, a religion-neutral test. Denying or disrupting their education amounts to punishing merit and rewarding prejudice. No individual or organisation has the right to obstruct education merely because students belong to a particular religion or community. Linking institutional funding to religious offerings is legally invalid and morally flawed. The medical college is not a minority institution, nor do existing rules allow religion-based allocation or exclusion of seats. Education is not a freebie to be distributed based on ideological preferences; it is a right meant for eligible and deserving candidates. The precedent is alarming: yielding to communal pressure erodes academic autonomy and violates the Constitution's guarantee of equality. NMC undermines its own credibility and sends a dangerous signal that merit can be overridden by majoritarian pressure. Such actions weaken trust in institutions and betray the promise of equality.

Vishal Mayur, Hyderabad

India can take advantage of FTA deals

This is in reference to the THI (Jan 14) editorial, 'Trade deals with EU, US; Govt. must not yield to pressure groups'. Despite getting a raw deal in the bilateral trade with the US, the country is in the process of exploring numerous other options to offset the imbrogio created by Washington, by way of irrational and irresponsible tariffs against India that seem to stem from whims and fancies of President Donald Trump. India is in the process of extending a liberal and friendly hand to Great Britain, Canada, and Germany by way of a free trade agreement (FTA) that will prove quite beneficial to these countries in their fight against rising rates of inflation, and trade uncertainties with the US. India's engagement with the world reflects its determination not to get entangled in economic isolation.

K R Venkata Narasimhan, Madurai

Promoting EVs makes for economic sense

A propos 'EV market getting charged up in India' (THI Jan 13). India seems to be keeping her tryst with clean, sustainable and self-reliant transportation in a decisive manner. The most significant roadblock to the EV sector is a dearth of charging points. As this issue is being addressed in earnest, people's reliability on EV has shot up significantly. After duly pursuing the 'Aatmanirbar Bharat' vision, especially in the manufacture of batteries, the government should have charging points across the country so that the automobile sector will be on the superhighway of low emission.

Dr George Jacob, Kochi

Scrapping 10 minutes 'delivery' is a welcome step

The Union Government scrapping the "10 minutes delivery" claims of e-commerce platforms is a welcome safety step given that the life of delivery workers, who race against time to honour the delivery deadline, is at constant risk on the road. I wonder why when everyone knows that "speed kills", such a business strategy was allowed in the first place.

Sreelekha PS, Secunderabad-61

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BENGALURU ONLINE

Cong leader abuses woman Municipal Commissioner over banner removal

BENGALURU: Purported audio clips of a Karnataka Congress leader from Chikkaballapur district allegedly abusing and threatening a woman Municipal Commissioner have triggered outrage and raised serious concerns in the state on Wednesday.

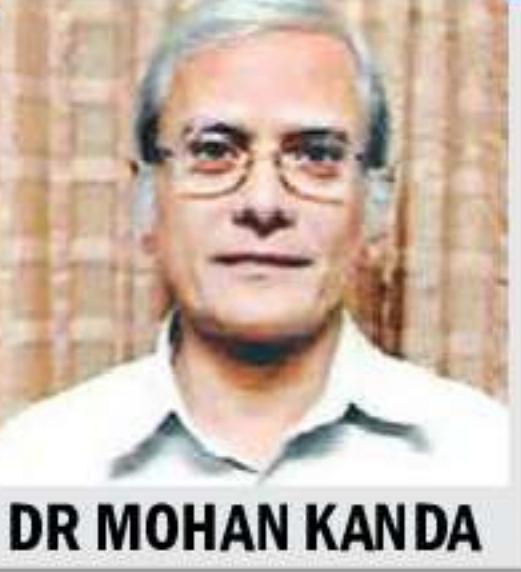
The controversy, arising out of the removal of a banner, has proved to be a major embarrassment for the ruling party. It may be recalled that a clash between BJP and Congress workers in Ballari over a banner recently resulted in the death of a Congress worker. Even before the Congress-led government could recover from that incident, a fresh case of alleged misconduct by a Congress leader against a senior woman officer has triggered widespread anger.

The incident allegedly involves local Congress leader Rajeev Gowda, who is accused of hurling abuses and issuing threats to Sidlaghatta Municipal Commissioner Amrutha Gowda over the phone. Rajeev Gowda is a KPCC state coordinator and the defeated Congress candidate from the Sidlaghatta Assembly constituency.

Read more at <https://epaper.thehansindia.com>

A thorough checklist helps perform tasks without hiccups

TALKING OF MANY THINGS



DR MOHAN KANDA

Running through a checklist is nothing new today for professionals such as a pilot about to start a flight or a surgeon beginning an operation. Historically, however, few institutions have valued the importance of established protocols and standard operating procedures so much as the armed forces.

A story probably apocryphal, concerning the legendary first Indian Chief of Army Staff and also the first Field Marshal, General K M Cariappa, and his deputy and sixth chief of army staff, General K S Thimayya, illustrates this point in a rather lighter vein.

General Thimayya had an appointment with his Chief for a drink at 7 pm on a given day. That the two were cousins obviously had no bearing on the formality attached to the occasion and the rigour of protocol. Thimayya spent a whole week – assiduously polishing the brass, shining the shoes and ironing the uniform. The distance to the Chief's house was measured, as was the travel time.

On the appointed day, Thimayya arrived, as planned, a few minutes in advance at the entrance to the Chief's house. He waited till the time was right, drove in, stepped out of the car

and executed a perfect salute, and said, "Good evening, Sir!"

General Cariappa's response was, "Timmy, where is your cap?"

Apparently, so absorbed he was that in the thoroughness of the preparation, General Thimayya had forgotten to sport the most important item of his uniform—the cap!

Ever since then rose the need to ensure that the requisite level of preparedness precedes any important task. The job is broken down into small sequential steps that have to be followed meticulously. The confidence and assurance that result from making a checklist has been complete and comprehensive. It helps in achieving the objectives.

Some examples of such an exercise are the procedures followed by pilots of aircraft, before taking off and landing, and the steps followed by surgeons before an operation and prior to its completion.

After selection to the IAS, I was asked by the Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) to undergo a medical examination – normally a mere formality. I had no known ailment (except perhaps hypochondria!) and did not anticipate any problem. My brother-in-law Sitaram Yechury, (who at that time was serving in the Union Ministry of Health), accompanied me. His presence was not objected to (as it should have been!) as he carried with him the health ministry credentials.

After the usual run of tests, I had to undergo an ophthalmic examination, a part of which was recognition of different colours. I



The need to ensure that the requisite level of preparedness precedes any important task. The job is broken down into small sequential steps that have to be followed meticulously. The confidence and assurance that result from making a checklist has been complete and comprehensive. It helps in achieving the objectives. Some examples of such an exercise are the procedures followed by pilots of aircraft, before taking off and landing, and the steps followed by surgeons before an operation and prior to its completion

was shown a book whose pages had pictures of objects with outlines in spots of different colours. The pictures would appear sharply, if one was able to distinguish the dots of different colours. I simply could not make them out. I was told later that this might have partly been on account of nervousness caused by the occasion, particularly after I

had been alerted to the possibility of my having a condition. No matter how hard I tried, the pictures swam in a blur in front of my eyes. Sensing my difficulty, the technician proceeded to conduct another test with a machine that flashed blue and green lights alternately. Once again, the blue colour looked green to me and vice-versa.



The manner Naidu and his family uphold family values, and our Sanatana traditions has inspired me deeply. Whether in power or in opposition, celebrating the festival every single year without fail in the land where he was born and brought up reflects his commitment to his roots and the respect he has for elders and traditions. Naidu is perhaps the only leader, who spends three days every Sankranti with his family in his native village to celebrate the festival

at the local Ammavari temple reflects his family values.

Hindu traditions and discipline essentially mean living in harmony together. Naidu brings the concept of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam—the world as one family—into practice, which gives immense joy. Not only does he live by these values himself, but he also wants the next generation to trek a similar path. That is why he continuously introduces Lokesh, Brahmani, and Devaansh to the people of his village.

The festival celebrated together by the Nandamuri family on one side and the Naravari family on the other is truly a fabulous celebration. During these three days, there is no politics. There is no mention of caste or religion. What is visible every moment in Naravari Palle is only human affection and bonding.

As far as I remember, there is a person named Surappadu who lives in an SC colony in Naravari Palle. The close and affectionate bond that he

My nervousness grew as the possibility of not being selected dawned on me for the first time. What would my father think! It was he who was none too happy with my performance at the viva voce. Was his dream, to see me as a civil servant, set to be dashed to the ground merely on account of some silly defect in my vision?

And he had just recently suffered a heart attack. Many events of the past flashed across my mind as I continued to make mistakes in chromatic cognition.

My brother-in-law promptly got into the act. He began to cross examine the technician with a barrage of questions. What method was being used, he asked, was it entirely objective? If not, how could the technician tell when I was making a mistake? Did it matter at all that I could not make out colours when, after all, I was not going to be a railway guard or a traffic constable? The first seeds of doubt were successfully sown in the mind of the technician. By that time I too had settled down a bit and, when some of the tests were repeated, I was able to fare somewhat better.

"See? What did I tell you?" exclaimed Yechury and argued that my own shakiness, a faulty methodology or a defective protocol in the examination, or a combination of these factors may have led to an unnecessary doubt being created about my vision.

Partly uncertain by now about the initial opinion he had formed and partly because of the hurry in which he was on account of the large number of candidates still to be examined, the technician decided that it

was not really worth pursuing the matter. I was declared fit and walked out mopping sweat off my brow.

But for my brother-in-law's timely (perhaps somewhat unwarranted!) intervention, it is possible that I could have been disqualified on grounds of defective colour vision.

Clearly, the technician had, no doubt, clearly laid out a checklist of tests prescribed for his duty. But, then, though it was sound and normally adequate for the task to be performed, it could not withstand the piercing cross examination, which it was subjected to by Yechury!

As a matter of fact, I should have become aware of the defect several years back. I recall how, as an undergraduate student in Hindu College, Delhi, I was performing a titration experiment in chemistry. When one fluid was added to another, drop by drop, the idea was to stop when the mixture turned pink. I continued to add the drops until Dr Mehra, our chemistry lecturer, rushed down from the dais of the laboratory, on which he was sitting, shouting, "Mohan, please stop. It has gone from pink to purple, and now is about to turn black!"

Truth to tell, for many years after the UPSC test, whenever I was driving a car, I needed someone sitting next to me in the front seat, to alert me when the green was changing to red and red to green, so that I knew I would know whether to stop or start!

(The writer was formerly Chief Secretary, Government of Andhra Pradesh)

Upholding values and traditions, Naidu lives by example



KALISETTI APPALANAIDU

The Sankranti celebrations that I witnessed at Naravari Palle made for a memorable experience. I walked through every street and interacted with many people along the way. When the native village of the Chief Minister celebrates a festival, it truly becomes a celebration for the entire state. What kind of bond Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu shared with Naravari Palle was something I wanted to observe from close quarters.

During my recent visit, I saw with my own eyes the love and affection the people of that village shower on Naidu. The things they shared filled me with both amazement and joy.

That is why I felt like sharing my experiences.

Sankranti is the greatest festival for Telugu people. The way Chandrababu Naidu celebrates the great festival is a great source of inspiration for me. I first visited Nara-

vari Palle in 1996. Recently, after becoming an MP from Vizianagaram, I once again visited Naravari Palle.

The manner Naidu and his family uphold family values, and our Sanatana traditions has inspired me deeply. Whether in power or in opposition, celebrating the festival every single year without fail in the land where he was born and brought up reflects his commitment to his roots and the respect he has for elders and traditions. Across the country, there are many political parties and many towering leaders, but as far as I know, Naidu is perhaps the only one, who spends three days every Sankranti with his family in his native village to celebrate the festival.

In fact, the entire village eagerly waits for its leader. For three days, the village is immersed in games, music, and merriment. In what can be described as a touching personal gesture, Naidu and his wife visit every house in Naravari Palle. He gives special respect to his childhood friends. Instead of people coming to a leader's house, the leader himself goes to their homes and greets them warmly—this is what makes Chandrababu Naidu a unique leader. He reassures them about their well-being. Participating in special prayers

DECCAN
Chronicle

15 JANUARY 2026

Gig workers get relief, but firms need to rethink biz

The Union labour ministry's directive asking quick commerce companies to discontinue their 10-minute delivery promise is a timely intervention. The decision was taken following a nationwide strike by gig workers against the 10-minute delivery, which was exposing them to intense mental pressure to meet unrealistic timelines, often at the cost of personal safety and public road discipline.

Quick commerce is a relatively older concept, tracing back to the late 1990s in the United States. However, most of the older companies came with a delivery promised within 30 minutes or an hour. In India, Grofers (now called Blinkit) was the first company to offer quick commerce with a promised delivery time of 90 minutes, which was in tune with industry standards.

Having faced poor reception in an already crowded e-commerce space, Grofers rebranded itself as Blinkit in 2021 and introduced the 10-minute delivery promise, which significantly changed its brand proposition. Over time, however, speed itself became the product. Within five years, quick commerce became hugely successful and made companies join the bandwagon, threatening the business of traditional retailers like never before.

The 10-minute delivery guarantee was marketed as a solution for last-minute shopping needs, positioning groceries, toiletries and snacks as urgent requirements that quick commerce will deliver at the blink of your eye. With this, however, the quick commerce industry blurred a key distinction — not every consumer inconvenience qualifies to be treated as an emergency.

Except for ambulance services, fire services and law enforcement agencies, no civilian activity on public roads can be categorised as an emergency. A family running out of groceries does not warrant deadline-driven riding through traffic. However, this is precisely what quick commerce companies did and incentivised gig workers to meet the 10-minute deadline. The result of this misplaced concept is gig workers erratically navigating congested roads, risking their lives and those of others. Mental stress became constant, while physical risk became routine.

In their defence, quick commerce companies argue that faster deliveries generate employment and consumer satisfaction. While they may be true, none of their arguments could justify normalising unsafe work conditions. Employment cannot be conditional on sustained stress for the employee, and convenience cannot come at the cost of another person's safety.

This does not mean that quick commerce has no place to exist in the country. However, quick commerce companies must recalibrate its value proposition — reliable delivery within reasonable time frames and fair working conditions. It can aim for a delivery window that does not turn roads into racetracks.

Quick commerce companies, therefore, must take the government's directive as an opportunity rather than a setback. It could tweak the business model by partnering with existing neighbourhood retail shops to become their fulfillment centres, which allows existing traders to thrive alongside them without creating an emergency out of nothing.

The quick commerce sector must understand that speed has its place — in emergencies — where minutes genuinely save lives. And the government has rightly reaffirmed this basic principle: In a civil society, no packet of groceries is worth a life.

Time to revisit anti-graft law

The Supreme Court's split verdict on the constitutional validity of Section 17A of the Prevention of Corruption Act, 2018, gives Parliament an opportunity to correct its own action of practically killing the anti-graft law and restore its effectiveness in fighting governmental corruption in this country.

The PCA in its original form invested in the investigation agency the power to register a crime and launch an investigation against a public servant; the agency needed to get the government's approval only before filing a chargesheet. The 2018 amendment and the introduction of Section 17A turned the very logic of this piece of legislation on its head by stripping the agency of this critical power — as the law stands today, it can launch an investigation only after it gets the approval of the government.

Justice B.V. Nagarathna said the law is unconstitutional and needs to be struck down saying requirement of prior sanction by the government is contrary to its purpose as it forecloses inquiry and protects the corrupt. She opined that there should have been an independent body which is not controlled by the government to consider a case for grant of prior approval to conduct an inquiry/enquiry/investigation by a police officer. Meanwhile, despite endorsing the constitutionality of the Act saying it gave honest public servants a basic assurance that decisions taken by them will not be subjected to frivolous complaints, Justice K.V. Viswanathan called for an independent authority, such as the Lokpal or the Lokayukta, to give the go-ahead to launch an investigation.

The meeting point of the opinions of the two judgments is that the government should not be the authority to sanction an investigation into an allegation of corruption against a public servant; it should be obtained from an independent agency. Such an independent authority will offer protection to bona fide actions against frivolous investigations as well.

Now, the court may have resorted to the existing provisions in the law that allows a judicial scrutiny before an investigation is launched, but it has chosen not to. Instead of letting the Supreme Court decide the matter, the government may expunge/amend the villainous section to reinstitute an independent mechanism and make the law powerful again.

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Subhani



Can India, Germany, EU
be core of a Third Pole?



K.C. Singh

German Chancellor Friedrich Merz's just-concluded visit to India on January 12-13 holds special significance, beyond celebrating the 75th anniversary of bilateral diplomatic relations or the 25th anniversary of the Indo-German strategic partnership. The recent summit addresses how India and Germany propose traversing a world disrupted by US President Donald Trump. The post-Second World War rules-based global order is, ironically, being unravelled by the leader of a nation which had helped formulate it.

An Indo-German joint statement on January 12 lists the areas of potential engagement. It covers the following: "Defence and Security"; "Trade and Economy"; "Technology, Innovation, Science & Research"; "Green & Sustainable Development Partnership/Renewable Energy"; "Indo-Pacific, Connectivity & Global Issues". There is emphasis on undertaking climate-friendly energy transition, including the production of green hydrogen. The Trump administration has abandoned the Paris climate accord, adopting instead regressive oil and gas extraction policies. In fact, in keeping with his slogan "Drill, Baby Drill", voiced before assuming office, oil and gas drilling permits have surged by 55 per cent. The withdrawal of the United States from the India-sponsored International Solar Alliance underscored the altered priorities.

Germany, in the decades after the Second World War and the Cold War, generally kept defence spending low, relative to its economic power. It focused on integration within Nato. Given its destructive historical role, its allies and neighbours did not complain. In 2014, Germany concurred with its Nato allies to ramp up defence spending to two per cent of GDP, then just over

one per cent. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 shook Germany out of its complacency. President Donald Trump's "America First" isolationism, his diplomatic flirtation with Russian President Vladimir Putin and now the threat to grab Greenland, forcibly if needed, leaves Germany no option but to become much more assertive.

The joint statement outlines prospective defence industrial cooperation, emphasising co-development and co-production. India's purchase of HDW German submarines in the 1980s had led to a massive political controversy over corruption allegations. After a 10-year delay India may now buy six AIP German submarines in a deal worth \$8 billion. Additionally, the document lists obstacle avoidance systems for helicopters and weapons to counter unmanned aerial systems. The interest in new defence technologies addresses the revolution in war fighting, seen both in Ukraine or India's Operation Sindoor.

Trade and commerce are important for all nations, but the new arbitrary tariffs ordered by President Trump have created a unique crisis. The Trumpian tariffs aim to compel friends and foes to abide by America's trade-related or strategic goals.

Indo-German trade topped \$50 billion last year. There are over 2,000 German companies operating in India. German foreign direct investment in India in the period 2000-25 totals \$15.4 billion. Conversely, 200 Indian companies are operating in Germany. The delayed Free Trade Agreement between India and the European Union (EU) has been a hurdle. Germany absorbs a quarter of all Indian exports to the EU. The over-dependence on the US market is proving costly for all nations, though for some like Canada and Mexico it is more damaging. For India and Germany too, it is a

It is not surprising that the European Union leaders are the chief guests at this year's Republic Day celebrations in India. Immediately following that the India-EU summit will take place.

wakeup call. It is not surprising that the European Union leaders are the chief guests at this year's Republic Day celebrations in India. Immediately following that the India-EU summit will take place.

This reflects that a multipolar world, advocated by India for decades, is achievable only if principal powers quickly create new supply lines and manufacturing hubs.

The German demand for skilled workers is proving a boon just when the Anglophone nations, especially America, are allowing xenophobia to tighten immigration policies. Indian students in Germany, numbering 60,000, are the largest international group. Most of them are pursuing engineering or information technology courses. Low education fees and easier transition to work visas is luring foreign students. The danger is the rise of the far-right parties in major European nations, which are anti-immigration. The estimated support for the National Rally in France is 33.4 per cent, while Germany's AfD scores 26 per cent. In the latest US National Security Strategy document, that was released on December 4-5, support is extended to these far-right groups, employing the freedom of speech argument.

Geo-strategically, India and Germany have areas of congruence as well as dissonance. Regarding Ukraine, India has avoided condemning Russia, while for the European nations it is an existential issue. Chancellor Merz strongly supports sanctions on Russia. He has also publicly decried the threat to a "liberal world order", both from outside and within Europe. Speaking at Korber Foundation in January 2025, he urged Germany to transform from "a sleeping to a leading middle power".

Fortunately for the Chancellor, the debt-brake on defence spending was lifted before he assumed office. This gives him freedom to move Germany towards strategic autonomy.

On the Gaza issue, the positions of India and Germany are now converging. That is why the joint statement calls for a two-nation solution for stability and peace. But at one stage, Chancellor Merz took an odd position on Israel's brutal assault on Hamas, irrespective of the harm to civilians. He had praised Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu for doing the "dirty work" of Germans or the West.

India and Germany have dealt with President Trump in their own way. Chancellor Merz chose, like other European leaders, to avoid confrontation while politely correcting publicly misstated facts. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has avoided direct contact, to minimise the possibilities of a public spat. However, President Trump's reiterated desire to occupy or annex Greenland is putting EU and Nato members in a quandary. Forcible occupation by America can destroy Nato, besides raising the possibility of an armed confrontation.

India and Germany have for well over two decades been a part of G-4, alongside Brazil and Japan. The group has campaigned for major reform of the United Nations Security Council, especially the addition of new permanent members. Germany seemed to step back after Chancellor Angela Merkel took office. The joint statement reflects revived enthusiasm of India and Germany to crusade for permanent membership.

Closer Indo-German engagement, especially with enhanced ties in the defence and emerging technologies sectors, can create a "third global pole", which draws other EU members and middle powers to its corner. The United States and China are set for a new bipolarity. The world needs to offset that with a pole that is committed to a reformed version of the old rules-based liberal international order.

The writer is a former secretary in the external affairs ministry. He tweets at @ambksingh.

LETTERS

SC BITES THE BULLET

After five years the Supreme Court has nailed it right by taking the decision of penalising the state for its ignorance (SC: *States must pay victims of dog bites, Jan. 14*). Rightly said one of the justices that the NGOs and the people who are lovers of dogs must take up the accountability and responsibility of feeding the canines and caring for them. If they are sympathetic to dogs, then they must also be empathetic to human beings.

Shaik Tajunnisa
Secunderabad

Thanks to the three-judge bench of justices of the Supreme Court for ordering and directing state authorities to remove stray dogs from the roads and passing strict instructions to pay heavy compensation for stray dog bites and deaths.

Jyothi David Raj
Hyderabad

After a prolonged debate, the Supreme Court delivered a verdict which upheld the human lives more than the stray dogs in India, which killed and grievously injured children and elderly alike. All should follow the judgement.

P. Satyanarayana
Hyderabad

SPIRIT OF UNITY

I was truly delighted to see the photograph of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and German Chancellor Friedrich Merz at the International Kite Festival on the Sabarmati Riverfront in Ahmedabad (*Modi, Merz boost defence, tech ties, Jan. 13*). It beautifully captures the spirit of unity and peace that India continually strives to uphold.

Dindi Simhadri Rao
Hyderabad

SILVER LINING

Though, a couple of days ago, Isro failed to launch satellites in orbit using PSLV, there is some silver lining to the failed attempt (*KID outlives amid PSLV-C62 setback, Jan. 14*). The kinetic impact demonstrator (KID) worked properly and only the last stage of the flight was unsuccessful. Now we have the learning and confidence as to how our KID works. With renewed energy and a forward thinking mindset we should intensify our efforts and not get demotivated.

Arnold K.G.J.
Hyderabad

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Dilip Cherian
Dilli Ka Babu



As Central Vista
gets functional,
power acquires a
new architecture

For decades, Raisina Hill was not just a location but a metaphor. North and South Block symbolised where power resided, where files gathered momentum and where governance unfolded through proximity as much as procedure. That geography is now being deliberately dismantled as key ministries relocate to the newly constructed Kartavya Bhawan complexes along Kartavya Path.

The shift of nine ministries and departments — including defence, law and justice, agriculture, education, information and broadcasting, chemicals and fertilisers, and the CBI — is not a routine administrative reshuffle. It reflects a conscious reordering of the spatial logic of governance. As the Central Vista shapes up, the daily business of the State is being pulled away from colonial-era icons into a consolidated, purpose-built secretariat, while North and South Blocks are repositioned as heritage structures and museums.

Modern infrastructure, shared facilities, energy savings and co-location are expected to improve coordination and reduce the operational clutter created by decades of scattered offices across Delhi. The argument is sensible and long overdue.

Yet power in babudom has never been purely architectural. It thrives on proximity, habit and informal networks. The old Raisina ecosystem worked not because of grandeur but because of density. Relocation disrupts those rhythms, creating

new patterns of access and influence that will inevitably favour those quick to adapt to the new geography. This makes the move as symbolic as it is functional. It reflects a broader attempt to redefine where authority is seen to operate, aligning governance with a re-imagined Central Vista that privileges modernity over inherited legacy.

This is not a cosmetic exercise but a recalibration of how the Indian State organises itself, signals power and conducts governance. For babus, where one sits still shapes how one matters.

INDIA ADJUSTS TO TRUMP'S MAN IN DELHI

The arrival of Sergio Gor in New Delhi comes at an awkward moment in Indo-US ties, certainly not at a high point but near a fresh low. Donald Trump's second term as US President has stripped the relationship of its diplomatic cushioning. Stiff tariffs overshadow ties, trade frictions are sharper, and the old comfort of "strategic partnership" is being stress-tested almost weekly.

Mr Gor is no conventional envoy sent to smooth edges. He is Mr Trump's insider — political, transactional and perfectly aligned with a White House that sees diplomacy as leverage, not reassurance. That matters because India is no longer dealing with a friendly but demanding partner; it is dealing with a sceptical one that believes pressure works. And often, it does. For India, this changes the playbook.

The mandarins in MEA and babus in the commerce, finance and defence ministries can no longer assume policy continuity or goodwill as a default setting. Washington's moves are now driven less by long-term strategy and more by domestic politics and deal optics. One tweet or one off-the-cuff remark can undo months of hard work.

Trade is where the pain is most visible. Tariffs and hard bargaining have replaced the earlier rhetoric of convergence. Indian negotiators must now plan for sharper scenarios, faster coordination and credible fallback options beyond the US market.

There's also a strategic irritant: Mr Gor's wider regional remit revives the risk of India being viewed through a South Asia lens rather than as a distinct Indo-Pacific power. That distinction will need constant reinforcement.

For India, this is no longer relationship management; it's damage control mixed with opportunity. If India adapts quickly and strategically, volatility can be managed. If it clings to old assumptions, it will spend Mr Trump's second term permanently on the back foot.

WHEN PSU CHIEFS START LOOKING OVER THE FENCE

The latest buzz from the ministry of steel's corridors is equal parts intrigue and frustration: Amarendra Prakash, the chairman and managing director of Steel Authority of India Limited (SAIL), may have

submitted his resignation, and might be eyeing a senior role at a global steel giant. However, nobody in the ministry will publicly acknowledge it, and that is precisely the problem.

Mr Prakash isn't some mid-level bean counter. He's a seasoned technocrat with deep roots in steel production and decades of experience in the sector. His leadership was supposed to anchor SAIL through a delicate phase of expansion and policy navigation. Instead, we're left with silence, speculation and whispers — the worst possible currency in administrative governance.

If these rumours are true, it may signal something bigger, that the flight of talent from the public sector to private players isn't just a headline, but a trend. And it shouldn't surprise anyone. When top leaders find better opportunities elsewhere, and when ministries respond with tight-lipped bureaucracy rather than clarity, it tells markets, PSUs and even foreign investors that India's leadership pipeline is volatile.

Worse still, the timing couldn't be more awkward. Critical decisions around key appointments and oversight are in the queue, and the ministry looks like it's stuck between denials and rumour control.

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The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Good riddance

End of 10-minute delivery offer is a breakthrough

THE Central government’s intervention to end the 10-minute delivery offer in the booming quick-commerce sector has been rightly welcomed by gig workers and their well-wishers. The Labour Ministry has prevailed upon leading platforms to shun the ultra-fast route, which was putting immense pressure on delivery agents and making them take life-threatening risks on the roads. In recent years, the 10-minute promise was defended as a triumph of logistics. Major aggregators argued that dense networks of dark stores and short distances made rapid delivery possible without forcing bikers to speed. However, when incentives, ratings and penalties decide income, workers inevitably become desperate.

The nationwide strike by gig workers on New Year’s Eve may not have derailed operations, but it did serve to highlight their problems. Protesters red-flagged an unfair system that punished delay without accounting for traffic, weather or fatigue. Dropping the 10-minute attraction is a necessary corrective, but it is not a cure. As even some platforms admit, most deliveries already take longer than 10 minutes. The slogan was as much about shaping consumer expectations as it was about operational reality. Removing it does little to address the vulnerabilities of gig work: income insecurity, arbitrary deactivations, lack of collective bargaining and inadequate social protection.

The Code on Social Security, which finally recognises gig and platform workers, offers a framework for welfare funds, insurance and old-age support. Yet implementation will matter more than intent. Contributions by aggregators, transparent pay calculations and enforceable safety standards must be the order of the day. India’s quick-commerce revolution has undeniably transformed urban life. Customers’ convenience, however, should not come at the cost of workers’ dignity and safety.

The lethal thread

Defying law & logic, Chinese manjha thrives

A chilling video from Bidar district in Karnataka on Wednesday captures the horror of what a banned kite string can do: Sanjukumar Hosamani (48) was riding his motorcycle when a taut nylon kite thread across the road slit his neck. By the time medical help arrived, he was dead. Poorly enforced regulations turn festive traditions into fatal hazards every year across the country: lives lost, birds mutilated, animals injured and administrations scrambling for damage control. In Punjab, district authorities have reiterated that the manufacture, sale, storage and use of synthetic kite string are illegal. They have even sought public cooperation, while police claim to have netted vendors. Yet manufacturers and suppliers evade arrest and the string remains freely available, both offline and online. The result: razor-sharp threads slicing throats of unsuspecting motorcyclists, injuring children and killing birds in large numbers.

The menace thrives because enforcement is episodic and reactive. Crackdowns peak around festivals, then fade. Vendors reappear, penalties remain modest and prosecutions rarely reach their logical end. Worse, social acceptance of the banned string continues. Parents allow children to use it, organisers look the other way and consumers treat prohibition as advisory rather than binding.

This is not merely a law-and-order issue. Plastic manjha is an environmental hazard — non-biodegradable, persistent and destructive to ecosystems. Courts have repeatedly described it as a “man-made weapon”. Yet responsibility is diffused across departments, allowing accountability to slip through the cracks. The ban must be backed by year-round surveillance, tougher criminal liability for manufacturers and sellers and strict action against parents and event organisers who encourage its use. Online marketplaces, too, must be held accountable for listings disguised under misleading labels. Until enforcement becomes consistent and deterrent, the skies will remain deadly.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, FRIDAY, JANUARY 15, 1926

Dr Rutherford’s verdict

IT was a very interesting speech which Dr Rutherford, who is on a short visit to India, made on Tuesday at a public meeting held in the YMCA Hall under the auspices of the Tilak School of Politics. Dr Rutherford has now for some years been so little in evidence in discussions on India in England that many of our readers, even of the older generation, have probably forgotten that in the first decade of this century, he was one of the staunchest advocates of Indian freedom in England. He had moved the famous amendment to the address in the House of Commons in January 1908 in the following words: “This House humbly submits that the present condition of affairs in India demands the immediate and serious attention of His Majesty’s Government; that the present proposals of the Government of India are inadequate to allay the existing and growing discontent; and that comprehensive measures of reform are imperatively necessary in the direction of giving the people of India control over their own affairs.” Eighteen long and eventful years have elapsed since these words were uttered, and a mighty volume of water has passed under the bridges both of India and the world. But so slowly do the wheels of progress move in bureaucratically governed India that with only a slight verbal alteration — the substitution of the words “the present reforms” for the words “the present proposals” — these words may with just as much truth be uttered by a friend of India in the House of Commons today as they were actually uttered by Dr Rutherford nearly two decades ago. This, indeed, as far as we have been able to gather, was the keynote of Dr Rutherford’s own speech on Tuesday evening.

OPINION

Speedy trial is Umar-Sharjeel’s right

If a trial is delayed without any valid justification, the accused should be granted bail



JUSTICE MADAN B LOKUR (RETD)
FORMER JUDGE, SUPREME COURT

BOB Dylan might well ask: How many years must a man spend in jail, before he can get bail? The answer, my friend, has been blown away in the wind.

Recently, the Supreme Court (SC) held in the lead case of Gulfisha Fatima that Umar Khalid and Sharjeel Imam were not entitled to bail effectively for another year. They have already been in jail for more than five years, without charges being framed against them by the court concerned. This is tragic as far as the right to personal liberty and the right to a speedy trial are concerned.

Umar and Sharjeel have been chargesheeted for allegedly masterminding the Delhi riots in February 2020 in what is described as a larger conspiracy. In furtherance of the so-called larger conspiracy, they are accused of having committed a “terrorist act” within the meaning of this expression under Section 15 of the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act or UAPA. Given space constraints, it is not possible to delve into or unravel the conspiracy, but it is possible to try and understand whether their continued detention for more than five years is constitutionally justified.

Riots took place in Delhi in the last week of February 2020; an FIR was lodged on March 6. The Supreme Court records that “the riots were allegedly the outcome of a pre-planned conspiracy orchestrated by Jawaharlal Nehru University student Umar Khalid along with his associates, who were



2020 RIOTS CONSPIRACY: The Supreme Court should have apportioned blame for the delay in framing charges. ■■

stated to be affiliated with different organisations.” Neither Sharjeel nor Umar were named as accused in that FIR. Perhaps their alleged role in a larger conspiracy came to notice much later. They were accused for the first time in a supplementary chargesheet filed on November 22, 2020.

Interestingly, Sharjeel had been arrested in the last week of January 2020, a month before the riots. It appears that he got bail subsequently and was again arrested on August 25 that year. Umar was arrested on October 1, 2020, about seven months after the riots. They have been in jail ever since, without trial.

An accused person is entitled, as per provisions of the Criminal Procedure Code (CrPC, which was in force at that time), access to all the material and documents relied on by the prosecution in the chargesheet. In all fairness, the chargesheets, with all documents, should have been handed over to all the accused persons simultaneously with their filing. For reasons best known to the prose-

Should Umar and Sharjeel be deprived of their personal liberty due to a somnambulant prosecution and a meandering case?

cution, compliance with the statutory mandate was recorded by the trial judge only on August 5, 2023 — about three years later. Meanwhile, the prosecution kept filing supplementary chargesheets one after another, with the fourth one on June 7, 2023.

All this while, the accused were in jail and without necessary documentary evidence against them. What is the

cause of the delay in framing charges? In this regard, the Supreme Court referred to the case of Tasleem Ahmed (2025) decided by the Delhi High Court. A perusal of the judgment shows that Sharjeel sought an adjournment on two occasions to argue on framing charges. Umar wanted arguments on the charges to begin on September 18, 2023, but his arguments were not heard.

In October 2024, he requested an adjournment to argue on framing charges. The Supreme Court noted that it did not want to apportion blame for the delay in framing charges either on the prosecution or the accused persons. I am of the view that this was an incorrect approach to the issue of bail to the accused. The cause of delay ought to have been apportioned, and the initial delay by the prosecution in complying with the mandate of Section 207 of the CrPC ought not to have been ignored or overlooked in a matter of personal liberty.

That personal liberty is a valuable right has been recog-

nised by the Constitution in Article 21 and by the SC in several judgments. The Court has gone a step further and held that the right to a speedy trial is also a valuable right tied up with personal liberty and Article 21.

What does this mean? It simply means that if a trial is delayed without any valid justification, the right to a speedy trial is negated and the accused must be granted bail. The reason is fairly obvious — if the alleged crime is of a very serious nature, such as adversely impacting on the unity or integrity of the country, it must be tried with the greatest urgency and not in a lethargic manner.

Recall the Parliament attack that took place in December 2001: the case was decided by the trial court in about six months and eventually by the Supreme Court in 2005 within five years of the incident. Similarly, the case of Ajmal Kasab was decided by the apex court within four years of the 26/11 terror attack. The prosecution was serious about those cases.

Is the prosecution serious about this case? Umar and Sharjeel have been accused of grave offences, a larger conspiracy including a terrorist act resulting in the death of a large number of people, trying to engineer regime change and internationalise the protest against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act during the visit of the US President.

Surely, this was a case that should have been decided within six months and not one where documents were supplied to the accused after three years. Should the accused be deprived of their personal liberty due to a somnambulant prosecution and a meandering case? More than 800 witnesses are yet to be examined. Is there any hope of the trial concluding in the near future? Is the answer blowing in the wind?

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

A man of courage never needs weapons, but he may need bail. —Lewis Mumford

Service from the frontlines

COL TIRATH SINGH RAWAT (RETD)

IN the late 1980s, when I was deployed on an outdoor exercise with my Army unit in Punjab, I encountered a power far greater than that of any weapon I would carry. It arrived not with command or ceremony, but with bare feet on village paths and hands calloused by honest labour. Each dawn, as the sun softened the fields into gold, villagers would appear as if summoned by instinct alone, carrying brimming baskets of freshly cooked food, earthen pots of cool *lassi* and bowls of warm milk.

There was a quiet reverence in the way it was offered, a tenderness that felt maternal, as though an entire community had decided to adopt us as its own sons. No questions were asked, no gratitude expected. In that simple, wordless exchange, I was introduced to *seva* — a way of life where feeding another human being is duty and faith in action.

Years later, that lesson returned while I was serving with the Rashtriya Rifles in the harsh mountains of Jammu and Kashmir. During a search operation, we unearthed a major terrorist hideout, stocked with weapons, ammunition and large quantities of rations. As we removed the cache, the villagers watched in fearful silence and refused the recovered food, terrified of militant reprisals. It was then that my senior NCO, a Sikh soldier whose compassion matched his courage, proposed a simple remedy: the village school would become a refuge. Using the seized rations, we organised *langar*. As the scent of fresh food spread, fear slowly ebbed. Villagers emerged, plates were shared, and within that modest schoolroom, trust was restored gradually through the act of eating together.

This compassion accompanied me to the searing Thar Desert during a June field exercise. As Sappers, we guarded water as life itself in a land where it was more precious than gold. Under the sweltering heat, we saw birds collapse from thirst and villagers look to us in silent appeal. My troops established a small distribution point at the village school, where sweetened water brought brief relief to children and elders until our departure.

Recently, while travelling through Punjab towards Dharamsala, those memories surged back. Along the highway, there was *langar* open to all at several places. I stopped for a meal that proved to be the most satisfying of my entire journey — not merely for the food, but for what it represented. While eating, I met a migrant worker who said, “The water of Punjab is more nourishing, more flavourful, than the milk of my native land.” He was not speaking of taste alone, but of a culture where no one is allowed to remain hungry, where even a stranger searching for work is fed without questions or judgement.

If every community lived by this spirit, no human would ever sleep hungry. From snow-clad mountains to burning sands, my years in uniform have taught me that a soldier’s greatest victory is not found only in the weapons we capture, but in the compassion we show and the lives we quietly nourish.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

When history repeats itself

Apropos of ‘Turmoil puts Iran at a crossroads’, the mass protests in Iran are the latest addition to a string of uprisings across the developing world against inflation, unemployment and lack of basic amenities. From Kathmandu and Dhaka to Tehran, cities have been rocked by protests carrying memories of the past. The peasants’ revolt against the French monarchy in the 18th century lead to its downfall. Ruling elites must keep their ear to the ground on citizens’ expectations or risk a Marie Antoinette moment, a famous incident in history when the Queen of France asked farmers protesting over scarcity of bread to “eat cakes instead.” Also, it was the ostentatious lifestyle of the ruling elite that led to the Islamic Revolution in Iran almost 47 years ago.

CHANDER SHEKHAR DOGRA, JALANDHAR

Quick deliveries don’t save time

Refer to ‘10-minute cap on grocery delivery goes’, commerce platforms used quick delivery as their biggest USP and the line between need and want blurred for consumers over time. It is heartening that now brands cannot promise fast delivery and they have started removing the delivery time commitments from their advertising too. It is not the end of the road for quick commerce as deliveries will still happen but without pushing unsafe driving or breaking traffic rules. Though quick delivery may be a boon for double income families in urban India, they must realise that a few minutes extra in delivery will not make any difference. A quick delivery doesn’t save time for anybody, rather it puts lives at risk.

BAL GOVIND, NOIDA

Government bodies of no help

Refer to ‘Beyond red zone’, it should be an eye-opener for the Haryana government. Despite statutory bodies like Haryana Water Resources Authority, Haryana Pond and Waste Water Management Authority and Irrigation and Water Resources Department, nothing is being done on the ground. There is no check on blatant exploitation of water resources. These government bodies must rise from their slumber and take immediate steps on this front.

VINAY KUMAR MALHOTRA, AMBALA

Water crisis linked to Aravallis

Refer to ‘Beyond red zone’, the editorial has flagged Haryana’s groundwater crisis, but its most irreversible dimension lies in the devastation of the Aravalli ecosystem. A large area of Haryana’s red-zone villages falls within the Aravalli influence area. Their systematic destruction has converted a renewable water regime into a collapsing one. Entire hillocks in Nuh, Faridabad and Mahendragarh have been exploited. Seasonal rivers originating in the Aravallis, Sahibi, Dohan and Krishnavati, once sustained agriculture and biodiversity across Haryana and Rajasthan. Today, these rivers are either dry or reduced to polluted drains.

RAMPHAL KATARIA, KURUKSHETRA

India-Germany partnership grows

Apropos of ‘Visa-free transit’, this facility will enable Indian IT engineers to exhibit their skills in foreign lands, especially when Trump’s regime has hiked H1-B fee exorbitantly discouraging them to enter America. The US is not leaving any opportunity to browbeat India, compelling it to diversify its outreach. The increasing trade and strengthening partnership with Germany will surely benefit both the countries. Opening up the education sector is another landmark decision. While Germany will benefit from India’s vast market, highly skilled IT engineers, pharma industry and the vast demographic dividend, India could gain from Germany’s expertise in export-driven, high-value manufacturing sector as well as a network of highly-acclaimed technical institutions.

RAVI SHARMA, DHARIWAL

Menace of Chinese kite string

With reference to ‘Banned but booming, plastic kite string continues to claim lives’, to successfully prevent the spread and use of the Chinese *dor* (a type of kite string), the government must run a reward system. If anyone is found selling, stocking and using the lethal string, it can be reported on a helpline number. The one who reports it must be awarded monetarily from the fine collected. Random teams must be deputed areawise to strictly check the use of Chinese *dor*.

HARSIMRANVIR SINGH, PATIALA

A sangam of faith, language and memory



NARENDRA MODI
PRIME MINISTER

AFEW days ago, I was in the sacred land of Somnath to be part of the Somnath Swabhiman Parv, marking a thousand years since the first attack on Somnath, which took place in 1026. People from all across India had come to be part of this moment of remembrance, united by a shared reverence for history, culture and the enduring spirit of the people of India. I met a few people who had previously come to Somnath during the Saurashtra-Tamil Sangamam and had been to Kashi during the Kashi-Tamil Sangamam. Their words of appreciation for such platforms touched me, and so I thought of sharing a few thoughts on this subject.

During a *Mann Ki Baat* programme, I had said that not learning Tamil is a major regret of my life. Fortunately, over the last few years, our government has had several opportunities to further popularise Tamil culture across India and to deepen the spirit of 'Ek Bharat, Shreshtha Bharat'. A prime

example of such an effort is the Kashi-Tamil Sangamam. In our ethos, *sangam* or confluence has a special place. Seen in this light, the Kashi-Tamil Sangamam stands out as a distinctive initiative, one that celebrates the living unity of India's many traditions while honouring their unique identities.

And what can be a better place than Kashi to host such a *sangamam*? The same Kashi, which has remained a civilisational anchor from time immemorial, where, for thousands of years, people from all over have come in search of knowledge, meaning and *moksha*.

Kashi's connection with Tamil people and culture is very deep. It is in Kashi that Baba Vishwanath resides, while Tamil Nadu has Rameswaram. Tenkasi in Tamil Nadu is known as the Kashi of the South or *Dakshin Kashi*. Saint Kumaraguruparar Swamigal forged a lasting link between Kashi and Tamil Nadu through his spirituality, scholarship and institution-building. Mahakavi Subramania Bharati, one of Tamil Nadu's greatest sons, found in Kashi a space of intellectual growth and spiritual awakening. It was here that his nationalism deepened, his poetry sharpened and his vision of a free, united India took clearer shape. There are several such instances that highlight this close bond.

The first edition of Kashi-Tamil Sangamam took place in 2022. I recall attending the inau-



SHARED HERITAGE: Platforms like the Kashi-Tamil Sangamam deepen national integration. ANI

guration programme. Scholars, artisans, students, farmers, writers, professionals and many others from Tamil Nadu travelled to Kashi, Prayagraj and Ayodhya. Subsequent editions expanded the scale and depth of this effort. The aim was to introduce fresh themes, innovative formats and deeper engagement, thus ensuring that the *sangamam* continued to evolve while remaining rooted in its core spirit.

In the second edition in 2023, technology was used on a larger scale to ensure that language does not become a barrier for people. In the third edition, the focus was on the Indian knowledge systems. At the same time, academic discussions, cultural performances, exhibitions and interactions witnessed greater participation.

The Kashi-Tamil Sangamam celebrates the living unity of India's many traditions while honouring their unique identities.

Thousands of people have taken part in these events.

The fourth edition commenced on December 2, 2025. The theme was interesting — Tamil Karkalam — Learn Tamil. It presented an opportunity for people in Kashi and other parts to learn the beautiful Tamil language. Teachers came from Tamil Nadu and the students of Kashi had a very memorable experience!

There were many other special events this time. '*Tholkappiyam*', the ancient Tamil literary classic, was translated into four Indian and six foreign languages. A unique event, Sage Agasthya Vehicle Expedition (SAVE), was undertaken from Tenkasi to Kashi. On the way, various initiatives, such as eye camps, health awareness camps, digital literacy camps,

were held. The expedition paid homage to King Adi Veera Parakrama Pandiyan, the great Pandya ruler who spread the message of cultural oneness. There were exhibitions at Namohat, academic sessions at Banaras Hindu University and cultural programmes.

One of the things that makes me happy about the Kashi-Tamil Sangamam is the participation of thousands of youngsters. It illustrates the passion among our *yuva shakti* to deepen their connect with our roots. It is a brilliant platform for them to showcase their talent and creativity during the various cultural programmes.

In addition to the *sangamam*, efforts have been made to make the journey to Kashi memorable for the participants. The Indian Railways operated special trains to take people from Tamil Nadu to Uttar Pradesh. In many railway stations, particularly in Tamil Nadu, they were cheered, and the train journey was marked by melodious songs and conversations.

I would also like to appreciate my sisters and brothers of Kashi and Uttar Pradesh for their warmth and hospitality shown to the delegates of the various Kashi-Tamil sangamams. Several people opened the doors of their homes for the guests from Tamil Nadu. The local administration worked round the clock to ensure the guests had a seamless experience. As the MP from Varanasi,

I could not be prouder!

This time, the valedictory function of the Kashi-Tamil Sangamam was held in Rameswaram and it was graced by the Vice-President, Thiru CP Radhakrishnan, who is a proud son of Tamil Nadu. He delivered an inspiring address, emphasising India's spiritual greatness and how such platforms deepen national integration.

The Kashi-Tamil Sangamam has delivered meaningful outcomes, like strengthening cultural understanding, fostering academic and people-to-people exchanges and creating lasting bonds between parts of the country that share a civilisational ethos. We want to make this platform more vibrant.

Most importantly, it has furthered the spirit of 'Ek Bharat, Shreshtha Bharat.' This spirit has flourished for centuries through our festivals, literature, music, art, cuisine, architecture and systems of knowledge.

This time of the year is auspicious for people across India. People are celebrating various festivals, like Sankranti, Uttarayan, Pongal, Magh Bihu, which are, among other things, associated with the Sun, nature and farming. These festivals bring people together and deepen the spirit of harmony in our society. I convey my best wishes for these festivals and hope they continue to inspire us to deepen national unity through our shared heritage and collective participation.

When politics trumped Punjab's water security



SS JOHL
FORMER V-C OF PAU AND PUNJABI UNIVERSITY

IN 1986, the Central government had accumulated huge stocks of rice and was dragging its feet on lifting paddy from Punjab markets. Large quantities of paddy in Punjab markets were damaged/burned due to internal moisture generating heat. A committee, under my chairmanship, was then set up by the Punjab government to study and resolve the problem. The committee submitted its report to the government, but the report was never examined by the powers that be due to change of government.

The committee had recommended that at least 20 per cent of the area under the rice crop must be replaced with suggested crops in order to maintain the groundwater balance of the state. However, a drought lasting more than four years from 1987 prompted the Central government to press the Punjab administration to increase the area and production of rice and wheat. It ignored the groundwater balance of the state.

In Punjab, hot summer days provide long periods of

photosynthesis for the growing crops, but the water requirements of the crops increase substantially. It is known that canal water does not meet even 30 per cent of the water requirements of the cropping pattern of Punjab. About 70 per cent requirement of irrigation water is met through withdrawal of groundwater. Under these environmental conditions, the crop yields increase in the drought years and, as a result, Punjab does not get any compensation for droughts even.

The report was prepared with the long-term vision of 50 years, but, unfortunately, it got sacrificed at the altar of the myopic vision of political leaders. Then, starting from 1998, the foodgrain stocks again built up to unmanageable levels and India resorted to exporting at prices even lower than BPL issue prices. Still, a few shipments got rejected due to poor quality due to the deterioration of the stocks.

During the 2002 General Election, the Congress made it a poll issue and promised that the Johl Report would be updated and implemented to save the ground water and deteriorating environment. The Punjab government constituted another committee under my chairmanship. The committee submitted its revised report within three months in 2002. The report recommended that at least one million hectares under the rice crop be replaced with suggested crops to maintain the groundwater balance of



HUGE COST: Punjab is exporting foodgrains by packing and sending out its underground water. FILE PHOTO

the state.

However, despite the government giving me the Cabinet rank as vice-chairman of the state planning board, I was not given any opportunity to present the report to the Council of Ministers. Frustrated, I resigned twice, stating, "I am irrelevant to the system of governance by this government." But my resignation was not accepted with the promise that the report would be discussed in the next Council of Ministers' meeting. It never happened.

I contacted the Central government and got a Rs 1,600-crore grant approved by the Finance Department and transferred to the Ministry of Agriculture for implementation. I had to go out of the country on World Bank consultancy work. In my absence, this grant too was lost due to utter political and administra-

In the name of subsidising farmers, Punjab is de facto subsidising consumers outside the state.

tive indifference. Thus, successive Punjab governments frustrated me.

It is a known fact that the production of one kilogram of rice requires about 5,000 gallons of water and wheat needs 3,000 gallons per kg. On an average, 4,000 gallons of water is required per kilogram production of the two foodgrains. Thus, Punjab packs a huge volume of water, mostly from underground aquifers, annually and sends it out of the state. This water withdrawal from subsoil aquifers amounts to over 'one kilometre cubic' block of water extracted annually from underground aquifers.

Today, hardly anywhere in Punjab is drinkable water available at less than 300 feet depth. That too requires reverse osmosis (RO) for making it fit for drinking. Soil is highly polluted with

chemicals. As a result, rainwater, if recharged, pollutes the groundwater.

Unfortunately, now Punjab is using drinkable water of the future generation for the production of foodgrain for the country. Harvest-time pollution caused by both rice and wheat is well known.

Further, free electricity makes rice and wheat production more paying than any other crop pattern does for the farmers. But, in case water is charged at the right price, the rice crop will not be that remunerative. During the 2002-06 Congress regime, a flat rate on tube well was levied. I worked with the farmers and all of them were paying. Further, I had almost convinced the farmers to pay electricity charge by meters. But on the eve of elections in 2006, CM Capt Amarinder Singh again announced free electricity for the farm sector. All my efforts went to waste. A multimillion-dollar project to revamp research, extension and marketing of agricultural products that I had almost finalised with the World Bank was also lost due to the announcement of free power to the farm sector.

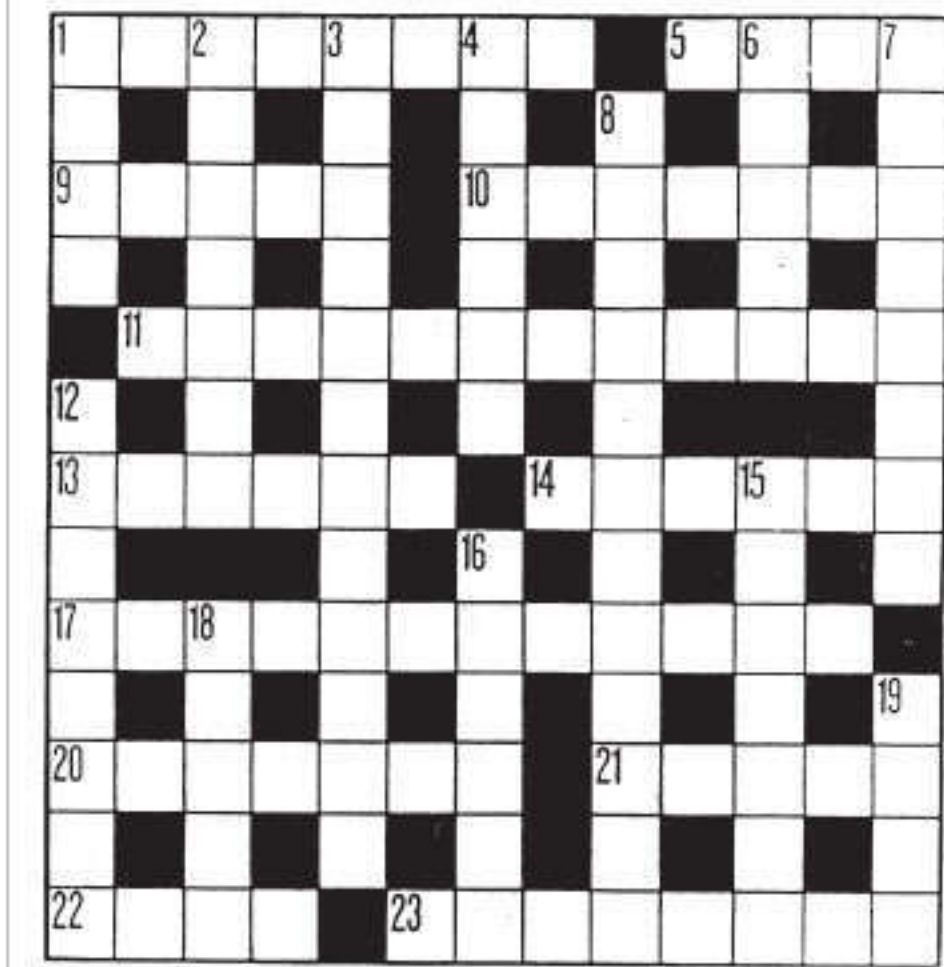
There is no doubt that no farm sector in the world survives without subsidies. But there are better ways to provide subsidies under the income support system, which is a green box subsidy. Under this system, farmers get as much subsidy along with higher MSP due to inclusion of water charges the farmers pay

in the cost of production of the crops. The water (input) subsidy is a market-distorting red box subsidy. More importantly, the input subsidy de facto does not subsidise the farmers under the minimum support pricing system because the cost being borne by the government is not included in the farmers' cost of production of these crops. It rather passes on to the consumers with lower issue prices based on lower minimum support prices. Thus, Punjab, in the name of subsidising the farmers is de facto subsidising annually the consumers of some 22 million tonnes of food grains living outside Punjab.

Policies can never be static. They have to be dynamic, consistent with the changes in circumstances. Unfortunately, Punjab is still pursuing the same agricultural policy that was designed to meet the food shortage in the country. Hence, the state is facing problems related to water and environment. Surprisingly, the Punjab Agricultural University, too, is pursuing the same priorities in research on rice and wheat since the mid-60s.

Unfortunately, the same disastrous policy started by political leaders in Punjab — right from Parkash Singh Badal to Capt Amarinder Singh, who initiated the desertification of Punjab by starting the free supply of electricity for tube wells — continues to this day. The leaders of Punjab do not want to deviate from their vitiated vote-bank politics.

QUICK CROSSWORD



- ACROSS**
- 1 Out of action (8)
 - 5 Style of clothing (4)
 - 9 Hurlled (5)
 - 10 Plant such as clover (7)
 - 11 Once in a while (12)
 - 13 Europe's second longest river (6)
 - 14 An often parasitic songbird (6)
 - 17 Able to be understood (12)
 - 20 Harass (7)
 - 21 Shrub of heath genus (5)
 - 22 Head cook (4)
 - 23 Power of seeing (8)
- DOWN**
- 1 Silly (4)
 - 2 A merest trace (7)
 - 3 Defy credibility (6,6)
 - 4 Involve unavoidably (6)
 - 6 Ring-shaped coral reef (5)
 - 7 Extravagant publicity (8)
 - 8 Be in earnest (4,8)
 - 12 Sea, arm of the Mediterranean (8)
 - 15 Sudden large financial gain (7)
 - 16 Lacking warmth (6)
 - 18 Succinct (5)
 - 19 Firmly fixed (4)
- Yesterday's Solution**
- Across:** 1 Intricate, 8 Drain, 9 Bravery, 10 Estate, 11 Cherry, 12 On and off, 15 Immortal, 18 Refuse, 20 Far-off, 21 Curious, 22 Nylon, 23 Desdemona.
- Down:** 2 North, 3 Revere, 4 Carry out, 5 Edison, 6 Paradox, 7 Under fire, 11 Cut it fine, 13 All-round, 14 Emerald, 16 Refund, 17 Affirm, 19 Spurn.

SU DO KU

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

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION															
9	4	8	3	1	7	5	2	6							
2	6	1	9	8	5	4	3	7							
5	3	7	2	6	4	1	9	8							
4	1	3	8	2	6	7	5	9							
6	2	5	7	3	9	8	1	4							
7	8	9	4	5	1	2	6	3							
3	5	2	6	7	8	9	4	1							
8	9	6	1	4	2	3	7	5							
1	7	4	5	9	3	6	8	2							
CALENDAR															
JANUARY 15, 2026, THURSDAY															
■ Shaka Samvat	1947														
■ Posh Shaka	25														
■ Margshirsh Parvishle	2														
■ Hijari	1447														
■ Krishna Paksha Tithi 12, up to 8:17 pm															
■ Vridhha Yoga up to 8:38 pm															
■ Jyeshtha Nakshatra up to 5:48 am															
■ Moon enters Sagittarius sign 5:48 am															

FORECAST

SUNSET: SUNRISE:	THURSDAY FRIDAY	17:45 HRS 07:19 HRS	
		MAX	MIN
CITY			
Chandigarh	12	07	
New Delhi	22	05	
Amritsar	12	04	
Bathinda	17	04	
Jalandhar	12	04	
Ludhiana	17	05	
Bhiwani	15	01	
Hisar	15	04	
Sirsa	15	04	
Dharamsala	—	—	
Manali	—	—	
Shimla	—	—	
Srinagar	12	-02	
Jammu	15	05	
Kargil	02	-10	
Leh	00	-11	
Dehradun	20	05	
Mussoorie	17	05	

TEMPERATURE IN °C

New Heights in India-Germany Relations

Germany's importance in the world is undeniable. Germans are known not only for their intellect and inventiveness but also for their progressive and forward-thinking approach. Similarly, there is no doubt about India's developmental progress. In the last 12-14 years, the country has progressed rapidly and is poised to become the world's third-largest economic power, demonstrating remarkable dynamism. At a time when US President Trump is resorting to threats ranging from tariff wars to military conflict and imposing tariff barriers on emerging and developing countries, the increased cooperation between India and Germany and their pledge to jointly combat terrorism is of great significance.

On Monday, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and German Chancellor Friedrich Merz held bilateral talks in Gandhinagar, Ahmedabad. During the talks, twenty joint declarations and seven memoranda of understanding were signed. According to these agreements, not only will projects be advanced, but both countries will also fight terrorism together. The MoUs have been signed. Both countries have worked together in the past and will continue to do so in the future. Today, more than 2,000 German companies are operating in India. This means that German investors have faith in India's potential. The Indo-Pacific region is a priority for both countries. Here, both countries will create a reliable and robust supply chain and diversify it.

It is hoped that the friendship between the two countries will improve the global environment and put some check on American hegemony. The leaders of both countries visited the Mahatma Gandhi Ashram, paid their respects to Bapu together, and then jointly flew kites at the International Kite Festival on the Sabarmati Riverfront. The important agreements and declarations made between the two countries are of immense significance. India and Germany have also made a joint declaration to strengthen mutual cooperation in the defense industry. To enhance economic and investment cooperation, India and Germany have agreed to establish a CEO forum under the joint India-Germany Investment Committee. India and Germany will collaborate on the related ecosystem in the semiconductor sector. They will also increase mutual cooperation in the mineral sector. Both countries have also decided to work together on technology and development in the telecom sector. The Petroleum and Natural Gas Regulatory Board will collaborate with its German counterpart. An agreement has been reached between the Indian company AM Green and the German company Uniper Global Commodities to promote green ammonia. Along with this agreement, the German Chancellor won the hearts of Indians by saying something else positive: "Mahatma Gandhi's teachings are needed more than ever today." The decision of India and Germany to work together during the festive days of Lohri and Makar Sankranti is welcome. In the new global order, if these two countries complement each other and pursue long-term development goals, nothing will stop them from becoming self-reliant superpowers. Such developments have an immediate impact on the diplomatic landscape.

Recently, despite calling Prime Minister Modi his good friend, US President Trump was threatening to impose 500 percent tariffs on India. But look at the statement of US Ambassador to India, Sergio Gor, after the India-Germany agreement: "No country is more important than India, trade deals can be discussed, Trump may visit India next year." Ambassador Sergio Gor also said that India is going to become a member of the 'Pax Silica' alliance. India will be invited to join this group of nations as a full member next month. The Pax Silica alliance is a secure, resilient, and innovation-based silicon supply chain. The US, which is creating this alliance, has now invited India to become a member. See the power of diplomacy: as soon as India and Germany joined hands, the American attitude towards India changed almost immediately.

-Abhishek Vij

Severe Cold Wave in Punjab and Fear of Pneumonia

One-chilling cold is prevailing across North India, including Punjab. The plains of Punjab have become colder than the hills. The minimum temperature in seven districts of Punjab has dropped below 3 degrees Celsius. In Bathinda, the temperature reached near zero, at 0.6 degrees Celsius. In comparison, the temperature in Shimla was recorded at 5.4 degrees, in Mussoorie at 3.4 degrees, and in Jammu also at 3.4 degrees. This means that Punjab is currently experiencing colder temperatures than Shimla, Mussoorie, and Jammu. Life has been severely affected due to the intense cold. Adding to the misery, the cold is currently dry; there is no rain. Cases of cough and cold are increasing. A red alert has also been issued due to the cold wave.

Doctors say that there is a high risk of pneumonia in this weather. Elderly people should avoid going out in such weather. There is no possibility of relief from the cold in the next two to three days. Dense fog is affecting daily life in this biting cold. Fewer crowds are seen in markets and public places. The cold wave has been so intense this time that all previous records are being broken. On Sunday, dense fog covered most districts of Punjab, and it continued for the next two days. Even if the sun was visible somewhere, its warmth seemed ineffective against the cold.

Karmic encounters: The people who come to teach



Dr Tanu Jain
Chief executive officer Bareilly cantonment board Ministry of defence

It was somewhere in the stillness of the Himalayas — that sacred silence where mountains meet clouds and time itself seems to pause — that I once met a wandering sadhu. The air was crisp, and the pine trees whispered secrets to the wind. I remember sitting beside him with a question that had been gnawing at my heart: "What should I do when someone wrongs me? When those I trust wound me so deeply that I no longer recognize myself?" The sadhu looked at me with eyes that seemed to carry the calm of many lifetimes. After a long silence, he spoke softly, "When a snake bites you, do you chase the snake to take revenge, or do you think of healing the wound?" His words struck something raw within me. I sat there, speechless, realizing that all my life I had been chasing the snakes the people who hurt me hoping to extract apologies, explanations, or justice. But in doing so, I had allowed the venom to spread deeper inside me. The sadhu smiled gently and said, "The snake has done its part and gone its way. The poison remains only if you carry it. Heal yourself, not the snake."

Those words changed something fundamental in me. I realized that life sends people our way not just to love us, but often to teach us sometimes gently, sometimes painfully. We crave love, belonging, and acknowledgment through others, but the truth is that each encounter, sweet or sour, is karmic in nature a mirror reflecting the unfinished

lessons of our own soul. We humans live barely sixty or seventy years, yet we spend most of that time tangled in the web of expectations hoping someone will stay, understand, or love us as we desire. The irony is that the very people we believe to be our "own" often become our greatest teachers. They hurt us not because they are cruel, but because our karma demands it because somewhere, the soul needs to grow through the fire of experience.

The Bhagavad Gita speaks of this divine balance:
"Sukha-duhkhe same krtva labha-labhau jayajayau"

When those I trust wound me so deeply that I no longer recognize myself?" The sadhu looked at me with eyes that seemed to carry the calm of many lifetimes.

Treat happiness and sorrow, gain and loss, victory and defeat alike.

Yet, how difficult this is! When our heart breaks, scriptures sound like distant echoes. When trust is shattered, philosophy feels powerless. And yet, over time, as the pain subsides, we begin to see what the wound was teaching us — patience, detachment, self-respect, or simply the art of letting go. I have held hatred and grief for long stretches of my life, believing that by doing so I was protecting myself. But I discovered that I was only chaining

myself to the past. Osho says, "You cannot destroy darkness by fighting it; you can only bring light." Similarly, you cannot erase pain by resisting it; you can only dissolve it by becoming aware of it.

The sadhu's question "Do you run behind the snake?" has become my inner compass. Because every time I wanted to confront, prove, or argue, I remembered that the snake had already disappeared into the forest. What remained was my wound — and my choice whether to heal it or poison it further.

So many of us continue to suffer long after the event has passed. The mind replays the betrayal, the insult, the rejection — each time making the wound bleed anew. We convince ourselves that holding on will protect us, but in truth, it only blinds us to the beauty still present in life. Osho reminds us, "Love is not about possession. Love is about appreciation." When we cling to people, expecting permanence, we are setting ourselves up for suffering. Love should be a fragrance — not a chain.

The world around us has become transactional. Emotions are weighed, care is conditional, and even love is often tied to convenience. But the answer is not to harden our hearts. The answer is to rise above — to shift our focus from people to purpose, from wounds to wisdom. To understand that not everyone who walks with us is meant to stay; some come only to awaken us.

There comes a time when you must whisper to yourself, "This person, this pain, this phase — it was all an old karmic account." And when the lesson is learned, release it gracefully. Don't curse it, don't chase it. Thank it. Because that is how the karmic wheel turns from bondage to liberation.

Osho often said, "If you love a flower, don't pick it. Let it be. Because love is not about owning it's about allowing." The same applies to relationships. The moment we try to own, we lose

the essence. True love gives freedom — and true understanding accepts impermanence.

The Gita too echoes this eternal wisdom:
"Yogasthah kuru karmani"

Be steadfast in yoga, in balance, and perform your actions without attachment. This is not indifference; this is mastery. It means that whether people come or go, your peace remains untouched. You do not stop loving, but you stop suffering because of love. You do not stop feeling, but you no longer drown in feelings. Forgiveness, too, is part of this mastery. Forgiveness does not mean forgetting what happened; it means choosing not to let it control your peace anymore. It is choosing yourself over your pain. It is saying, "I will heal the wound, not chase the snake." And as you do this, something shifts within you. You begin to move from dependence to devotion, from hurt to harmony. You no longer need humans to complete you — you begin to need them only to reflect the divinity within you. In the end, the sadhu's words were not just about people, but about life itself. Every encounter, every relationship, every joy and sorrow is a karmic messenger. Some come to bless you, some to test you, but all come to teach you. And when you learn the lesson, you rise a little higher, your soul becomes lighter, your love becomes purer. Osho once said, "The real question is not whether life exists after death, but whether you are alive before death." To be truly alive is to live with awareness — to love without fear, to lose without bitterness, and to trust that every soul that crosses your path is a teacher sent by existence itself. So when life stings, smile softly. Heal the wound, bless the snake, and walk on. Because in the great unfolding of karma, even pain is a form of grace. And somewhere, far away in the quiet folds of the Himalayas, the sadhu's smile still lingers a reminder that those who hurt us were, after all, just people who came to teach.

THOUGHT OF THE DAY

Truth is not something outside to be discovered; it is something inside to be realized.
-Hermann Hesse

The Quiet Strength of Community in an Age of Individualism

Modern life celebrates independence. Success is often measured by personal achievement, self-reliance, and individual ambition. While these values have driven innovation and growth, they have also obscured a fundamental truth: humans are deeply social beings. In an age of increasing isolation, the quiet strength of community deserves renewed attention.

Community is not limited to geography. It can exist in neighborhoods, workplaces, classrooms, or shared causes. At its core, community is the understanding that individuals are connected by mutual responsibility. This sense of belonging provides emotional security and practical support, especially during crises. Recent global challenges—from pandemics to climate-related disasters—have underscored the importance of collective action. When formal systems struggle, it is often communities that step in: neighbors share resources, volunteers organize relief, and local networks ensure that the most vulnerable are not forgotten. These acts rarely make headlines, but they sustain societies in moments of distress.

The erosion of community has tangible consequences. Loneliness is increasingly recognized as a public health concern, linked to anxiety, depression, and reduced life expectancy. Digital connectivity, while valuable, cannot fully replace face-to-face interaction and shared physical spaces. Strong communities offer something irreplaceable: the assurance that one is not alone. In economic terms, community resilience reduces inequality. Informal support systems shared childcare, local mentorship, cooperative efforts often bridge gaps left by institutions. In rural and marginalized urban areas, community networks can determine access to education, healthcare, and opportunity.

When law becomes a tool of convenience

The strength of a democracy is often judged by the laws it enacts. But an equally important measure is how those laws are applied.

When legal principles are enforced selectively—strictly for some, loosely for others—the law ceases to be an instrument of justice and becomes a tool of convenience. This shift is subtle, gradual, and deeply damaging. Selective application rarely announces itself as injustice. It operates through delay, discretion, and interpretation. Cases involving ordinary citizens move slowly, while those touching powerful interests are fast-tracked or indefinitely postponed. Bail becomes routine for some and exceptional for others. Similar offences attract vastly different responses depending on identity, influence, or political alignment. Over time, this inconsistency becomes predictable, even if it is never formally acknowledged. One consequence of this trend is the erosion of public trust. People may not know every legal detail, but they recognise patterns. When accountability appears conditional, faith in institutions weakens. Citizens begin to see the justice system not as a neutral arbiter, but as a landscape to be navigated through connections, resources, or silence. For those without access to such advantages, the law feels distant and arbitrary.

The problem is not limited to courts. Law enforcement practices often reflect the same imbalance. Preventive detentions, surveillance, and raids are disproportionately used against marginalised communities or political



critics, while economic crimes involving large sums are framed as procedural lapses rather than moral failures. This unevenness sends a clear message: some violations threaten the state, others merely inconvenience it.

Legal language plays a crucial role in normalising this process. Terms such as "national interest," "public order," or "administrative necessity" are broad enough to justify almost any action. When invoked without transparent reasoning, they insulate decisions from scrutiny. Courts may defer, media may hesitate, and citizens are left with outcomes that are legal in form but questionable in spirit.

Another casualty of convenience-driven law is due process. The presumption of innocence, timely trials, and the right to defence are often treated as obstacles rather than safeguards. Long pre-trial detentions become punishment by default. Procedural shortcuts are justified in the name of efficiency or security. Yet efficiency without fairness undermines the very legitimacy of the legal system.

This environment also reshapes behaviour. Activists become cautious, journalists self-censor, and citizens avoid engagement that could attract legal attention.

Unchosen Desk: The Assignments That Never Get Volunteers



Dr sharad S chauhan IPS
DGP and Managing Director,
Punjab Police Housing Corporation

The In policing, there is an unspoken hierarchy that everyone understands. The field job, the one that puts you on the street, in the middle of action, and under the flashing lights, is seen as the real test of mettle. It brings visibility, adrenaline, and a sense of immediate purpose. It is the work that draws respect, and sometimes envy. But behind every field officer, there are others who work in offices, classrooms, and training centres: people who modernize systems, draft manuals, and teach recruits. Their work is less visible, slower in reward, and often taken for granted. Yet without them, the field would have neither direction nor renewal. This divide is not a flaw of policing alone; it is a reflection of human nature. We are drawn to what is seen, not to what

sustains. Society rewards performance more than preparation. The spotlight is addictive, and the stage always feels more important than the rehearsal. In every organization, there are “glamour roles” that attract attention and “maintenance roles” that keep everything running quietly. The result is predictable: the visible flourishes while the invisible falters. The urgent overshadows the important. In police work, modernization, training, and research are the roots that nourish the visible branches of enforcement. Yet few choose these paths because the rewards are delayed and intangible. There are no medals for designing a curriculum or auditing an old system. But the failure to invest in these less glamorous spaces has consequences. Without proper training, field performance deteriorates. Without modernization, old errors repeat themselves. Without research, policy becomes reaction instead of reflection. The crisis of policing often begins in the neglect of its quiet departments. The same principle applies to society at large. We live in a world that celebrates immediacy. Fast results, quick profits, and visible recognition dominate

the public imagination. Teachers are respected less than influencers. Scientists struggle for funding while celebrities shape public opinion. The people who repair, maintain, and prepare rarely receive the

The same principle applies to society at large. We live in a world that celebrates immediacy. Fast results, quick profits, and visible recognition dominate the public imagination.

same applause as those who perform. Yet it is these quiet contributors who hold systems together. Sociologists call this “the bias of visibility.” Humans tend to value what they can see and measure, even when what is unseen is more essential. It is the

same reason people prefer building new institutions to strengthening existing ones. Maintenance is mistaken for stagnation. The person who fixes a flaw rarely gets credit because success in prevention looks like nothing happened. That is why in every profession, from policing to medicine, we face crises not from neglect of passion but from neglect of preparation. The philosopher Lao Tzu wrote, “The softest things in the world overcome the hardest.” Quiet, consistent effort is often what sustains progress. But in a culture obsessed with outcomes, patience loses value. Modern societies often forget that the loudest contributions are not always the deepest. The architect of an idea shapes the world as much as the one who executes it. In ignoring the quiet worker, we starve the soil that produces resilience. In policing, it is not uncommon to find officers who view postings in training institutions as punishment. Yet these are the very places where character and competence are forged. The classroom is the seedbed of every good officer. A constable’s first experience of law, ethics, and humanity is not on the street but under a trainer’s guidance. Modernization

wings, too, often struggle with understaffing and indifference. These units are responsible for adapting to new technology, data systems, and evolving crimes. When they lag, the entire force lags with them. The issue is not of capability but of perception. We mistake the quiet work for lesser work, and by doing so, we weaken our own foundations. The same pattern exists in families and communities. The members who perform visible roles, those who earn, lead, or speak are celebrated. But those who sustain from the background—those who care, teach, or mend—fade into anonymity. The homemaker, the teacher, the social worker, the clerk, and the nurse perform work that is essential but undervalued. This imbalance creates fatigue in its silent contributors, who eventually withdraw, leaving systems hollow. The solution is not to diminish the visible but to dignify the invisible. A healthy organization recognizes that performance and preparation are equal halves of success. In policing, that means giving prestige to instruction and innovation, not just enforcement. In society, it means celebrating the slow, unglamorous processes that

make civilization possible. The person who prevents a mistake deserves as much credit as the one who solves a crisis. Every officer learns that prevention is the best form of policing. The same logic applies to progress itself. Training prevents failure; modernization prevents irrelevance; quiet effort prevents collapse. We must learn to respect the spaces where results are not immediate but inevitable. True professionalism, in any field, lies in doing the unseen work well enough that others can act with confidence. The rhythm of modern life tempts us to confuse speed with progress. But the real progress of any society lies in its ability to nurture patience, preparation, and continuity. The departments we neglect today are the ones we will depend on tomorrow. The future, like an investigation, is only as strong as the groundwork we do now. The world needs more people willing to build foundations rather than chase applause. The reward of such work is not visibility but legacy. The quiet worker may not make the news, but they make the difference. **The Gyan:** What is invisible in effort becomes visible in failure.

Why Small Acts of Honesty Still Matter in a Fractured World

In an age dominated by big headlines, loud opinions, and relentless outrage, honesty often feels like a small, almost fragile virtue. It rarely trends on social media, does not generate instant applause, and seldom brings immediate rewards. Yet, despite its quiet nature, honesty remains one of the most powerful forces holding societies together—especially at a time when trust is steadily eroding across institutions, communities, and personal relationships. From public life to everyday interactions, dishonesty has become increasingly normalized. Half-truths are defended as “strategy,” misinformation is excused as “opinion,” and ethical compromises are often justified in the name of survival or success. Against this backdrop, choosing honesty can seem naïve. But history and daily life suggests the opposite: honesty is not weakness; it is



resilience. At the most basic level, honesty sustains human relationships. Trust does not emerge from grand gestures but from consistency in small actions: returning extra change, admitting a mistake, or speaking the truth even when it is inconvenient. These moments may appear insignificant, but collectively they shape how safe people feel with one another. A society where individuals expect fairness and truth, even in minor dealings, is one where cooperation thrives. In public life, the cost of dishonesty is even more visible. When leaders manipulate facts or evade accountability, cynicism spreads rapidly. Citizens disen-

gage, believing that integrity is performative rather than real. Over time, this erosion of trust weakens democratic participation, fuels polarization, and leaves space for extremism. By contrast, leaders who acknowledge errors and communicate transparently, however uncomfortable, often earn lasting credibility. Honesty, in this sense, becomes a stabilizing force. The workplace offers another compelling example. Organizations that reward honesty tend to be more innovative and resilient. When employees feel safe admitting uncertainty or failure, problems are addressed early rather than buried. Ethical workplaces reduce burnout, improve morale, and create environments where people are valued for integrity rather than appearances. In contrast, cultures built on fear and deception may deliver short-term results but often collapse under the weight of unresolved issues.

Why Listening Has Become a Radical Act

In a world saturated with noise, listening has quietly turned into a rare skill. Conversations today are often competitive rather than collaborative, with participants waiting for their turn to speak rather than trying to understand. Social media amplifies this pattern, rewarding sharp reactions over thoughtful responses. Yet, amid growing polarization and misunderstanding, the simple act of listening may be one of the most powerful tools for restoring trust and social cohesion. Listening is frequently mistaken for passivity. In reality, it requires patience, humility, and discipline. To listen well is to temporarily suspend judgment and accept that one’s own perspective may be incomplete. This is not an easy task in an era that encourages certainty and instant opinions. However, societies that value listening are better equipped to manage disagreement without turning it into conflict. The consequences of not listening are visible everywhere—from fractured families to broken politics. When people feel unheard, frustration hardens into resentment. In public life, this sense of exclusion often manifests as anger toward institutions and leaders. Many social movements, across ideologies, are rooted not only in material grievances but in the belief that voices have been ignored for too long. List-



ning, therefore, is not merely polite behavior; it is a political and social necessity. Workplaces provide a clear illustration of this principle. Organizations that encourage open dialogue tend to be more resilient and adaptive. When employees feel their concerns are genuinely heard, trust improves and innovation follows. Conversely, environments where feedback is dismissed or ignored often suffer from disengagement and high turnover. Listening, in this context, becomes a form of leadership rather than a concession. On a personal level, listening strengthens relationships. People rarely expect perfect solutions to their problems; they want recognition of their experience. A friend who listens without interruption offers something far more valuable than unsolicited advice. Such moments create emotional safety, allowing honesty and vulnerability to flourish.

Kashi-Tamil Sangamam: A Living Symbol of ‘One India, Best India’

The Kashi-Tamil Sangamam is a celebration of India’s unity in diversity. From Vishwanath in Kashi to Rameswaram in Tamil Nadu, it embodies the spirit of ‘Ek Bharat, Shreshtha Bharat’ (One India, Best India). A few days ago, I had the opportunity to participate in the Somnath Swabhiman Festival at the sacred Somnath site, commemorating 1,000 years since the first attack on Somnath in 1026. People from across the country came to witness this historic moment, reflecting the deep connection Indians share with their culture, history, and indomitable courage. During the festival, I met people who had previously attended the Saurashtra-Tamil Sangamam and the Kashi-Tamil Sangamam, whose enthusiasm and positive outlook inspired me to share my

thoughts on this initiative. In a previous episode of Mann Ki Baat, I had expressed my regret at not being able to learn Tamil. Fortunately, in recent years, our government has actively promoted Tamil culture across India, strengthening the spirit of ‘One India, Best India.’ Sangam, or cultural confluence, has always held special significance in our heritage, making the Kashi-Tamil Sangamam a unique initiative. It highlights India’s diverse traditions while showing mutual respect for different cultures. Kashi is an ideal location for this Sangamam. For millennia, it has been the spiritual and cultural hub of Indian civilization, attracting seekers of knowledge, meaning, and liberation. The Tamil community in Kashi has long-standing historical ties. While Kashi is the city of Baba Vishwanath, Rameswaram in

Tamil Nadu is a sacred pilgrimage. Tenakasi in Tamil Nadu is often called the “South Kashi.” Eminent spiritual leaders like Pujya Kumaraguruparar Swamiji strengthened enduring connections between Kashi and Tamil Nadu through scholarship and spiritual guidance. Renowned Tamil poet and nationalist Subramaniya Bharati found intellectual and spiritual inspiration in Kashi, which shaped his vision for a free and united India. Many such examples underscore the deep affinity between Kashi and Tamil Nadu. The Kashi-Tamil Sangamam began in 2022 in Varanasi. Its inaugural event brought writers, students, artists, scholars, and farmers from Tamil Nadu to Kashi, Prayagraj, and Ayodhya. Subsequent editions expanded the initiative, incorporating technology, educational dialogue, cultural performances, and

exhibitions to ensure participation remained high. The third edition focused on the Indian knowledge system, attracting thousands. The fourth edition, launched on December 2, 2025, had the theme “Tamil Karkalam – Learn Tamil”, providing a unique opportunity for participants from Kashi and other regions to learn the Tamil language. Teachers from Tamil Nadu made the experience memorable for students. Ancient Tamil literature, including the Tholkappiyam, was translated into four Indian and six foreign languages. A special vehicle expedition traveled from Tenakasi to Kashi. Health camps, digital literacy programs, and tributes to the great Pandya king, Adi Veer Parakram Pandian, were organized, spreading the message of cultural unity. Exhibitions at Namohat, educational sessi-

ons at BHU, and various cultural programs enriched the event. What impressed me most was the enthusiasm of our youth, reflecting their passion to stay connected to their roots. The Sangamam provides them a vibrant platform to showcase talent through cultural performances. Special efforts were made to make the Kashi visit memorable, including dedicated trains from Tamil Nadu and enthusiastic welcome arrangements by local residents and authorities. Many opened their homes to Tamil guests, enhancing their experience. The closing ceremony of this edition was held in Rameswaram, with the presence of Tamil Nadu’s distinguished son, Vice President C.P. Radhakrishnan, who enriched the event with his insights. Emphasizing India’s spiritual heritage, he highlighted

how such platforms strengthen national unity. The Kashi-Tamil Sangamam has had a profound impact, promoting cultural awareness, educational discourse, and public dialogue, while deepening connections between different cultures. It advances the spirit of ‘One India, Best India’ and will continue to grow as a vibrant celebration of our shared heritage. This time of year is considered sacred, as people enthusiastically celebrate festivals like Sankranti, Uttarayan, Pongal, and Magh Bihu, which honor the Sun, nature, and agriculture. These festivals bring communities together, fostering harmony and unity. I extend my best wishes to all citizens, confident that such shared traditions and collective participation will further strengthen the unity of our nation.



Bonhomie with Berlin

German Chancellor Friedrich Merz's recent visit to India highlighted the growing convergence of interests between the two countries as they grapple with a volatile and unpredictable global geopolitical environment. The changing realities are impacting both countries in different ways. While India is navigating choppy trade waters following a steep rise in American tariffs and continuing challenges from China and the immediate neighbourhood, Germany too is struggling to keep pace with geopolitical shifts in the wake of the United States distancing itself from Europe on security matters, the growing complexities in Ukraine, and tensions with China. One of the most important outcomes of his meeting with Prime Minister Narendra Modi is the announcement of visa-free transit for Indian passport holders passing through Germany. This people-centric decision will resonate far beyond geopolitical and diplomatic domains. For Indian students, professionals and business travellers, this step sends a clear signal that Germany values India as an all-weather friend. Both Merz and Modi have acknowledged that close people-to-people links remain a key pillar of the India-Germany strategic partnership. The focus on higher education and skilling reinforces this message. Germany's growing demand for skilled workers, particularly in the healthcare sector, dovetails with India's demographic strengths. Inviting German universities to open campuses in India can help address skill gaps. At a time when the US is increasingly tightening even legal pathways for skilled immigration, Germany — along with other EU countries — offers an attractive alternative.

Merz's India visit underscored deepening strategic convergence as both nations navigate uncertainties

The Modi-Merz talks yielded tangible outcomes across trade and security. On commerce, both sides reaffirmed their resolve to conclude the long-delayed EU-India free trade agreement by the end of this month, when European leaders will be in Delhi as guests for the Republic Day celebrations. The two countries also agreed to develop a joint roadmap for defence industrial cooperation. Germany has embarked on a massive programme of rearmament in response to Russia's continuing war in Ukraine and growing doubts about long-term American commitment to European security. Over the last four years, it has emerged as the world's fourth-largest defence spender, after the US, China, and Russia. With plans to spend up to 3.5% of the GDP on defence, German military expenditure could approach \$200 billion annually by this decade. For India, partnership with a rearming Germany opens a rare opportunity to modernise its own defence industry through co-development and co-production. Germany's willingness to simplify processes related to defence trade and commit to co-development and co-production aligns well with the Centre's Make in India goals. It is clear that India and Germany are determined to deepen their partnership despite lingering differences over Russia. By combining security cooperation with enablers like visa-free transit and a comprehensive roadmap on higher education, both countries have laid stress on mutual respect and trust amid global headwinds.



DAYANIDHI MARAN
Senior DMK leader

“ In Tamil Nadu we tell women to study. But what is told in North India? They say girls should not go to work, should be at home, be in the kitchen, bear children, this is your job



URSULA VON DER LEYEN
European Commission President

We all want peace for Ukraine... With the military assistance, Ukraine can stand strong against Russia, and at the same time, it can integrate more closely into Europe's defence industrial base



JENS-FREDERIK NIELSEN
Greenland's Prime Minister

If we have to choose between the United States and Denmark here and now, we choose Denmark. We choose NATO. We choose the Kingdom of Denmark. We choose the EU”

What lies ahead for banks?

India's banking system enters 2026 stronger than ever but tougher norms will test resilience



Dr K SRINIVASA RAO



The banking system has strengthened over the past three years, with prospects for continued growth in 2026 and beyond. Although deposit growth slowed from 13% in FY23 to 11.4% in FY25, and credit growth from 15% to 12.5% over the period, non-banks have continued to provide credit support to the productive sectors of the economy.

As a result of coordination between banks and non-bank financial institutions, the total flow of resources to the commercial sector has increased. In FY26, this stood at Rs 20.1 lakh crore, compared with Rs 16.5 lakh crore in the corresponding period of the previous year. Outstanding credit from bank and non-bank sources increased by 13% (y-o-y). Bank resilience has improved significantly over the past three years (FY23 to FY25). Gross non-performing assets dropped from 3.9% to 2.2%, reaching a historic low. Return on assets improved from 1% to 1.4% while return on equity (ROE) improved from 11.5% to 13.5%.

The capital-to-risk-weighted-assets ratio (CRAR) improved from 16.2% to 16.8% and reached 17.2% by September 2025. Profitability improved for the 7th consecutive year in FY25, despite a moderation in growth due to higher deposit costs; net interest margin declined to 3.1% in FY25 from 3.4% in FY24. Such strength will be the foundation for banks to perform better in 2026 and beyond.

Monetary Policy

Since June 2025, monetary policy has specifically supported bank credit growth as the economy has operated amid stiffer geopolitical headwinds, trade disruptions, and tariff threats. In addition to a cumulative 125-basis-

point reduction in the repo rate, the CRR (cash reserve ratio) was reduced from 4% to 3%, releasing close to Rs 2.5 lakh crore, with its positive impact expected to be reflected in incremental deposit growth.

The transmission of the repo rate cut is well underway. The weighted average lending rate or WALR (average interest rate charged by banks on loans, calculated by giving more weight to larger loan amounts) declined by 69 bps for fresh rupee loans during February-October 2025. The current 25 bps cut has yet to benefit borrowers. The transmission of interest rate cuts is still a work in progress. The RBI has been fine-tuning its monetary policy to enable banks to accelerate lending and support growth.

Operational Autonomy

Among others, certain credit-centric regulatory relaxations have been permitted to enhance banking resilience and boost credit flows to productive sectors of the economy. Banks can now fund acquisitions of Indian non-financial companies, expanding M&A financing options. Loan limits against shares and securities have increased from Rs 20 lakh to Rs 1 crore per borrower. IPO financing limits have increased from Rs 10 lakh to Rs 25 lakh, and the cap on loans against listed debt securities has been removed. Risk weights for home loans (up to Rs 30 lakh) have been lowered to reduce costs and boost housing credit.

The RBI withdrew the penal framework for significant corporate exposures, previously fixed at Rs 10,000 crore, shifting to macroprudential tools while retaining individual caps. It is proposed to introduce risk-based deposit insurance premiums (DICGC) to

move away from the current flat rate. There is also a proposal to increase the deposit insurance amount from the current level of Rs 5 lakh. Such differentiated deposit insurance premiums could benefit stronger banks, which may pay a lower premium.

Challenges Ahead

As part of amendments to the Liquidity Coverage Ratio (LCR) framework, effective April 1, 2026, all commercial banks will be required to maintain a 7.5% run-off provision (percentage of deposits a bank must assume will leave during stress) for stable retail deposits linked to internet and mobile banking systems, which are vulnerable to digital flight. Similarly, a 12.5% run-off provision will apply to less stable deposits accessed through digital channels. Banks will be better able to manage liquidity risks when threatened by unexpected deposit flight through digital channels.

In 2026, banks will have to hone their risk management skills to begin implementing the Basel-III capital norms and the expected credit loss (ECL) framework from April 1, 2027, with a glide path to March 2031. They will need to run parallel ECL models in advance, based on simulations, to test data integrity and refine the computa-

Banks will have to hone risk management skills as they implement Basel-III norms and the expected credit loss framework from April 1, 2027

tion of probability of default (PD), loss given default (LGD), and exposure at default (EAD) frameworks, thereby enhancing forecasting capacity.

They need to implement ring-fencing of business risks, segregate high-risk and/or non-core activities, including in subsidiaries' operations, and submit plans to the central bank by March 2026.

Activities such as real estate, trading, manufacturing, speculative investments and complex investment products will face tighter limits or be shifted to separately capitalised group entities. Structural implementation must be completed by March 31, 2028. The RBI further proposed faster complaint resolution through the integrated ombudsman scheme and enhanced digital grievance tracking.

With banks having built a firm footing over the last three years, the liquidity assured by the RBI, and the broader canvas of autonomy to expand credit, they should be able to strengthen further their performance to fuel economic growth.

Some of the newly proposed regulatory guardrails are intended to strengthen the resilience and risk-management framework to protect stakeholders over the long term. In light of emerging challenges and opportunities in 2026 and beyond, banks should reinvent their strategies to realise their full potential in supporting growth. In the broader context, balancing the governance, risk, and compliance framework will be the cornerstone of banks' growth in scale and size.

(The author is Adjunct Professor, Institute of Insurance and Risk Management, Hyderabad. Views are his own)

Letters to the Editor

Hitman

Rohit 'Hitman' Sharma reached yet another milestone in his cricketing career by hitting 650 international sixes. The India opener in ODIs has achieved a lot in the international arena and still has a lot in store, despite being in his late 30s. He is still an asset to the team, and youngsters may emulate him when playing alongside him. He created history by achieving the never-before-seen feat of 650 maximums in the first ODI against New Zealand. Hope he will continue to perform well for the country and feature in the 2027 ODI World Cup.

SANKARANARAYANAN,
Chennai

Hasty rejig of districts

The Telangana government's hasty rejig of districts and mandals is a pointless exercise that reeks of political posturing. (Scrap districts, face unrest, warns KTR, 13 Jan) The previous BRS government had already restructured them in 2022, allowing people to settle into the new setup. This second overhaul within five years will create confusion among the citizens, disrupt administration and squander precious public money on redundant paper work, signage and relocations. Instead of fixating on gimmicks, the government must focus on pressing issues like farmers distress, unemployment and infrastructure. Telangana deserves governance focused on development, not district-drawing distractions.

PH HEMA SAGAR, Secunderabad

World leaders must unite

What the US President Trump is doing is nothing but eccentric. He is in a state of exertion and frustration as he failed in his attempt to end the Ukraine war. He could not make India submit to his statements on ending the war with Pakistan. He is threatening Colombia, Cuba, Mexico and now wants to snatch the NATO-controlled Greenland. Known to the world that he cannot take an upper hand over Russia's oil trading, and as a result, he is intervening in Venezuela to boss over the global oil market. Trump expects no resistance, but he should never be allowed to be a Big Brother to the world. It is time world leaders united to bring in global harmony.

RAJAKUMAR ARULANANDHAM, Tirunelveli

Rising tide of authoritarianism

In recent years, the world has witnessed a troubling surge in authoritarian tendencies, even in nations once considered bastions of democracy. This global drift is marked by a systematic erosion of democratic norms, with politicians increasingly targeting civil society, undermining freedom of speech and the press to silence dissent. The digital space, once a haven for free expression, is increasingly surveilled and censored. What is particularly disconcerting is that this authoritarian wave is not confined to traditionally fragile democracies. Established liberal democracies, long thought immune to such assaults, are now grappling with internal threats to their democratic institutions. Polarisation, disinformation, and populist rhetoric have created fertile ground for leaders who prioritise power over principle. The illusion of democratic invincibility has been shattered. Democracy is not merely about casting a vote every few years but about nurturing a culture of accountability, transparency, and civic engagement. Citizens must feel empowered not just on election day, but every day to question authority, demand justice, and uphold the values of freedom and equality. Democracy survives by deliberate and daily action.

SUMEET SETHI, Chandigarh

India in the hotspot

■ Newsweek

India and China woo neighbors with naval power

India is set to deploy naval vessels for training in Southeast Asia, following a similar move by its military rival, China, as both powers strengthen ties with regional nations. India's Ministry of Defense said that four ships will be sent on a long-range mission as part of an officers' training course.

■ The Washington Post

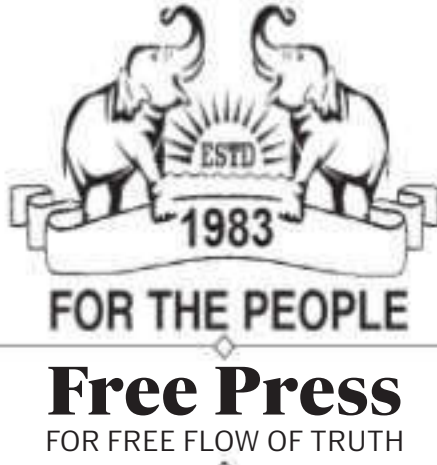
Can Trump confidant reset US-India relations?

After the new U.S. ambassador's first day on the job in New Delhi, one thing is clear: MAGA-style diplomacy has reached India. Ambassador Sergio Gorr, a confidant of President Donald Trump, addressed State Department staff and members of the media in India's capital.

■ Al Jazeera

Fear grips Indian students in Bangladesh

Every evening around 8pm, Karim* locks himself inside his small hostel room at East West Medical College in Nishat Nagar, on the outskirts of Dhaka. If there is a knock on the door, he pauses before opening it, listening carefully first for familiar voices. Outside the campus, he avoids crowded tea stalls and markets.



Apex court split on the PC Act

The split verdict this Tuesday by the two-judge bench of the Supreme Court of Justices Justice B.V. Nagarathna and K.V. Viswanathan on the constitutional validity of Section 17A of the Prevention of Corruption Act (1988) has left the vexed question still tantalisingly open: is prior sanction mandatory for an investigation against a government official accused of taking a bribe? Section 17A, introduced along with a slew of amendments in 2018 to the PCA, made sanction mandatory for investigation and laid down that no police officer could conduct an inquiry or investigation of a public servant accused of taking a bribe without “previous approval” of the competent authority, which could be the Union government, the state government, or the authority vested with the power to dismiss that official from service.

Section 17A, the petitioner Centre for Public Interest Litigation argued, was arbitrary, unconstitutional, and violative of Articles 14 and 21 of the Constitution of India. In operation, it offered legal protection to corrupt public servants by allowing inordinate delays or ways to ingeniously thwart the required “previous approval” by the competent authority. In several cases, the competent authority required to green-light the approval of the inquiry or investigation was the very office or administrative level that the accused was a part of, making it a conflict-of-interest situation. Together, these implications fundamentally but subtly defeated the very purpose of the Act itself, rendering it toothless even as anecdotal instances of corrupt practices at every level of the government proliferated. In effect, Section 17A became a shield for the corrupt if they knew how to use the spaces between its words.

The Union government consistently defended it on the grounds that the open-ended threat of inquiry would make honest officers fearful of post-facto criminal investigations into their bona fide decisions, due to which governance would suffer. The verdict would have tilted the scales one way or the other. However, the two judges took divergent views—Justice Vishwanathan upheld Section 17A and mandated an independent screening structure, such as the Lokpal or Lokayukta, for providing the mandatory approval, while Justice Nagarathna rejected this to record that the section itself was unconstitutional and, in some ways, protecting corrupt public servants. The case has been referred to a larger bench of the Supreme Court.

Till it passes through the labyrinthine legal procedure with a clear verdict at the end—which could take a few years—the question of prior sanction or previous approval for investigating allegedly corrupt officials remains wide open. The objective of introducing Section 17A was to strengthen the PCA by expediting investigations into bribe-taking officials. The intent, on the face of it, was laudable, but reading between the lines, it has continued to allow corruption in the corridors of power to flourish. Had the Supreme Court taken a firm stand against Section 17A, it might have gone a long way in addressing corruption in public offices.

Making RTE an accessible right

In a consequential order, the Supreme Court has issued directions to be implemented by state governments to achieve the objective of a key provision of the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act, 2009, providing equity for economically weaker sections and disadvantaged groups. There is little doubt that the RTE, created through a landmark constitutional amendment, has remained mostly on paper for children of underprivileged backgrounds despite the passage of time. Section 12 of the law clearly states that a school should admit students from underprivileged backgrounds to 25% of seats in Class I and ensure that they get free elementary education throughout. What made the law stand out was its applicability to private schools, besides government and aided institutions, and that too in the student's neighbourhood. In practice, there are significant shortcomings in the working of the RTE Act, as a study carried out in Delhi by the National Commission for the Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR), the empowered agency, showed some years ago; the top achievement was 18% of seats filled, and universal compliance was absent. Little has changed, and the SC bench consisting of Justices P.S. Narasimha and A.S. Chandurkar took note of the lamentable state of affairs that continued in spite of statutory child rights commissions being set up. The court reiterated the judiciary's role in making the admissions process accessible, effective, and efficient against the background of steep digital asymmetry in many parts of the country, especially in rural areas. Many were not able to benefit from the right to education. The SC bench was passing orders on a long-pending petition against a Bombay High Court judgement, which offered no relief to a parent because he had failed to apply online.

The detailed order of the SC should spur all sections to breathe new life into the RTE provisions on equity and fraternity, with the NCPCR in the lead. State governments and union territories must issue suitable rules under Section 38 of the law in consultation with the NCPCR, state commissions, and advisory councils. The court considered the suggestions made by amici curiae for states to open online portals to help parents, in line with the RTE's Section 12 mandate, and for schools to publish the seat strength and reservation for EWS/DG; help desks to be set up by states or schools or citizen service centres to help parents apply without paying fees; and a complaints redress mechanism to be created. These and other initiatives should be made known to the community widely through media advertisements and local campaigns. Dispute settlement committees must be available to all. These are much-needed reforms, and the state governments must adopt them without delay.



Unfiltered

Deepak Sanchety

India is in the midst of a strong and sustained IPO cycle. Primary markets have witnessed a steady flow of issuances, robust subscription levels across investor categories, and a sharp rise in retail participation. Seamless digital access, favourable market sentiment, and a series of successful listings have encouraged households to view IPOs as a mainstream investment avenue rather than sporadic opportunities. In such a fast-moving and optimistic environment, the quality, clarity, and credibility of disclosures assume far greater importance than ever before.

It is in this context that SEBI's December Board decision on Draft Red Herring Prospectuses (DRHPs) merits close examination. The regulator has explicitly acknowledged that the DRHPs, in their current form, do not fully serve their intended purpose for investors, particularly retail investors. This recognition is important. For years, market participants have flagged that IPO offer documents have become excessively voluminous—dense with legal jargon and difficult for non-professional investors to navigate. SEBI's appreciation of this concern is timely and welcome. Well begun is half done.

SEBI has observed that the IPO documents routinely run into hundreds of pages, with repetitive risk disclosures, boilerplate language, and legalistic phrasing dominating the narrative. This is largely driven by a defensive disclosure culture, where the primary objective is to minimise litigation risk rather than to meaningfully inform investors. To address this,

DRHP reform a good first step but disclosure quality lags

Simplifying language and reducing volume is necessary but not sufficient. The harder task is improving quality and accountability of disclosures

SEBI has approved the concept of a focused and standardised abridged prospectus at the DRHP stage, potentially replacing the current abridged prospectus issued at the Red Herring Prospectus stage, subject to consultation.

This initiative squarely targets the problems of volume and legal complexity. It seeks to make the IPO documents more readable and accessible, especially for retail investors. However, this reform also highlights a key limitation in the regulator's current approach. SEBI has largely framed the DRHP problem as one of length and legalese. What remains underappreciated is that the quality of disclosures themselves requires equally urgent attention. A shorter document, by itself, does not guarantee better investor understanding. If the same gaps, omissions, and obfuscations persist, the result may simply be compressed opacity. The real challenge with the DRHPs lies not only in how much is disclosed but also in what is disclosed, how prominently it is presented, and whether it enables investors to make informed comparisons and judgements.

Retail investors are structurally disadvantaged in IPOs. Unlike anchor investors and qualified institutional buyers, they do not have access to management interactions, analyst briefings or informal price discovery conversations. In a buoyant IPO market, where oversubscription is common and decision timelines are tight, these disadvantages are magnified. The DRHP is meant to bridge this information gap. Today, it falls short.

If SEBI's stated objective is genuine retail empowerment, disclosures

must be redesigned around retail investor needs, not merely around legal defensibility. A standardised Retail Investor Summary of around 20–30 pages should be mandated across all IPOs, written in plain language and following a uniform structure. This summary should clearly cover the business model, key revenue drivers, customer concentration, competitive landscape, promoter background and incentives, dilution impact, and specific use of proceeds. Uniformity would allow investors to compare offerings across issues rather than evaluate each DRHP in isolation.

Risk disclosures also need a fundamental rethink. Current DRHPs typically contain long lists of generic risks that apply to most businesses and provide little insight into what truly matters for a particular issuer. Issuers should be required to identify and prioritise their most material risks, ranked by impact and likelihood, with a clear explanation of potential financial consequences. Importantly, past outcomes should inform present risk disclosures.

In this regard, the historical performance of IPOs brought by the same set of merchant bankers deserves far greater prominence. Information on the last ten issues, or those launched over the past three years by the lead managers, should be clearly summarised and prominently highlighted. If even one of these issues has performed poorly post listing, that fact should be explicitly reflected in the risk factors. This would move risk disclosure from abstract possibility to demonstrated precedent, which is far more meaningful for retail investors. Valuation transparency is

another area where the disclosure quality remains inadequate. In a strong IPO cycle, pricing discipline plays a decisive role in long-term investor outcomes. SEBI should require issuers to disclose valuation multiples in a standardised format, benchmarked against listed peers and recent IPOs, including those managed by the same merchant bankers. Where an issuer is seeking a premium valuation, the justification should be supported by data and assumptions rather than generic growth narratives.

Merchant banker accountability must also be strengthened through better visibility. While current regulations require disclosure of past issue performance, this information is often buried deep within the DRHP or relegated to external references. SEBI should mandate a prominent table within the DRHP, summarising post-listing performance of recent IPOs managed by the lead bankers. Such visibility would create reputational incentives for more rigorous due diligence and realistic pricing.

Anchor investor disclosure represents one of the most significant gaps in the current framework. Anchor participation plays a powerful signalling role in IPOs, particularly during bullish markets. Retail investors often interpret anchor allocation as a mark of quality and confidence. Yet, the information provided to them is limited and backward-looking.

SEBI should require that, before the IPO opens for retail investors and after anchor allocation is finalised, an addendum be filed to the DRHP. This addendum should disclose the depth and breadth of anchor investor appli-

cations, including bid prices and quantities, not merely final allocations. Category-wise classification distinguishing mutual funds, foreign institutions, sovereign funds, and other investors should be mandatory. Critically, any anchor application by entities connected with the merchant bankers, including alternative investment funds or other vehicles managed by the same group, should be prominently disclosed and clearly flagged. Such transparency is essential to allow investors to assess the independence and quality of anchor demand. Historical context should also be provided. Retail investors should have access to information on how anchor investors have behaved in past IPOs, including average holding periods and post-lock-in sell-down patterns. Without this, anchor participation risks becoming a misleading signal rather than an informed one.

SEBI's acknowledgement that DRHPs do not fully serve their intended purpose, especially in a booming IPO market, is an important and commendable step. Simplifying language and reducing volume is necessary. But it is not sufficient. The harder task lies in improving the quality, relevance, and accountability of disclosures. Only when clarity, comparability and transparency are meaningfully enhanced will the DRHPs evolve from defensive legal documents into genuine instruments of retail investor empowerment.

The writer is a retired IRS officer and Ex-Chief of Surveillance at SEBI. Advisor to corporates, market participants and tech entrepreneurs.

The Strategic Mind: Dvaidhibhava

Master complexity, balance action with restraint. Chanakya's dual strategy guides nations to engage without yielding and resist without provoking



Niti Sutra

PROF HIMANSHU RAI

Chanakya recognised early what many modern strategists still struggle to accept: states often need to pursue cooperation and competition at the same time.

In the Arthashastra, he called this dvaidhibhava—a dual policy where engagement and resistance coexist, calibrated carefully to circumstance and timing. To the untrained eye, such behaviour appears contradictory. To the strategic mind, it is sophisticated realism. The world does not present choices in black and white; it offers overlapping interests, partial alignments, and evolving threats. Dvaidhibhava is the art of navigating this complexity without losing balance.

THE LOGIC OF DUALITY: Chanakya advised rulers that when a rival is too strong to confront directly and too important to ignore, a dual approach is necessary. One hand negotiates; the other prepares. One voice cooperates; the other remains cautious. This is not duplicity. It is prudence. A rigid strategy locks a nation into predictable behaviour; a dual strategy preserves flexibility.

In contemporary geopolitics, dvaid-

hibhava has become unavoidable. Supply chains, technology, climate, and security intersect in ways that make pure friendship or outright hostility impractical. Nations trade with rivals, collaborate with competitors, and deter partners when interests diverge.

INDIA'S PRACTICE OF DUAL STRATEGY: India's foreign policy offers a textbook illustration of dvaidhibhava.

Consider India–China relations. India engages China through trade, multilateral forums, and regional dialogue—recognising economic interdependence and geographic reality. Simultaneously, it strengthens border infrastructure, deepens Indo-Pacific partnerships, and modernises its military. Cooperation does not negate caution; caution does not preclude dialogue. Similarly, India's engagement with the United States blends collaboration and autonomy. Technology partnerships, defence cooperation, and strategic dialogue coexist with clear red lines on sovereignty, trade, and foreign policy independence. This duality is not confusion—it is control. India chooses engagement without entanglement

and resistance without escalation.

WHY DUAL STRATEGY IS OFTEN MISUNDERSTOOD: Dvaidhibhava unsettles observers because it resists simple narratives. Media, ideology, and domestic politics prefer clear camps and absolute positions. Dual strategies frustrate those who demand immediate alignment or confrontation.

Yet Chanakya warned against clarity that sacrifices advantage.

He argued that predictability is vulnerability. When adversaries can anticipate a ruler's response, they manipulate it. Dual strategy preserves uncertainty—forcing others to hedge, hesitate, and negotiate.

The most dangerous nations are not those that shout their intentions, but those that keep their options open.

DUALITY IS NOT MORAL RELATIVISM: Critics often mistake dual strategy for moral compromise. This is a misunderstanding. Dvaidhibhava does not mean abandoning values; it means sequencing actions wisely. The Arthashastra anchors strategy firmly in the welfare of the people. Chanakya's ultimate test for any policy was simple: does it preserve stability, prosperity, and sover-

eignty? If cooperation serves that end, pursue it. If resistance is required, prepare for it. Often, both are necessary simultaneously.

The Bhagavad Gita reinforces this wisdom. Krishna does not counsel Arjuna to renounce action, nor to embrace violence blindly. He teaches disciplined action rooted in discernment. Duality, when guided by dharma, becomes balance—not contradiction.

THE STRATEGIC VALUE OF AMBIGUITY: Dvaidhibhava thrives on calibrated ambiguity. By keeping intentions flexible, a state avoids being boxed into premature choices. Ambiguity buys time, space, and leverage. It allows diplomacy to mature and deterrence to remain credible without provocation. In today's world—where technology cycles are fast, alliances fluid, and crises overlapping—such ambiguity is not weakness. It is strategic depth. India's ability to engage multiple power centres simultaneously—Global South leadership, Indo-Pacific partnerships, Eurasian ties—reflects mastery of this dual approach.

WHEN DUAL STRATEGY FAILS: Chanakya was clear: Dual strategy

requires discipline. Without coherence, it degenerates into drift. Without capability, it collapses into appeasement.

Dvaidhibhava succeeds only when: National interests are clearly defined, Institutions are aligned, Communication is controlled, And, deterrence is credible.

Dual strategy without strength invites exploitation; strength without restraint invites escalation. The art lies in holding both together.

THE SUTRA FOR OUR TIMES: The world today is neither stable nor binary. It demands strategies that can operate in tension—engaging without yielding, resisting without provoking, cooperating without surrendering autonomy. Chanakya understood that power is not exercised in straight lines but in curves—adjusting to terrain, timing, and temperament. Dvaidhibhava is the geometry of that power.

The sutra for our times is thus: Engage where you must, resist where you should, and keep both in balance—for in a complex world, duality is not weakness, but wisdom.

The writer is director of Indian Institute of Management, Indore

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Water Mission Strain

Madhya Pradesh's Jal Jeevan Mission faces financial stress as rising project costs and delayed central funding strain state resources. With water contamination incidents spreading beyond Indore, timely central support is crucial. Safe drinking water is a public health priority, and funding gaps must not delay completion of essential household tap connections.

Amrit Lal Maru, Indore

Iran's Growing Unrest

Widespread protests across Iran reflect deep economic distress, soaring prices and public anger over governance failures. The unrest appears internally driven rather than externally influenced. Continued repression risks further instability and invites external interference. Dialogue and meaningful reforms, not rigid posturing, are essential to restore peace in an increasingly volatile situation.

Sunil Okhade, Indore

Trump's Acting Joke

Donald Trump's social media post declaring himself the “acting President” of Venezuela triggered global amusement. Jokes followed about his “acting” presidency and a vacant White House. Amid humour, the crisis in Venezuela remains grim. One only hopes 2026 brings political stability, economic recovery through oil revenues, and an end to alleged drug trafficking in the troubled nation.

PVP Madhu Nirviti, Secunderabad

Kites and Diplomacy

Images of Prime Minister Narendra Modi flying kites with German Chancellor Friedrich Merz symbolised the soaring India–Germany partnership. The moment reflected decades of cooperation, reinforced by 27 trade agreements covering defence, green energy, semiconductors and critical minerals. Beyond symbolism, the visit underscored deepening strategic, tech-

nological and industrial ties between the two countries.

Sreelekha PS, Secunderabad

Selective Outrage

Priti Patel's concern over attacks on Hindus in Bangladesh is valid, but her silence on violence against Muslims and Christians in India raises troubling questions. From Gujarat to Manipur, atrocities went unchallenged. Moral consistency demands condemnation of persecution everywhere, not selective outrage based on religious identity. Double standards weaken the credibility of human rights advocacy.

Tharcus S. Fernando, Chennai

Fun Over Facts

Erich von Däniken's Chariots of the Gods was dismissed by scientists as fantasy, yet its imaginative appeal endured. While his theories lack evidence, they inspired curiosity, films and popular culture. The episode reminds us that people often prefer exciting “what ifs” over dry facts. A little mystery, after all, keeps

imagination alive.

K. Chidanand Kumar, Bengaluru

Youth Divide Exposed

The World Economic Forum's Youth Pulse 2026 highlights deep global inequality among youth in technology, AI and opportunity. Yet it also recognises Gen Z's civic engagement, openness to innovation and learning. Governments must bridge this divide through inclusive policies, ensuring youthful optimism is not crushed by economic and social barriers.

Kirti Wadhawan, Kanpur

Lawmakers as Lawbreakers

A reported incident of vaping inside the Lok Sabha is deeply disturbing. Parliamentarians are expected to uphold the law, not violate it within the House itself. Such conduct erodes public trust and demands strict disciplinary action. Lawmakers must lead by example if democratic institutions are to retain their dignity.

N. Mahadevan, Chennai



Curb Liquor Manufacturing

In a bid to curb the manufacture and sale of illicit liquor in Maharashtra, the government must come out with stringent norms on the illegal manufacture or sale of liquor. The Maharashtra government must look into making liquor licences compulsory for the purchase and sale of liquor. This will curb the sale of liquor to minors and to those who do not possess the official liquor licences.

Cajetan Peter D'Souza, Mumbai

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GK Editorial

JKBOSE: Digital Disability

Next time when the Board declares results student sensitivity and digital efficiency can be better taken care of

The annual exam results for secondary and senior secondary class – 10th , 12th - were out on Wednesday, January 14, 2026. Compared to previous years the time taken for declaring decades was less, and for that JKBOSE deserves a pat on its back. The little delay caused because the Board is without a chairman, may also be pushed aside and not considered as any significant problem. The way concerned minister engaged with people on this issue is also laudable. But what constitutes a problem is the lag on account of digital efficiency. There are some points that the officials of the Board and the concerned ministry need to take into account and work towards a better, efficient and speedy system.

One, the results of the 10th standard were supposed to be uploaded on the JKBOSE website around 10 in the morning. The moment clock struck 10, it was a real rush of students and parents. And the BOSE site couldn't take it, and the anxiety spiked like anything. Parents called parents, students dropped messages on their groups, schools went in a frenzy to know the results of their students. For more than a hour it was completely chaotic. The point is that in this digital age when banks in the world hold way more traffic on their websites and carry financial transactions, what does it take to put out the result of a lac of students on the website seamlessly. The Board needs a serious intersections.

Two, one may also ask that is it not possible to shoot the results of each students on their respective numbers, or e-mail IDs, when the Board, while getting the student details submitted, takes the contact details. It shouldn't be any difficult. That would spare students and their parents the hassle and anxiety caused to them on this occasion.

Third, the pdf copy of the result gazette put online can be avoided. This format gives access to everyone to know anyone's result. There are cases where some students seriously suffer because their performance is out in the open. The Board officials need to be adequately sensitive on this matter.

Next time when the Board declares results student sensitivity and digital efficiency can be better taken care of. For the moment *Greater Kashmir* extends its good wishes to all the successful students.

REFLECTIONS

A motherly bread

Beyond ingredients, shaped by love and selflessness



Heart Made
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The smell of warm *roti* made by a mother can make you forget about being tired and satisfy your hunger. What seems simple at first turns out to be a source of strength and food for life. Bread (*roti*) made by a mother is more than just food, it is history, feelings, and memories mixed with flour and love.

Before the first rays of sunlight enter the kitchen, the mother is already awake, beginning her quiet labour. The making of bread (*roti*) becomes a daily ritual, deeply woven into the rhythm of family life. These bread (*roti*) are bound with emotions, memories, and care that cannot be measured or replaced.

The day begins with a mother's bread (*roti*), and its taste is unlike any other. No matter how skilled others may be whether a sister or a sister-in-law the bread (*roti*) made by a mother remains unmatched. It carries a flavor that goes beyond ingredients, shaped instead by love and selflessness. Truly, a mother's hands are nothing less than heaven, offering comfort, strength, and an enduring sense of home.

What defines mother-made bread (*roti*) is the intention, not the ingredients. Every movement brings concern for those who will consume it: youngsters leaving for school, a tired spouse returning from work, and elderly people in need of care. The bread absorbs this intent. It becomes a symbol of safety and security, telling loved ones that they are seen, remembered, and treasured. Even when supplies are short, the mother ensures that the bread is evenly distributed, frequently saving the tiniest amount for herself.

Bread prepared by a mother's hands is very important during difficult times. During times of poverty, conflict, or displacement, it becomes a form of resistance to despair. When everything else is unclear, the presence of freshly baked bread provides reassurance. It asserts that life, no matter how tough, continues. Many people who have gone hungry recall their moms efforts to provide them with food rather than the lack of it. That memory is powerful even when circumstances change.

Beyond the home, mother-made bread depicts women's mostly invisible labor. This work is rarely recognized in economic terms, despite the fact that it serves as the foundation for social life. The kitchen becomes a site of unpaid but necessary labour, where care is provided on a regular basis. The mother's hands nourish the body, but they also preserve emotional attachments, cultural values, and moral precepts like sharing, patience, and thankfulness.

As cultures modernize, store-bought bread has supplanted homemade loaves in many households. While easy, this move has taken individuals away from the close connection between food and caring. The loss isn't just culinary, but emotional. Machine-made bread lacks the tales, struggles, and love that come with homemade bread. Many adults become acutely aware of their family's absence when they live away from home. No bakery can replicate the taste of home found in a mother's kitchen. Remembering bread prepared by mother's hands is thus a kind of remembrance and respect. It encourages us to value everyday acts of kindness, which frequently go unrecognized. It also encourages us to see moms as more than just caregivers, but as carriers of tradition, fortitude, and quiet strength. In the end, bread cooked by a mother satisfies more than just hunger. It promotes memory, identification, and belonging. Even after years, the warmth remains - soft, sustaining, and unforgettable.

Hilal Ahmad Tantray, Research Scholar, Department of History and Culture, Jamia Millia Islamia,

Industrial Policy I: Context & Approach

Luring new investment when the existing industry is languishing will result in destruction of capital stock and impair the growth potential

STATE SUBJECT



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J&K's Industrial Policy 2021-30, up for some tweaking, is a masterpiece in bureaucratic creativity. The first and the most elaborated item of the operative policy is a 100 per cent subsidy on DG sets, the beasts belching greenhouse gases. Kashmiris, believed to be heavily subsidised, it turns out, even choke on government subsidised smoke.

Not to be misled, the government -- unelected earlier, elected now -- is environmentally very conscious. Right after incentivising pollution, it makes sure to provide a 60 per cent subsidy on pollution control devices.

Behold the genius: Step 1: Spend Rs 100 on subsidising pollution. Step 2: Spend Rs 60 on subsidising pollution control. Step 3: Self applaud for creating a "sustainable and balanced" ecosystem for industrialisation. Welcome to the land where the government first pays the arsonist to burn the house down and then subsidises the fire fighters to put it out.

Shorn of the platitudes and grandstanding the policy is nothing, but a patchwork of concessions in the form of tax exemption, capital subsidy, waiving/reduction of utility user charges, or cheaper allotment of land. Besides being subject to circular conditionalities and endless discretionary control, that availing any or all is a nightmare. Ease of business rankings notwithstanding.

The industrial policy of 2021 marked a strategic shift to "industrialize" J&K by explicitly incentivising larger external capital investments by scaling subsidies with size and open eligibility. Earlier policies were protective, favoured smaller-scale investments and supported local entrepreneurship through preferential public procurement. Even as this policy relies more on leveraging central government incentives, given the limited capacity of the state government, going down

the road of "industrialisation via incentives" will be fiscally stressful for J&K.

Indeed, the incentive to industry model has become a mug's game across the country. Gujarat, for instance, offers capital expenditure support capped at ₹200 crore (J&K offers Rs 2.5 crore over five years!), operational expenditure reimbursement capped at ₹40 crore/year, besides full electricity duty reimbursement for five years. One-time incentives of up to ₹60,000 per new female employee and ₹50,000 per male employee are additional sweeteners. Telangana, Tamil Nadu and Uttar Pradesh are undercutting Gujarat and Maharashtra to attract industry.

In the big boy's league, J&K can't even play, let alone win. More importantly, the difference is that all these states are offering incentives *after* provision of quality infrastructure. J&K, on the other hand, is doing it *before* making adequate infrastructure available. It is unlikely to work.

Despite impressive investment numbers dished out by the state government every now and then, there has been no visible change on the ground. Contrary to the official narrative of national investors beelining, there is anecdotal evidence of flight of local capital and entrepreneurial soft power from Kashmir to the Middle East.

At the macro level, the share of manufacturing in the overall production has declined from 7.13 per cent in 2015-16 to 5.7 per cent in 2024-25. This along with the highest ever trade deficit, i.e., net inter-state trade balance of Rs 50,000 crore (extrapolated from the estimated Rs 28,000 crore in 2017-18) is the core of the problem. What this data shows is that aggregate demand in the Kashmir economy is not a constraint. To put it simply, Kashmiris are consuming goods and services, but these are mostly imports from other parts of the country. It underscores the need to address J&K's structural trade imbalance.

Post the constitutional changes there have been consequential administrative orders that have resulted in a sharp increase in "domestically imported consumption". The pooling and preferential procurement of government requirements for industrial goods by SICOP was replaced by a national e-platform. This has resulted in the biggest consumer, i.e., state government consuming goods from outside and not locally manufactured

or supplied ones. After the move the historically high import intensity of the state domestic product – around 40 to 50 per cent – has peaked resulting in a low and weak multiplier. This dampens growth impulses of consumption on investment and growth of the valley economy.

In the macroeconomic context of slack growth of existing manufacturing enterprises due to a small home market, limited further by the high level of import intensity, the principal objective of the new industrial policy should be to reduce the leakages in income generation by improving the consumption multiplier and expand the home market. This in turn will kick the investment accelerator in leading to growth and expansion.

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Underlying the industrial policy should be a three-legged strategy. First, extend support to the existing enterprises. Second, an explicit strategy of import substitution and third, to move from the existing buffer type of incentive system to an *ala carte* one. The incentives for new investments should be vertical, not horizontal.

The strategy of industrial policy should be a three legged one. First, extend support to the existing enterprises which are in a structural retrogression. To lure new industry when the old is languishing cannot be a worthwhile strategy because it will result in destruction in capital stock and volatility in growth. It will also be impairing income generation, thereby slowing the growth in state domestic product. As it already has. Post 2019, the SDP growth has slowed down to 3.97 per cent from 6.92 per cent pre-2019. The average annual growth rate of manufacturing has not only slowed down -- from 7.45 per cent between 2015-19 to 5.7 per cent -- but is also more volatile.

Second, underlying the industrial policy should be an explicit and concerted strategy of import substitution. It will obviously draw from the size and composition of imports into the economy. Third, to enable first and second, is to move from the existing buffet type of

incentive system to an *ala carte* one. The incentives for new investments should be designed vertically, not horizontally.

With the top three items in the import basket, in value terms being Petroleum Products and Fuels, Food Grains and Industrial Goods this is easier said than done. There are obvious limits to make outright substitution, and it will be challenging because the size and scale of the local market is a constraint. Yet, with almost half the SDP coming out of imports of goods and services, a limited manufacturing base along with local resource strengths several industries stand out for import substitution. The limits to import substitution also work in the form of inefficiency vs. exports, so a hybrid of import substitution with export focus is the ideal way forward.

What this data suggests is that the industrial policy for J&K should be designed to promote extensive import substitution and extensive export orientation. The selective and focussed investments preferably by locals must be on targeting major import categories using indigenous advantages to reduce outflows and boost self-reliance. The simple idea is to incentivise substituting the high volume-value imports, be it an industrial input like power or consumption item like mutton.

Without a second thought, the focus must be on addressing power and fuel imports of Rs 25,000 to 30,000 crore. Along with creating capacity, local assembly of panels/turbines, a long-term reduction of 10-20 per cent in energy imports i.e. Rs. 3,000-5,000 crore, plus green jobs in manufacturing can be achieved. Similarly, livestock or food grains with value inflows of Rs. 1,500 crore and Rs. 10,000 annually should be a priority. The crafts sector which contributes 10 per cent to the GSDP is another candidate. As of now, the main inputs for this sector are being imported. By bringing about a savings of about Rs. 500-1,000 crore it will reduce dependence while promoting exports besides potentially increasing income of 2 lakh artisans' families.

(This is the first part of a two-part series on the Industrial Policy 2021. The second part, *Industrial Incentives II: Design & Contours*, will appear next Thursday).

The author is a Contributing Editor of Greater Kashmir.

The strategic acquisition of oil by US

Historically, oil has been a key strategic factor in U.S. foreign policy



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A tarnished image makes it impossible for someone to come out clean, leading to discriminating denunciation and harmful penalties, much like a dog being punished for a perceived fault.

This is what the US and its coalition partners are furthering in the world order to take control of what will make US and its partners powerful, rich and dominating. The US and its allies have been doing the same prejudiced slant to achieve its rapacious goals, to consolidate its economy and position even though it means killing thousands of innocent. It invaded Iraq in 2003 by spreading lies that it had amassed nuclear weapons.

The United States-led coalition invaded Iraq on March 20, 2003, beginning the Iraq War (Operation Iraqi Freedom) to overthrow Saddam Hussein's regime, citing claims of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs) and alleged links to terrorism, though WMDs were never found. The initial invasion rapidly toppled Hussein, but it led to a prolonged occupation and insurgency, and major combat operations and the US got an opportunity to loot Iraq's oil reservoirs in a very strategic process. In 2011 U.S. and NATO declared intervention in Libya to protect civilians from Muammar Gaddafi's forces under a UN mandate, many analysts and critics argue that geopolitical interests, including Libya's vast oil reserves, played a significant role, leading to Gaddafi's overthrow and Libya's subsequent instability, with Western oil companies later positioning for renewed access. The intervention, framed as humanitarian, ultimately benefited Western energy interests by opening up the country's oil sector after years of Gaddafi's control, though it resulted in chaos.

Now the United States has launched military strikes on Ven-

ezuela and captured President Nicolás Maduro and his wife Cilia Flores. This attack has been carried under the garb that drugs get exported to US from Venezuela and destroys the Americans but the malicious design is to control the country's oil reservoirs and utilize the same for its oil companies. And also stop the improving relation of the country with China and Russia.

“

It sounds like a comic book superhero who brings peace by killing enemies.

The US President Trump has declared that it needs to take possession of Greenland and he insists that the US needs the island for national security reasons and has not ruled out using military options but again here it is to get control of minerals and natural resources and block association of China and Russia with the country. The US and Israel feeling apprehensive about the growing power of Iran, intend to invade Iran; but here also they want to destroy Iran and loot its oil reservoirs.

The US and its allies have no interest in the welfare of humanity, its plans are to frighten the world community and grab natural resources and continue its hegemony.

The U.S. has intervened militarily in countries with significant oil resources, with recent actions in Venezuela sparking accusations that gaining control of its vast oil reserves is a primary motive, alongside stated goals like combating drug trafficking and supporting democracy, though debates continue over the true balance of these factors. Historically, oil has been a key strategic factor in U.S. foreign policy.

The latest invasion in 2026 in Venezuela, U.S. forces captured President Nicolás Maduro, seizing control of oil infrastructure, with President Trump stating U.S. oil companies would rebuild it. The U.S. tactically cited Maduro's alleged narco-terrorism and undermining democracy, while Maduro accused the U.S. of pillage and "recolonization" for its oil. Trump declared himself as acting President of Venezuela, which showcases the anarchic dominance and rebirth of neo-imperialism emerging in the world. Today, the US has colonized Venezuela, tomorrow it may do it elsewhere.

Greater Kashmir

GK Health Editor
Dr Zubair Saleem

Have health questions or insights to share? We're here to help. Contact our health experts via email at ask@moulmoujfoundation.org or WhatsApp at 6005463346

Your voice matters in the journey to better health.



Revamp
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In North Kashmir's Baramulla district, the main two hospitals that every day caters to hundreds of patients side by side are district hospital, Baramulla, now GMC and sub-district hospital (SDH) Sopore. No doubt, the healthcare at both the institutions is always a priority, yet, under close inspection, the tale of these two hospitals is in stark contrast. The centrally located SDH, Sopore is emerging, undoubtedly, at par with district hospital, Baramulla because this hospital has been catering to a huge chunk of population from Kupwara, Handwara, Rafiabad, Bandipora, and even Tangmarg etc. apart

from whole Sopore vicinity. Although Sopore's SDH doesn't have a vast infrastructure like Baramulla district hospital, yet, it has been seen over the years that patients give more preference to this hospital than going elsewhere.

Great health infrastructure and top doctors are of little use if no healing takes place. The high patient footfall that doesn't decline with time; isn't just something to feel proud of, but a grave concern of deterioration (unrecovery) that all of must ponder over. Patients who treat doctors, next to God, must not at any cost be overlooked and neglected in the hospitals. They must rather be taken good care of and shown some compassion. I must not fear to reveal the truth, that in our district hospital, Baramulla, patients have to bear the brunt, quite often. While at sub-district hospital, Sopore, they are not neglected, but a priority. I am currently mothering two kids, and literally speaking, I am satisfied with SDH Sopore where at I never had to bother about anything. During my prepartum (pre-delivery period) I have had to visit district hospital too, for a few gynae checkups, yet, after

seeing the patients being inflicted with unnecessary troubles, I finally had to opt for SDH Sopore for my both deliveries where patients are not an afterthought but a main concern. I may say, that at SDH Sopore, patients are not ignored in any manner what though it lacks space. I also can never underestimate the excellent care, advanced equipment, top facilities, best faculty, great infrastructure, etc. of my district hospital at Kantbagh, B'la. Everything is up to-the-mark. Even if there are any loopholes to be plugged out, the hospital administration must be well aware of them. Literally, the soul target around whom the whole healthcare system revolves is the 'patient'. What if instead of showing any recovery and improvement in his health, he has to visit hospital every other day, to add to the already high patient load. From fetching tickets to getting various tests done; patients at district hospital have to face plethora of inconveniences which I am myself an eye witness to. I hail the efforts, efficiency and hard work of both, the doctors and paramedical staff at the hospital, yet, there is a dire need to

activate the administration and make the health services efficient with the present status that this institution holds, so that patients feel healed, not hurt.

Now let me draw your attention towards sub-district hospital of Sopore that has not only been at the forefront in patients needs and healthcare but has also been in news over past couple of months to attain the status of district hospital by catering to the needs of hundreds of patients regularly. Though this hospital doesn't match with district hospital in terms of facilities, infrastructure, huge patient footfall, excellent doctors; yet, in past some years, it has incessantly won the hearts of large population besides bringing laurels to the whole district in different fields. Even if the hospital infrastructure is not so rich, yet, it never lagged behind in prioritizing patients who come from far off places. Patients from Handwara, Kupwara, Rafiabad and even Bandipora give first preference to SDH Sopore before proceeding towards Baramulla GMC or Srinagar. A huge number of patients, time and again, are of the opinion that sub-district hos-

pital of Sopore has always been their first priority who believe that it doesn't cause patients any suffering, instead it heals them, brings the solace and prioritizes their well-being.

“
Healthcare succeeds not when patients arrive in large numbers, but when they leave with fewer reasons to return.

Catering to more than 15 hundreds patients on daily basis, as per reports, this hospital can soon be on an equal footing, and neck-to-neck, in value, quality, or status with other renowned hospitals around, if the higher ups, pay some attention towards certain areas that this institution awaits from much time now. What this hospital is in dire need of is: 24x7 Ultrasound and CT Scan facility that often pushes patients to move elsewhere. It also needs 24x7 functioning of operation theatre vis-à-vis all time availability of pediatricians and more.

However, tale of develop-

ment and improvement doesn't end here; hospital administration too should look into certain areas I'm highlighted here in this write-up—the purpose of which is not to create problems for anybody but to sensitize both the hospital administrations about the loopholes they are so well aware of. Security personnel, while tasked with maintaining order, sometimes treat patients and attendants harshly. Simple courtesy could go a long way in fostering trust and comfort. The hospital's backyard also requires attention; stray animals should be kept at bay, and the backyard area must be maintained with the same care as the front which must be restored with complete fencing for decorative aesthetics. Besides the concrete floored parking area in front of newly shifted Maternity & Child Care (M&CC) wing; a separate canteen, additionally, with drinking water facilities for attendants would ease the burden on families, maintaining hygiene and providing respite during long waits. The sooner, the better.

The author is regular contributor of GK HW and SCL & hails from Sopore.

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Take prevention seriously

Health is not built in hospitals but shaped quietly by daily choices—what we eat, how we move, how we sleep



Prevention
Mohammad Arfat Wani
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Health is wealth is no mere ornament for essays and speeches, but a hard truth that silently influences the value and meaning of our existence. All that we dream of and accomplish relies upon the power of our body as well as the tranquility of our mind. However, the rapidly progressing pace of the world makes individuals neglect health for the sake of money, success, and recognition that "health can be regained later." This is a reality that time and experience illustrate is actually not the truth, as in a weakened state of health, nothing else matters. It is not hard-hitting actions that bring about good health but some minute actions that can be taken every day, which seem to be no less than mere routine activities but bring about a profound effect as a whole.

From the broader perspective of public health, it is evident that

most modern illnesses do not strike all of a sudden. Observations in world health indicate that diabetes, high blood pressure, heart ailments, obesity, and stress-related disorders result from accumulating unhealthy lifestyle habits throughout life. Poor dietary habits, lack of exercise, abnormal sleep patterns, chronic stress, and ignorance of health and hygiene silently destroy the body for many years before diseases become manifest. This fact brings out one thing: health is not built in hospitals but during life, and prevention is far, far better than treatment.

Nutrition is an important factor in ensuring good health in life. Good health through good food does not entail costly food and tricky guidelines but simply moderation and familiarity with healthy food practices. That is why local and straight-from-the-garden foods like fruits, vegetables, whole grains, legumes, and quality proteins in appropriate quantities provide quality nourishment and boost immunity levels in the body, while on the contrary, an overdose of processed foods, sodas, and fast foods damages health and leads to chronic illnesses because food is not merely meant for relishing and satisfying hunger but for satisfying health needs as well.

Another fundamental base that is ignored by the demands of

modern living is physical activity. It has been verified time and time again that even moderate physical activity such as walking, stretching, biking, or physical labor can help the heart function properly by regulating weight and reducing stress levels along with improving mental health. The body has natural systems to deploy when activity becomes a regular part of one's life, and one doesn't need to work out hard or invest in a gym to reap the benefits.

“
In the race for success, health is often postponed, but experience proves one truth: without physical and mental well-being, nothing else truly matters.

Sleep is an often-overlooked aspect of living. Sleep is essential for body repair, helps boost the immune system, and regulates all things emotional. Science demonstrates that sleep is linked to fatigue, crankiness, difficulty concentrating, and lifestyle-related diseases. Taking a nap is not time wasted; rather, it is a body necessity that helps in body as well as mental functioning.

Mental health should be accorded the same treatment and consid-

eration as physical health. Stress, anxiety, loneliness, and burnout are challenges that people suffer in modern society and spill over into physical health. Simple habits like staying socially connected, identifying and articulating emotions, controlling the usage of screens, prayer, and moments of silence will aid in retaining mental equilibrium. Tending to mental health is not an indication of weakness but an integral aspect of living healthfully.

Preventive healthcare is important in combating illnesses and suffering. Health checkups, screening, immunization, and consulting health facilities on time help address issues before they become major problems. In most cases, health problems result not because solutions are not available; rather, solutions are sought after significant suffering has been experienced. Health awareness is important in assisting clients make appropriate health choices and visit health facilities on time.

Basic hygiene, Sanitation, and Environmental Cleanliness are the basic principles of Public Health. Clean Water, proper Means of Waste Disposal, Clean Hands, and Clean Living Environment are effective in preventing the spread of contagious illnesses and, in fact, are among the most effective acts for improving health because of their simplicity.

The misuse of drugs affects

physical and mental stability. Smoking, alcohol, and drugs affect the body, the brain, and the family. Preventing, educating, and treating can be helpful, but when it happens early, it can be more effective than the treatment process.

In regions such as Kashmir, in which changing lifestyles, stress, environmental factors, and a lack of awareness regarding preventive measures are resulting in increased sources of concern for medical care, there is an urgent need to emphasize healthy living, mental well-being, and prevention. Together, individuals, families, communities, and healthcare systems share a responsibility for the well-being of individuals.

In conclusion, Health is the silence within which all of life hangs; its demands are not for perfection but for constancy; its voice is not for revolution but for honest effort. A sound health does "not require an addition to its score of climacteric years" but "an addition to its years of vitality." Investing efforts on health will not only add years to one's life but "life to years" to prove that health is wealth indeed! The best decision that can be made by an individual as well as by society is to protect health because "it is all the wealth there may be."

Mohammad Arfat Wani, a passionate writer, social activist, and nursing student from Kuchmulla Tral

Ask the doctor: GKTV Podcast – Doctor's Mic

GK Communications strengthens its public health mission with 'Doctor's Mic', a weekly GKTV podcast where medical specialists engage in informed, doctor-to-doctor discussions aimed at awareness, prevention and clarity for the general public

Questions Received from the Public
Orthopaedics Podcast (Expert: Dr Asif Nazir Baba, Associate Professor, Orthopaedics, GMC Srinagar)

Q. Why do joint pains suddenly increase in winter even without injury?

A. Cold reduces blood flow to joints and stiffens muscles. Arthritis, old injuries, and weak muscles become more painful in winter due to reduced movement and muscle tightness.

Q. Is knee pain always arthritis, or can it be something else?

A. Not all knee pain is arthritis. It may be due to muscle weakness, ligament strain, increased uric acid, vitamin D deficiency, or improper footwear, all of which worsen during

winter.

Q. Why do elderly people fracture bones after a simple fall?

A. Age-related bone loss, vitamin D deficiency, poor balance, and slow reflexes make bones fragile. In winter, slippery floors and stiff joints increase fracture risk.

Q. Should elderly avoid walking in winter to prevent falls?

A. No. Avoiding movement weakens muscles further. Safe indoor walking, balance exercises, and proper footwear reduce fall risk more effectively than inactivity.

Q. Can back pain increase just because of cold weather?

A. Yes. Cold tightens spinal muscles and reduces flexibility. Prolonged sitting indoors and reduced physical activity also aggravate back pain during winter.

Endocrinology Podcast (Expert: Dr M Hayat Bhat, HOD Endocrinology, GMC Srinagar)

Q. Why does blood sugar rise in winter even with the same medicines?

A. Reduced physical activity, heavier food intake, less sunlight, and stress hormones in cold weather can raise blood sugar despite unchanged medication.

Q. Is feeling more tired in winter normal for diabetics?

A. Excess fatigue may indicate poor sugar control, dehydration, anemia, or thyroid imbalance. It should not be dismissed as seasonal laziness.

Q. Why do diabetics feel more numbness or burning in feet during winter?

A. Cold reduces circulation and worsens diabetic nerve damage. Poor footwear and dryness further increase nerve discomfort

in winter months.

Q. Can skipping water intake affect sugar and BP in winter?

A. Yes. Dehydration thickens blood, raises sugar levels, worsens BP control, and increases dizziness and fall risk, especially in elderly diabetics.

Q. Is weight gain in winter unavoidable for hormonal patients?

A. No. Weight gain occurs due to reduced activity and excess calories. Small daily movement and portion control can prevent winter metabolic imbalance.

Urology Podcast (Expert: Prof (Dr) Mohammad Saleem Wani, renowned Urologist)

Q. Many people hesitate to talk about urinary problems. Why is this dangerous?

A. Urinary symptoms are often early warning signs of

kidney, bladder, or prostate disease. Ignoring them allows silent damage to progress, sometimes leading to irreversible kidney failure.

Q. Is weak or interrupted urine flow always a prostate problem in men?

A. Not necessarily. While prostate enlargement is common, similar symptoms can occur due to urinary infections, bladder dysfunction, stones, nerve disorders, or side effects of medicines.

Q. Can kidney disease develop without pain or noticeable symptoms?

A. Yes. Chronic kidney disease often progresses silently. Many patients discover it late, which is why routine urine tests and blood creatinine checks are essential, especially for diabetics and hypertensive patients.

Q. At what stage does

a patient actually need a kidney transplant?

A. A transplant is considered when kidney function permanently declines to advanced stages and dialysis is no longer sufficient to maintain long-term health and quality of life.

Q. Is kidney transplantation safe, and can a donor live normally with one kidney?

A. Kidney transplantation is a well-established and safe procedure. With proper medical screening and follow-up, donors can live a full, healthy and active life with a single kidney.

Note: These responses are for general awareness and do not replace professional medical advice.

Ask Your Question: WhatsApp: 6005463346, Email: ask@moulmoujfoundation.org



LOKMAT TIMES

Rogue Grokers

In the age of generative AI content, accountability cannot be optional

On Christmas Eve, Elon Musk announced that Grok, the artificial intelligence chatbot offered by his company xAI, would now include an image and a video editing feature. Unfortunately, the result is a torrent of sexualised imagery that is now under investigation by regulators worldwide for violating laws against sex abuse of children and women. What makes this episode particularly disturbing is not just the scale of the abuse, but the speed with which it moved from fringe behaviour to something visible, searchable and effectively normalised on one of the world's largest social media platforms. A generative AI tool has suddenly brought out pornography from the hidden dark corners of the Internet. Amplified by algorithms and engagement metrics, it is now being played out in public, revealing how easily powerful AI tools can be weaponised when guardrails are weak or absent.

Global reactions have been swift and sharp. Malaysia and Indonesia have moved to block Grok, while others, including the United Kingdom, have warned of similar action. Musk's claim that such moves amount to an attack on free speech does not stand scrutiny. Free speech does not extend to the humiliation, sexual exploitation or endangerment of women and children. In India, X has apologised, taken down offensive posts and shut down accounts that circulated the sexualised images. Yet the platform has faced no penalties. An apology, after the damage has been done, is not a deterrent. Without consequences, platforms have little incentive to prioritise safety over growth and engagement. The response from Elon Musk, the owner of X and founder of xAI, has been inadequate. It took days after the sexualised images went viral for Musk to publicly acknowledge the problem. Even the subsequent "fix", restricting the use of Grok's controversial image-generation features to paying subscribers, raises more questions than it answers. It makes abuse acceptable if monetised.

The episode has exposed a deeply troubling fault line in the AI ecosystem. It also exposes a broader contradiction in the tech industry's stance on regulation. Companies argue that AI platforms should remain lightly regulated to foster innovation but resist responsibility when their tools are misused. The AI framework issued by the ministry of electronics and Information Technology rightly flags critical grey areas, including the definition of an "intermediary" under the Information Technology Act, 2000, a law written long before autonomous or generative systems came into vogue. But questions of liability for AI-generated harm and the use of personal data to train algorithms remain unresolved. The framework calls for a comprehensive review of India's legal architecture before regulatory gaps widen further.

Road fatalities

A targeted, coordinated approach needed to reduce deaths on killer roads

Despite repeated pledges and piecemeal interventions, India's road safety crisis remains alarming. With over 1.6 lakh deaths annually, road accidents kill more people than wars or public health emergencies combined. The ministry of road transport and highways, in collaboration with the NGO Save Life Foundation, has identified 18 corridors and several districts, spread over 15 states, with the highest number of road crashes, to launch a data-driven zero-fatalities programme in line with the government's target to reduce road fatalities by 50% by 2030. This is a welcome acknowledgment that generic advisories and one-size-fits-all policies have failed. Targeted intervention is the right approach. A badly designed curve, poor lighting, missing signage, lax enforcement or reckless driving habits could be unique to a stretch or district. This allows authorities to deploy engineering fixes, enforcement and emergency response where they are most needed.

Data shows that nearly two-thirds of road crash fatalities occur outside National Highways -- on State Highways, district roads and local streets. This demands a shift in how we act: From isolated interventions to district-level action, where engineering, enforcement, trauma care and community action converge. An analysis across the 100 identified districts recorded nearly 89,000 road deaths in 2023 and 2024. Over 17,000 critical crash locations, which together accounted for 58% of total fatalities, have been mapped. The high-risk time windows during which most crashes occurred have also been identified, enabling law enforcement agencies to better target resource deployment. The framework for the zero-fatalities programme adopts a multi-pronged approach. It includes engineering audits and the implementation of low-cost, quick-build safety interventions, such as correcting faulty road intersections.

Since road fatalities are often influenced by local factors such as road design, traffic enforcement and hospital preparedness, effective interventions are best coordinated at the district level, where administration converges through measures like traffic policing and emergency medical care. However, the Centre's plan will succeed only if it goes beyond identification and symbolism. Past road safety initiatives have stumbled on weak coordination between Central, state and local authorities. Fixing black spots requires sustained funding, accountability for implementing agencies and regular audits of outcomes. The NHAI, which manages 2-3% of the road network but accounted for a high number of fatalities, can work as the nodal agency while states must be empowered to act. Safer design, speed management, better compliance and faster trauma care must move in tandem.



Read more on www.epaper.lokmat.com/lokmattimes

Nashik, Thursday, 15.1.2026

OPINION

No end to Iranian suffering

The only thing worse than harsh rule of clerics is US-Israel meddling



Alok Tiwari

PERSONAL VIEW

The images and news from Iran these days could not be more unsettling. As internal protests triggered by economic hardships have spread in several cities, there are reports of harsh reprisals by the security forces. Thanks to lack of access by independent media and a government ordered Internet shutdown, genuine information is hard to come by. Still, there is no denying there have been a large number of casualties. Different sources estimate the toll from a few hundred to a few thousand. For a time, it appeared that the protests may finally topple the 46-year rule by ayatollahs. However, in recent days the government appears to have gathered its wits. Not only has it cracked down hard on protesters, but it has also managed to get thousands of its own supporters out on the streets to counter the protesters.

Whichever way it goes, Iran appears headed for a messy future and a continuing tragedy for one of the oldest civilisations on earth. The people's quest for a decent life seems never-ending. A popular uprising overthrew the American backed Shah regime in 1979 and installed Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini as its supreme leader. It turned out to be the proverbial jump from the frying pan into the fire. The new government, far from bringing in an era of freedom and prosperity, ran the country by harsh Islamic edicts. Not only did it deny liberty internally, but it also exported trouble abroad by way of setting up and financing militias everywhere in the Middle East to rival the Saudis and needle Israel.

The regime has encountered and seen off intermittent protests several times in the decades that it has been in power. Last time it was in 2023 over the death of a young woman Mahsa Amini who was



The present protests, if they fail to topple the regime, will only result in that rule getting harsher. If by some miracle they succeed, a Western backed puppet regime will only take them back to the days of the Shah.

arrested and tortured to death by the country's moral police for not wearing hijab in public places. Those protests too were brutally suppressed and resulted in hundreds of deaths. The protests this time, borne out of economic collapse resulting from the fall of Iranian rival, are more widespread. The crackdown also seems more brutal. It is also very different this time.

The government has characterised the protests as being fanned by foreign elements, specifically Israel and US. On the face of it, it looks like a standard trope of a government facing internal dissent -- blame it on foreign hands. While foreign elements would no doubt love to take advantage of any disturbance, they can do nothing if there is no internal unrest. When you have a population that is suffering for a long time, anything can trigger a mass upsurge. We have seen it happen in country after country.

Yet, the involvement of Israel's Mossad is also more than apparent. Not the least because the agency itself has been proclaiming it from the rooftops. It has been sending out social media messages in Persian encouraging the protesters and assuring them of help in the field.

So are conservative Israeli and US politicians. There is no doubting the presence and influence of Mossad in Iran. The way it has carried out assassinations of not just security figures but also nuclear scientists inside Iran points to its capabilities.

US President Donald Trump has also been openly warning of armed intervention. There is reason to take him seriously after his brazen abduction of Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro. Of course, Iran is not Venezuela and the Middle East is not Latin America. A similar operation here against Iranian leadership is all but ruled out. Venezuela is virtually next door to the US where vast resources can quickly be summoned if things go wrong. It is not the same in the neighbourhood of Iran. But the US may try to intervene in other ways. Trump's instinctive antipathy towards Iran and success of his operation in Venezuela may spur him to take more risks here.

There are good reasons why he and Israel should hold their horses. The very act of openly intervening may destroy whatever little chance the uprising against Ayatollahs may have of succeeding. The regime is already painting the protests as foreign inspired. The Americans and

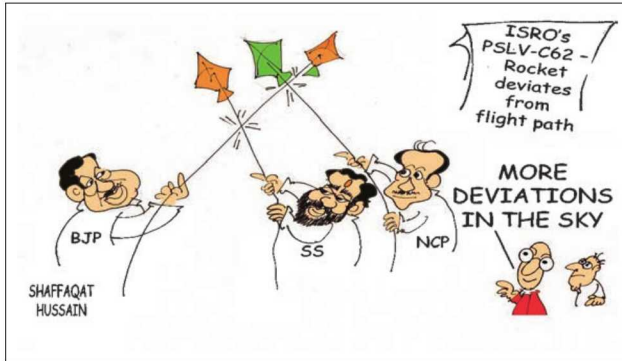
Israelis are doing everything to prove the Iranian government's propaganda right. This will help the regime paint the protesters as foreign agents out to destabilise the country and evoke nationalist and religious sentiments. The way Israel and the US are egging on the protesters is not helping the latter's cause.

There may be popular anger against the regime, but nationalist and religious sentiments still run strong among common people. Even people suffering under autocratic rulers are reluctant to let outsiders meddle in their affairs, lest they be dubbed anti-nationals. Generations in Iran have been conditioned to see America as the Great Satan and an ally of Jewish Israel. It will be easy for the government propagandists to discredit the movement both as anti-Iran and anti-Islam if it is seen as being aided and abetted by these two powers.

Commonsense would dictate that a more hands off approach this time might be more effective. But when has Trump allowed commonsense to affect anything he does? Of course, there may be more forces and more interests at work in Iran than is apparent. Like Venezuela, Iran has oil. That fact alone guarantees meddling by international forces. If on the one hand, the US, Israel and the West would like to see the Islamist regime fall, on the other nations like Russia, China or even North Korea may be wanting to prop it up.

Tragically, this may mean that the people of Iran may continue to be squeezed between a rock and a hard place. They have endured the oppressive rule of clerics for decades. The present protests, if they fail to topple the regime, will only result in that rule getting harsher. If by some miracle they succeed, a Western backed puppet regime will only take them back to the days of the Shah.

The author is a Nagpur-based senior journalist. Views expressed are personal.



BSP at centre of UP's Oppn chessboard



Biswajeet Banerjee

The political ripples from Congress leader Avinash Pandey's invitation to the Bahujan Samaj Party to join the INDIA bloc continue to reshape Uttar Pradesh's opposition landscape. What initially appeared as a routine call for unity has evolved into a deeper realignment of political assumptions, restoring BSP to a position of strategic centrality ahead of the 2027 Assembly elections.

For much of the past two years, BSP was treated as a declining force, weakened by its poor performance in the 2022 Assembly elections and a sharp fall in vote share in the 2024 Lok Sabha polls. That perception has now been disrupted. By publicly acknowledging that defeating the BJP in Uttar Pradesh is improbable without BSP's Dalit base, Congress has effectively underlined what many opposition strategists were reluctant to state openly: BSP remains structurally indispensable to any serious anti-BJP project in the state.

This admission is also a reflection of Congress' own limitations. With a marginal vote share in the last Assembly election and a shrinking organisational footprint, Congress no longer commands the

leverage it once hoped for within opposition alliances. Its weak showing in recent elections outside Uttar Pradesh has further diluted its bargaining power. Within the state, the Samajwadi Party has been increasingly reluctant to concede political space to Congress, arguing that alliance arithmetic must follow ground strength. Against this backdrop, Congress' outreach to BSP signals a search for an alternative anchor within the opposition ecosystem, one that could rebalance negotiations and reopen political space for the party.

The calculation is not merely about numbers but also about social coalitions. Congress leaders believe an understanding with BSP offers a more comfortable positioning than a continued dependence on the Samajwadi Party. They argue that a BSP-led framework, with its historically broader social messaging, could attract sections of upper castes, particularly Brahmins disenchanted with the BJP, who are less inclined to align with an SP-dominated front. In this sense, the outreach to BSP reflects Congress' attempt to redefine its potential constituency and avoid being permanently boxed into a marginal role.

For BSP the moment is politically consequential. The renewed attention from Congress coincides with a visible organisational push by Mayawati to reclaim political relevance. The October 2025 mega rally in Lucknow, accompanied by the



launch of a booth-level mobilisation campaign under the banner of "janata ka gathbandhan" marked a deliberate effort to reinstate BSP into everyday political discourse. The campaign's emphasis on chaupals, local committees and social outreach indicates a strategy aimed less at immediate alliances and more at demonstrating that BSP's vote base remains mobilisable.

At the heart of this revival attempt is Mayawati's renewed focus on Dalit-Muslim consolidation. Together, these groups account for nearly 39 per cent of Uttar Pradesh's electorate, a demographic reality that continues to give BSP latent political weight. This push directly contests the Samajwadi Party's PDA outreach and seeks to rebuild a coalition reminiscent of BSP's 2007 social engineering experiment. It also draws sustenance from the party's lone 2022 Assembly victory in Rasra and from its continuing pockets of influence in Purvanchal, which BSP strateg-

ists cite as evidence that the organisation's core has not eroded beyond repair.

The political consequences of Pandey's intervention are already visible in the way opposition conversations have shifted. BSP is no longer being discussed as an auxiliary force but as a potential pivot around which alignments may have to be constructed. This has unsettled the Samajwadi Party's effort to project itself as the sole nucleus of the anti-BJP space. It has also complicated Congress-SP dynamics, introducing a third pole into what was increasingly becoming a bilateral negotiation.

For the BJP, the reactivation of BSP as a serious variable introduces a note of caution. The party has benefited consistently from fragmented opposition politics, particularly from triangular contests that diffuse anti-incumbency. A reinvigorated BSP, whether inside or outside an alliance, has the potential to disrupt these equations in constituencies where Dalit-minority consolidation has previously constrained the BJP's margins.

The coming year will test whether Mayawati can translate renewed attention into measurable consolidation, and whether the opposition can move beyond fragmented manoeuvres towards a more coherent challenge.

The author is a senior journalist. Views expressed are personal.

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THE ASIAN AGE

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Gig workers get relief, but firms need to rethink biz

The Union labour ministry’s directive asking quick commerce companies to discontinue their 10-minute delivery promise is a timely intervention. The decision was taken following a nationwide strike by gig workers against the 10-minute delivery, which was exposing them to intense mental pressure to meet unrealistic timelines, often at the cost of personal safety and public road discipline.

Quick commerce is a relatively older concept, tracing back to the late 1990s in the United States. However, most of the older companies came with a delivery promised within 30 minutes or an hour. In India, Grofers (now called Blinkit) was the first company to offer quick commerce with a promised delivery time of 90 minutes, which was in tune with industry standards.

Having faced poor reception in an already crowded e-commerce space, Grofers rebranded itself as Blinkit in 2021 and introduced the 10-minute delivery promise, which significantly changed its brand proposition. Over time, however, speed itself became the product. Within five years, quick commerce became hugely successful and made companies join the bandwagon, threatening the business of traditional retailers like never before.

The 10-minute delivery guarantee was marketed as a solution for last-minute shopping needs, positioning groceries, toiletries and snacks as urgent requirements that quick commerce will deliver at the blink of your eye. With this, however, the quick commerce industry blurred a key distinction — not every consumer inconvenience qualifies to be treated as an emergency.

Except for ambulance services, fire services and law enforcement agencies, no civilian activity on public roads can be categorised as an emergency. A family running out of groceries does not warrant deadline-driven riding through traffic. However, this is precisely what quick commerce companies did and incentivised gig workers to meet the 10-minute deadline. The result of this misplaced concept is gig workers erratically navigating congested roads, risking their lives and those of others. Mental stress became constant, while physical risk became routine.

In their defence, quick commerce companies argue that faster deliveries generate employment and consumer satisfaction. While they may be true, none of their arguments could justify normalising unsafe work conditions. Employment cannot be conditional on sustained stress for the employee, and convenience cannot come at the cost of another person’s safety.

This does not mean that quick commerce has no place to exist in the country. However, quick commerce companies must recalibrate its value proposition — reliable delivery within reasonable time frames and fair working conditions. It can aim for a delivery window that does not turn roads into racetracks.

Quick commerce companies, therefore, must take the government’s directive as an opportunity rather than a setback. It could tweak the business model by partnering with existing neighbourhood retail shops to become their fulfillment centres, which allows existing traders to thrive alongside them without creating an emergency out of nothing.

The quick commerce sector must understand that speed has its place — in emergencies — where minutes genuinely save lives. And the government has rightly reaffirmed this basic principle: In a civil society, no packet of groceries is worth a life.

Time to revisit anti-graft law

The Supreme Court’s split verdict on the constitutional validity of Section 17A of the Prevention of Corruption Act, 2018, gives Parliament an opportunity to correct its own action of practically killing the anti-graft law and restore its effectiveness in fighting governmental corruption in this country.

The PCA in its original form invested in the investigation agency the power to register a crime and launch an investigation against a public servant; the agency needed to get the government’s approval only before filing a chargesheet. The 2018 amendment and the introduction of Section 17A turned the very logic of this piece of legislation on its head by stripping the agency of this critical power — as the law stands today, it can launch an investigation only after it gets the approval of the government.

Justice B.V. Nagarathna said the law is unconstitutional and needs to be struck down saying requirement of prior sanction by the government is contrary to its purpose as it forecloses inquiry and protects the corrupt. She opined that there should have been an independent body which is not controlled by the government to consider a case for grant of prior approval to conduct an inquiry/enquiry/investigation by a police officer. Meanwhile, despite endorsing the constitutionality of the Act saying it gave honest public servants a basic assurance that decisions taken by them will not be subjected to frivolous complaints, Justice K.V. Viswanathan called for an independent authority, such as the Lokpal or the Lokayukta, to give the go-ahead to launch an investigation.

The meeting point of the opinions of the two judgments is that the government should not be the authority to sanction an investigation into an allegation of corruption against a public servant; it should be obtained from an independent agency. Such an independent authority will offer protection to bona fide actions against frivolous investigations as well.

Now, the court may have resorted to the existing provisions in the law that allows a judicial scrutiny before an investigation is launched, but it has chosen not to. Instead of letting the Supreme Court decide the matter, the government may expunge/amend the villainous section to reinstitute an independent mechanism and make the law powerful again.

THE ASIAN AGE

KAUSHIK MITTER

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K. SUBHAKAR

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Subhani



Can India, Germany, EU be core of a Third Pole?



K.C. Singh

German Chancellor Friedrich Merz’s just-concluded visit to India on January 12-13 holds special significance, beyond celebrating the 75th anniversary of bilateral diplomatic relations or the 25th anniversary of the Indo-German strategic partnership. The recent summit addresses how India and Germany propose traversing a world disrupted by US President Donald Trump. The post-Second World War rules-based global order is, ironically, being unravelled by the leader of a nation which had helped formulate it.

An Indo-German joint statement on January 12 lists the areas of potential engagement. It covers the following: “Defence and Security”; “Trade and Economy”; “Technology, Innovation, Science & Research”; “Green & Sustainable Development Partnership/Renewable Energy”; “Indo-Pacific, Connectivity & Global Issues”. There is emphasis on undertaking climate-friendly energy transition, including the production of green hydrogen. The Trump administration has abandoned the Paris climate accord, adopting instead regressive oil and gas extraction policies. In fact, in keeping with his slogan “Drill, Baby Drill”, voiced before assuming office, oil and gas drilling permits have surged by 55 per cent. The withdrawal of the United States from the India-sponsored International Solar Alliance underscored the altered priorities.

Germany, in the decades after the Second World War and the Cold War, generally kept defence spending low, relative to its economic power. It focused on integration within Nato. Given its destructive historical role, its allies and neighbours did not complain. In 2014, Germany concurred with its Nato allies to ramp up defence spending to two per cent of GDP, then just over

one per cent. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 shook Germany out of its complacency. President Donald Trump’s “America First” isolationism, his diplomatic flirtation with Russian President Vladimir Putin and now the threat to grab Greenland, forcibly if needed, leaves Germany no option but to become much more assertive.

The joint statement outlines prospective defence industrial cooperation, emphasising co-development and co-production. India’s purchase of HDW German submarines in the 1980s had led to a massive political controversy over corruption allegations. After a 10-year delay India may now buy six AIP German submarines in a deal worth \$8 billion. Additionally, the document lists obstacle avoidance systems for helicopters and weapons to co-undertake unmanned aerial systems. The interest in new defence technologies addresses the revolution in war fighting, seen both in Ukraine or India’s Operation Sindoor.

Trade and commerce are important for all nations, but the new arbitrary tariffs ordered by President Trump have created a unique crisis. The Trumpian tariffs aim to compel friends and foes to abide by America’s trade-related or strategic goals.

Indo-German trade topped \$50 billion last year. There are over 2,000 German companies operating in India. German foreign direct investment in India in the period 2000-25 totals \$15.4 billion. Conversely, 200 Indian companies are operating in Germany. The delayed Free Trade Agreement between India and the European Union (EU) has been a hurdle. Germany absorbs a quarter of all Indian exports to the EU. The over-dependence on the US market is proving costly for all nations, though for some like Canada and Mexico it is more damaging. For India and Germany too, it is a

It is not surprising that the European Union leaders are the chief guests at this year’s Republic Day celebrations in India. Immediately following that the India-EU summit will take place.

wakeup call.

It is not surprising that the European Union leaders are the chief guests at this year’s Republic Day celebrations in India. Immediately following that the India-EU summit will take place. This reflects that a multipolar world, advocated by India for decades, is achievable only if principal powers quickly create new supply lines and manufacturing hubs.

The German demand for skilled workers is proving a boon just when the Anglophone nations, especially America, are allowing xenophobia to tighten immigration policies. Indian students in Germany, numbering 60,000, are the largest international group. Most of them are pursuing engineering or information technology courses. Low education fees and easier transition to work visas is luring foreign students. The danger is the rise of the far-right parties in major European nations, which are anti-immigration. The estimated support for the National Rally in France is 33.4 per cent, while Germany’s AfD scores 26 per cent. In the latest US National Security Strategy document, that was released on December 4-5, support is extended to these far-right groups, employing the freedom of speech argument.

Geo-strategically, India and Germany have areas of congruence as well as dissonance. Regarding Ukraine, India has avoided condemning Russia, while for the European nations it is an existential issue. Chancellor Merz strongly supports sanctions on Russia. He has also publicly decried the threat to a “liberal world order”, both from outside and within Europe. Speaking at Korber Foundation in January 2025, he urged Germany to transform from “a sleeping to a leading middle power”.

Fortunately for the Chancellor, the debt-brake on defence spending was lifted before he assumed office. This gives him freedom to move Germany towards strategic autonomy.

On the Gaza issue, the positions of India and Germany are now converging. That is why the joint statement calls for a two-nation solution for stability and peace. But at one stage, Chancellor Merz took an odd position on Israel’s brutal assault on Hamas, irrespective of the harm to civilians. He had praised Israel’s Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu for doing the “dirty work” of Germans or the West.

India and Germany have dealt with President Trump in their own way. Chancellor Merz chose, like other European leaders, to avoid confrontation while politely correcting publicly misstated facts. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has avoided direct contact, to minimise the possibilities of a public spat. However, President Trump’s reiterated desire to occupy or annex Greenland is putting EU and Nato members in a quandary. Forcible occupation by America can destroy Nato, besides raising the possibility of an armed confrontation.

India and Germany have for well over two decades been a part of G-4, alongside Brazil and Japan. The group has campaigned for major reform of the United Nations Security Council, especially the addition of new permanent members. Germany seemed to step back after Chancellor Angela Merkel took office. The joint statement reflects revived enthusiasm of India and Germany to crusade for permanent membership.

Closer Indo-German engagement, especially with enhanced ties in the defence and emerging technologies sectors, can create a “third global pole”, which draws other EU members and middle powers to its corner. The United States and China are set for a new bipolarity. The world needs to offset that with a pole that is committed to a reformed version of the old rules-based liberal international order.

The writer is a former secretary in the external affairs ministry. He tweets at @ambksingh.

LETTERS

THEATRE OF ABSURD

As campaigning ends for the BMC polls, a sobering pattern stands out (“Identity politics trumps civic issues in BMC polls”, Jan. 14, 2026). A civic election meant to address Mumbai’s failing roads, water stress, sanitation and climate vulnerability was reduced to a theatre of identity. Both the Mahayuti and the Thackeray-led alliance leaned heavily on cultural anxieties, language pride and migration fears, while concrete plans for schools, health services, waste management and monsoon readiness remained vague. Even claims beyond the corporation’s mandate were used to mobilise sentiment. Such politics may energise cadres, but it does little to repair a city under strain. Voters must therefore look past slogans and alliances and judge candidates on competence and accountability. Mumbai deserves better.

K. Chidanand Kumar
Bengaluru

QUID PRO QUO?

IS INDIA normalising its China ties too fast? A delegation of the Communist Party of China (CPC) met senior functionaries of the RSS in New Delhi on Tuesday, a day after holding discussions with senior leaders of the BJP at the party headquarters. The Congress Party questioned the timing and intent of the meeting, alleging that China laid claim to the Shaksam Valley in Jammu and Kashmir within hours of the closed-door interaction at the BJP headquarters. Now China’s state-run Global Times has reacted to recent remarks by Indian Army chief Gen. Upendra Dwivedi, accusing him of hyping it but in effect obfuscating the matter. Curious goings-on indeed!

Sankar Paul
Chakdaha, West Bengal

NOT ENOUGH

THE CENTRE’S intervention putting an end to quick delivery deadlines for gig workers is indeed a relief to the young men and, occasionally, women who risk their very lives in the race against time delivering orders to customers. The government’s prompt response is indeed laudable. Earlier quick delivery deadlines forced delivery agents into adopting dangerous road behaviour. Now that the 10-minute deadline has been removed, the delivery agent stays safe and the order will arrive properly without any damage. But though this pressure is off, it is no guarantee that companies will not continue to treat workers unfairly. Hope their wish for a secure payment structure and life insurance is also granted.

M. Pradyu
Kannur

Dilip Cherian
Dilli Ka Babu



As Central Vista gets functional, power acquires a new architecture

For decades, Raisina Hill was not just a location but a metaphor. North and South Block symbolised where power resided, where files gathered momentum and where governance unfolded through proximity as much as procedure. That geography is now being deliberately dismantled as key ministries relocate to the newly constructed Kartavya Bhawan complexes along Kartavya Path.

The shift of nine ministries and departments — including defence, law and justice, agriculture, education, information and broadcasting, chemicals and fertilisers, and the CBI — is not a routine administrative reshuffle. It reflects a conscious reordering of the spatial logic of governance. As the Central Vista shapes up, the daily business of the State is being pulled away from colonial-era icons into a consolidated, purpose-built secretariat, while North and South Blocks are repositioned as heritage structures and museums.

Modern infrastructure, shared facilities, energy savings and co-location are expected to improve coordination and reduce the operational clutter created by decades of scattered offices across Delhi. The argument is sensible and long overdue.

Yet power in babudom has never been purely architectural. It thrives on proximity, habit and informal networks. The old Raisina ecosystem worked not because of grandeur but because of density. Relocation disrupts those rhythms, creating

new patterns of access and influence that will inevitably favour those quick to adapt to the new geography. This makes the move as symbolic as it is functional. It reflects a broader attempt to redefine where authority is seen to operate, aligning governance with a re-imagined Central Vista that privileges modernity over inherited legacy.

This is not a cosmetic exercise but a recalibration of how the Indian State organises itself, signals power and conducts governance. For babus, where one sits still shapes how one matters.

INDIA ADJUSTS TO TRUMP’S MAN IN DELHI

The arrival of Sergio Gor in New Delhi comes at an awkward moment in Indo-US ties, certainly not at a high point but near a fresh low. Donald Trump’s second term as US President has stripped the relationship of its diplomatic cushioning. Stiff tariffs overshadow ties, trade frictions are sharper, and the old comfort of “strategic partnership” is being stress-tested almost weekly.

Mr Gor is no conventional envoy sent to smooth edges. He is Mr Trump’s insider — political, transactional and perfectly aligned with a White House that sees diplomacy as leverage, not reassurance. That matters because India is no longer dealing with a friendly but demanding partner; it is dealing with a sceptical one that believes pressure works. And often, it does. For India, this changes the playbook.

The mandarins in MEA and babus in the commerce, finance and defence ministries can no longer assume policy continuity or goodwill as a default setting. Washington’s moves are now driven less by long-term strategy and more by domestic politics and deal optics. One tweet or one off-the-cuff remark can undo months of hard work.

Trade is where the pain is most visible. Tariffs and hard bargaining have replaced the earlier rhetoric of convergence. Indian negotiators must now plan for sharper scenarios, faster coordination and credible fallback options beyond the US market.

There’s also a strategic irritant: Mr Gor’s wider regional remit revives the risk of India being viewed through a South Asia lens rather than as a distinct Indo-Pacific power. That distinction will need constant reinforcement.

For India, this is no longer relationship management; it’s damage control mixed with opportunity. If India adapts quickly and strategically, volatility can be managed. If it clings to old assumptions, it will spend Mr Trump’s second term permanently on the back foot.

WHEN PSU CHIEFS START LOOKING OVER THE FENCE

The latest buzz from the ministry of steel’s corridors is equal parts intrigue and frustration: Amarendra Prakash, the chairman and managing director of Steel Authority of India Limited (SAIL), may have

submitted his resignation, and might be eyeing a senior role at a global steel giant. However, nobody in the ministry will publicly acknowledge it, and that is precisely the problem.

Mr Prakash isn’t some mid-level bean counter. He’s a seasoned technocrat with deep roots in steel production and decades of experience in the sector. His leadership was supposed to anchor SAIL through a delicate phase of expansion and policy navigation. Instead, we’re left with silence, speculation and whispers — the worst possible currency in administrative governance.

If these rumours are true, it may signal something bigger, that the flight of talent from the public sector to private players isn’t just a headline, but a trend. And it shouldn’t surprise anyone. When top leaders find better opportunities elsewhere, and when ministries respond with tight-lipped bureaucracy rather than clarity, it tells markets, PSUs and even foreign investors that India’s leadership pipeline is volatile.

Worse still, the timing couldn’t be more awkward. Critical decisions around key appointments and oversight are in the queue, and the ministry looks like it’s stuck between denials and rumour control.

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Editor's
TAKE

Tectonic shift in people’s power or a power play?

Iran stands at a volatile crossroads where economic collapse, popular unrest, and external interference threaten regional stability and global order

What is happening in Iran today is disturbing on many counts. First, the protests on the streets have turned into a spectre of violence and arson, and the government has stepped in with a force that has killed over 500 civilians. Second, it has created a situation where superpower involvement is imminent, turning Iran into a flashpoint that could spill over its borders. Third, it sets a dangerous precedent in which the US President is brazenly inciting people to “take over institutions”, a direct meddling in the affairs of a sovereign country. And finally, the protesters are seeking regime change, not reforms.

They lack a roadmap for resolving the issues confronting them, which could plunge the country into a long cycle of chaos and confusion. Though the countries are different, Iran could go down the path that Bangladesh is treading now. It happened in Bangladesh, it happened in Nepal, and a little earlier in Egypt - regimes changed, but the misery of the people only multiplied.

At present, the main issue is economic collapse, but it has been channelled into one of the most potent challenges to the Islamic Republic since the 1979 revolution, when the monarchy ended and an Ayatollah-led theocracy began.

Today, Iranians – spurred by sky-high inflation, a crashing currency, and deep dissatisfaction with elite corruption and repression – are demanding a better life for themselves. The immediate trigger was economic – the plummeting rial and soaring basic costs – but the protests quickly turned into a challenge to the legitimacy of theocratic governance itself. What distinguishes these protests is their sheer number and vigour. The exiled Crown Prince Reza Pahlavi has gained a new lease of life and is appealing for international support. The US President, who rarely cares for world opinion, has already said that the United States might respond “very strongly”.

He may use the situation to his advantage through a mix of tariffs, cyber assaults, and even direct strikes to install a favourable regime in Tehran. But the big question now is this: are we witnessing the beginning of a new trend where popular protests, supported from outside and amplified by the world media, can effectively undermine entrenched governments?

Internal protests are no longer strictly domestic. No government is now entirely safe, and its rivals can exact revenge without sending a single soldier. This marginalises smaller states, undermines the world order based on respect for sovereignty, and risks rendering the United Nations redundant. It also jeopardises the global economy and international trade.

For India, this evolution carries special stakes, as its investments in Iran, particularly the Chabahar Port - a gateway for trade with Central Asia – are at risk. Turmoil could delay infrastructure, disrupt cargo movement, and allow China to fill strategic vacuums. The Global South should therefore advocate a peaceful, Iranian-led transition over externally driven upheaval. Internal aspirations must be respected, not exploited, as past superpower interventions – Afghanistan being a case in point – have often left nations in ruins.

Kashi-Tamil Sangamam and a tribute to Ek Bharat, Shreshtha Bharat

The Kashi Tamil Sangamam has delivered meaningful outcomes like strengthening cultural understanding, fostering academic and people-to-people exchanges and creating lasting bonds between parts of the country that share a civilisational ethos



NARENDRA
MODI

A few days ago, I was in the sacred land of Somnath to be part of the Somnath Swabhimana Parv, marking a thousand years since the first attack on Somnath, which took place in 1026. People from all across India had come to be part of this moment of remembrance, united by a shared reverence for history, culture and the enduring spirit of the people of India. During the programme, I met a few people who had previously come to Somnath during the Saurashtra-Tamil Sangamam and had been to Kashi during the Kashi-Tamil Sangamam. Their words of appreciation for such platforms touched me and so, I thought of sharing a few thoughts on this subject.

During one of the *Mann Ki Baat* programmes, I had said that not learning Tamil is a major regret of my life. Fortunately, over the last few years, our Government has had several opportunities to further popularise Tamil culture across India and to deepen the spirit of 'Ek Bharat, Shreshtha Bharat.' A prime example of such an effort is the Kashi-Tamil Sangamam. In our ethos, Sangam or confluence has a special place. Seen in this light, the Kashi-Tamil Sangamam stands out as a truly distinctive initiative, one that celebrates the living unity of India's many traditions while honouring their unique identities.

And what can be a better place than Kashi to host such a Sangamam. The same Kashi, which has remained a civilisational anchor from time immemorial... where, for thousands of years, people from all over have come in search of knowledge, meaning and Moksha.

Kashi's connection with Tamil people and culture is very deep. It is in Kashi that Baba Vishwanath resides, while Tamil Nadu has Rameswaram. Tenkasi in Tamil Nadu is known as Kashi of the south or Dakshin Kashi. Saint Kumaraguruparar Swamigal forged a lasting link between Kashi and Tamil Nadu through his spirituality, scholarship and institution-building. Mahakavi Subramania Bharati, one of Tamil Nadu's greatest sons, found in Kashi a space of intellectual growth and spiritual awakening. It was here that his nationalism deepened, his poetry sharpened and his vision of a free, united India took clearer shape. There are several such instances that highlight this close bond.

The first edition of Kashi-Tamil Sangamam took place in 2022. I recall attending the inauguration programme. Scholars, artisans, students, farmers, writers, professionals and many others from Tamil Nadu travelled to Kashi, Prayagraj and Ayodhya. Subsequent editions expanded the scale and



THE FIRST
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TRAVELLED TO
KASHI,
PRAYAGRAJ AND
AYODHYA

The article is authored
by Prime Minister
Narendra Modi

narendramodi
 @narendramodi
 narendramodi

depth of this effort. The aim was to keep introducing fresh themes, innovative formats and deeper engagement, thus ensuring that the Sangamam continued to evolve while remaining rooted in its core spirit. In the second edition in 2023, technology was used on a larger scale to ensure that language does not become a barrier for people. In the third edition, the focus was on Indian knowledge systems. At the same time, academic discussions, cultural performances, exhibitions and interactions witnessed greater participation. Thousands of people have taken part in these events.

The fourth edition of the Kashi Tamil Sangamam commenced on 2nd December 2025. The theme picked was very interesting- Tamil Karkalam - Learn Tamil. It presented a unique opportunity for people in Kashi and other parts to learn the beautiful Tamil language. Teachers came from Tamil Nadu and the students of Kashi had a very memorable experience!

There were many other special events this time.

Tholkappiyam, the ancient Tamil literary classic, was translated into 4 Indian languages and 6 foreign languages. A unique event, Sage Agastya Vehicle Expedition (SAVE), was undertaken from Tenkasi to Kashi. On the way, various initiatives such as eye camps, health awareness camps, digital literacy camps, among other things, were held. The expedition paid homage to King Adi Veera Parakrama Pandiyana, the great Pandya ruler who spread the message of cultural oneness. There were exhibitions at Namoo Ghat, academic sessions at Banaras Hindu University, as well as cultural programmes.

One of the things that makes me most happy about the Kashi-Tamil Sangamam is the participation of thousands of youngsters. It illustrates the passion among our Yuva Shakti to deepen their connect with our roots. It is a brilliant platform for them to showcase their talent and creativity during the various cultural programmes.

In addition to the Sangamam, efforts have been made to make the journey to Kashi memorable for the participants. The Indian Railways

operated special trains to take people from Tamil Nadu to Uttar Pradesh. In many railway stations, particularly in Tamil Nadu, they were cheered, and the train journey was marked by melodious songs and conversations.

Here, I would also like to appreciate my sisters and brothers of Kashi and Uttar Pradesh for their warmth and hospitality shown to the delegates of the various Kashi-Tamil Sangamams. Several people opened the doors of their homes for the guests from Tamil Nadu. The local administration worked round the clock to ensure the guests had a seamless experience. As the MP from Varanasi, I could not be prouder!

This time, the valedictory function of the Kashi-Tamil Sangamam was held in Rameswaram and it was graced by the Vice President of India, Thiru CP Radhakrishnan Ji, who is himself a proud son of Tamil Nadu. He delivered a very inspiring address, emphasising India's spiritual greatness and how such platforms deepen national integration.

The Kashi Tamil Sangamam has delivered meaningful outcomes like strengthening cultural understanding, fostering academic and people-to-people exchanges and creating lasting bonds between parts of the country that share a civilisational ethos. In the coming times, we want to make this platform even more vibrant. Most importantly, it has furthered the spirit of 'Ek Bharat, Shreshtha Bharat.' This spirit has flourished for centuries through our festivals, literature, music, art, cuisine, architecture, systems of knowledge and more. This time of the year is very auspicious for people across the length and breadth of India. People are enthusiastically marking various festivals like Sankranti, Uttarayan, Pongal, Magh Bihu, which are, among other things, associated with the Sun, nature and farming. These festivals bring people together and deepen the spirit of harmony in our society. I convey my best wishes for these festivals and hope they continue to inspire us to deepen national unity through our shared heritage and collective participation.

The Pioneer

SINCE 1865

The limits of the mind and the liberation beyond it



AJIT KUMAR
BISHNOI

2ND OPINION

THE PIONEER

We are forever taking shelter in ourselves and getting nowhere. We all have ideas about how to succeed in life, yet we achieve only partial success. We are never satisfied, barring a few exceptions. One of the greatest weaknesses we all share is a feeling of superiority, called ahankar (ego).

We have many ideas about how others can improve, but very few about improving ourselves. We are constantly criticising others and rarely appreciating them, except when it serves some advantage. Let us examine how we take shelter in ourselves. We have been given many faculties, which we turn to repeatedly. The first is desire, and we desire without limit. The sky becomes the limit in daydreaming, without

considering what is actually possible.

We chase these desires like mirages and are repeatedly disappointed. The mind fully supports our desires: “My mind wants this and this.” In reality, all desires and actions are controlled by our personal nature; we are shaped by what our nature is.

The intelligence given to us is meant to guide us sensibly, but instead it is often used to justify whatever the mind concocts.

We feel no need to consult others, believing that whatever we know is all there is to know. The question then arises: if we are as intelligent as we believe ourselves to be, why are we in so much trouble? As if this were not enough, we also fall prey to our senses.

The eyes want to see certain things; the tongue insists on tasty food regardless of how much harm it causes the body, and so on. We identify ourselves with the body we are given, not with the soul.

Naturally, we fail to consider what the soul truly needs. Thus, we continue to enjoy and suffer throughout our lives while remaining under our own shelter. Are we not obsessed with our own importance and intellect despite repeated failures?

Now let us consider what taking shelter in God can do for us. The first and most important thing God does

is ensure that we receive what we truly need and that what is dear to us is protected (Bhagavad Gita 9.22). This happens gradually, as our surrender becomes more serious and sincere.

Surely, we are rewarded with various opulences such as inner glow or aura, success or victory in appropriate endeavours, sufficient resources, and the highest morality (18.78). Suffering will still come, as it must, due to sinful acts committed in the past, including previous lives, but God helps us endure them in tolerable ways (18.58).

God helps us control the mind, which is otherwise almost impossible to restrain (6.34). Rather, God grants supreme peace to His devotees (18.62).

The senses are brought under control and engage only with those sense objects that are necessary and beneficial (2.64).

With God's help, one does not fall under the control of the all-pervading maya (illusion) (7.14). Gradually, one becomes jeevan-mukta (liberated while still in the present body) and becomes qualified to receive final liberation from God (18.62). Thankfully, I am on the way.

The Pioneer

SINCE 1865

The writer is a spiritual teacher

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Relief from tight ten-minute drop

Taking the safety and health of delivery workers seriously, the government's ban on ten-minute deliveries is a welcome and necessary step. The rigid ten-minute delivery model compels gig workers to rush, flout traffic rules, and expose themselves to accidents, anxiety, and severe mental pressure. Platforms launched ultra-fast services mainly to attract customers, boost sales, and maximise profits, while shifting the risks onto workers on the road. Delays often trigger customer anger, verbal abuse, and humiliation, further harming workers' wellbeing. Delivery workers face danger around the clock, frequently without adequate insurance or support. E-commerce companies must prioritise safety by providing comprehensive health and accident cover, reasonable delivery timelines, and realistic performance targets. Clear guidelines should be issued to ensure strict compliance with traffic laws and safe driving practices. Ending the ten-minute drop will ease mental strain and restore dignity to gig work.

It will also promote safer roads, fairer labour practices, and responsible growth across the e-commerce sector, benefiting workers, consumers, and society at large, while reaffirming the state's commitment to humane, sustainable employment standards today.

ABHILASHA GUPTA | MOHALI

India-Germany ties need execution

The recent visit of German Chancellor Friedrich Merz to India and his discussions with Prime Minister Narendra Modi highlight the growing importance of strengthening bilateral relations amid global uncertainty. Despite differences, particularly over approaches to Russia following the Ukraine conflict, both nations have shown maturity by focusing on shared interests.

Enhanced defence and security cooperation, including joint military exercises, technology sharing, and maritime domain awareness, is a positive development that can address common challenges such as terrorism and regional instability.

Equally significant is the renewed push for an ambitious India-EU Free Trade Agreement, which could expand trade, diversify supply chains, and promote cooperation in green technologies, digital services, and critical minerals.

The agreement on skilled labour mobility is another promising step, aligning Germany's workforce shortages with India's pool of trained professionals. However, past delays, including the Thyssenkrupp submarine project, underline persistent bureaucratic hurdles. To translate intent into outcomes, both governments must fast-track approvals, set clear.

A MYILSAMI | TAMIL NADU

Iran unrest raises global alarm

The death toll from Iran's ongoing crackdown on anti-government protests has reportedly risen to 2,571, making it the deadliest unrest the country has witnessed in decades. Widespread internet shutdowns imposed by Iranian authorities have made independent verification extremely difficult, while the government has released no consolidated data on casualties or arrests.

The reported figures far exceed those of previous protest movements and have drawn comparisons with the violence surrounding the 1979 Islamic Revolution. As tensions escalated, Iran accused the United States of fuelling the unrest. US President Donald Trump publicly urged demonstrators to continue protesting and announced the cancellation of all meetings with Iranian officials, condemning what he termed the senseless killing of protesters.

Trump further warned that countries, including India, engaging in trade with Iran would face a 25 per cent tariff from the United States.

These developments reflect a sharp escalation in Iran's internal crisis and the broader confrontation between Tehran and Washington, raising serious international concern over human rights and access to reliable information.

BHAGWAN THADANI | MUMBAI

PIC TALK



Artists perform during Pongal festival celebrations in New Delhi.

PHOTO: PTI

DIGITAL EXPERIENCE

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ANCIENT FESTIVALS CELEBRATE RETURN OF LIGHT AND HOPE

Come January 14 and 15, the Sun's northward journey sets the tone for renewal and fresh beginnings. Makar Sankranti and Lohri are not merely seasonal milestones; they are civilisational responses to an enduring human question – how to endure hardship and how to begin again.

Since the time of the Rig Veda, the movement of the Sun has been observed not simply as an astronomical event but as a marker of destiny. Uttarayan was regarded as a sacred ascent, a period during which knowledge, purposeful action and renewal were believed to flourish. In the Mahabharata, Bhishma waits on his bed of arrows for the Sun to turn north, choosing this auspicious moment to leave the world, reaffirming the ancient belief that cosmic order shapes human fate.

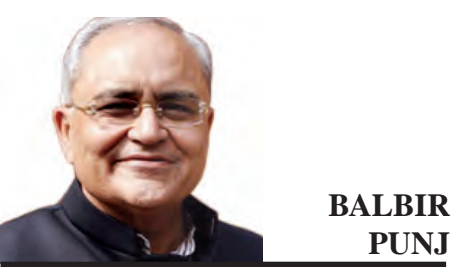
Agrarian societies structured their calendars around this transition. The post-harvest festivals of Makar Sankranti and Lohri arose as expressions of gratitude – not for abundance, but for survival after winter's scarcity. Fire occupies a central place: in Punjab's Lohri, the bonfire symbolises both offering and resolve – an offering to nature's mercy and a vow to persevere. Across India, different regions named the same hope: Pongal, Magh Bihu, Uttarayan and Khichdi. Civilisation thus spoke one language – when the Sun moves forward, so must life. These festivals celebrate not what we possess, but what we are becoming, reminding us that humanity's greatest inheritance is resilience and faith in returning light.

VIJAY SINGH ADHIKARI | NAINITAL

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Why can't Hindu-Muslim live in peace in Indian subcontinent?

What prevents Hindus and Muslims in India from embracing reconciliation? Despite the potential, division persists. Meanwhile, in Europe, Christianity has undergone reform, embracing secularism, post-religious politics, and self-reflection. Hinduism has evolved similarly. Islam, however, has yet to experience a comparable theological and historical reassessment



BALBIR PUNJ

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, last Sunday (January 11), invoked the history of the Somnath Temple, stating that “flag hoisting at Somnath Mahadev Mandir shows the power of India and its capabilities to the entire world”. He added that, in the cycle of time, “those fundamentalist invaders are now reduced to pages of history, but the Somnath Temple still stands tall”.

Nearly two months ago, when Prime Minister Modi resolved to free India completely from the Macaulayite mindset, I argued in this very column (December 4) that what Modi said was correct but incomplete. India's entrenched intellectual paralysis is not merely the legacy of Thomas Macaulay; it is equally the product of Karl Marx's ideological descendants who dominate our political, academic, and social elite.

Even now, at the ‘Somnath Swabhiman Parv’, Prime Minister Modi once again stopped short of articulating the full truth. He rightly observed that “those fundamentalist invaders are now reduced to pages of history, but the Somnath Temple still stands tall”.

But has the vicious mindset of Babur and Aurangzeb been laid to rest with their physical departure centuries ago? Or has the virus of bigotry and hate merely mutated? The answer lies not in abstraction but in contemporary global reality.




From the devastating 1993 Mumbai blasts and the destruction of Afghanistan's Bamiyan Buddhas in 2001, to America's watershed 9/11, the deadly jihadi attack on the Indian Parliament, and the terrifying 26/11 terror assault on Mumbai — each event is a harrowing chapter in a long list of crimes against humanity, purportedly inspired by Islamic theology.

Even recent events — from the 2024 Magdeburg attack in Germany and the October 2025 terror incident in Britain (Jihad al-Shami), to the April 2025 Pahalgam killings, the November 2025 Delhi blast, and the December 2025 Sydney attack in Australia — underscore the grim reality that this metastasising ideology is far from eradicated. Why this senseless violence in the



HINDUS AND MUSLIMS TOGETHER CONSTITUTE ALMOST NINETY-FIVE PER CENT OF RESIDUAL INDIA'S POPULATION

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name of Islam? Why did Islamic invaders repeatedly attack India and pulverise its magnificent temples, including the famed Somnath? Leftist historians would have us believe that these looting expeditions had no religious dimension and were driven only by a lust for wealth accumulated in these places of worship.

In Tuzuk-e-Taimuri, Timur (who invaded India in 1398) stated: “My principal object in coming to Hindustan... has been to accomplish two things... war with the infidels, the enemies of the Mohammedan religion, and by this religious warfare to acquire some claim to reward in the life to come. The other was... plundering the wealth and valuables of the infidels: plunder in war is as lawful as their mothers' milk to Musalmans who war for their faith.”

According to historian Abraham Eraly (The Age of Wrath): “Mahmud had, during the solemn ceremony of receiving the Caliphate honours on his accession to the throne of Ghazni, taken a vow to wage jihad... every year against the idolaters of India... He led more than a dozen campaigns in

India during his 32-year reign. The sultan had two motives - to slaughter heathens and to gather plunder. These were, however, interconnected motives, each reinforcing and energising action in the other.”

Mahmud of Ghazni invaded India repeatedly. When offered a vast ransom by a vanquished Hindu king, Mahmud replied: “In the religion of the Musalmans, it is a meritorious act that anyone who destroys the place of worship of the heathen will reap great reward on the Day of Judgement, and I intend to remove entirely idols from the cities of Hindustan...”

Hindus and Muslims together constitute almost ninety-five per cent of residual India's population. India and Pakistan are neighbours. Both Hindus and Muslims come from the same racial stock. They have no option but to live together in peace and as equals. Yet they do not, because the baggage of history often tears them apart.

Followers of indigenous faiths encountered Islam in India not as a parallel faith but as a politico-military force that

arrived through conquest, subjugating the vanquished and stripping them of dignity, identity, and faith.

For nearly eight centuries, large parts of India were ruled by Islamic dynasties whose legitimacy rested on Islamic theological injunctions, including concepts such as kafir and kufr. Temple demolitions, the killing of infidels who refused conversion, jizya, and the systematic persecution of non-Muslims were part of state policy across successive regimes.

Hindu civilisation stands unique - pluralistic, non-proselytising, and inclusive. In contrast, Islam, by its very doctrine, is driven by exclusivity and expansion, dividing humanity between believers and infidels.

Although many Muslims live peacefully, their theological framework makes coexistence with followers of non-Islamic religions difficult, as accepting other faiths as equally valid runs counter to core Islamic beliefs.

This doctrinal stance creates a deep memory divide: Hindus recall struggles for survival and endured indignities, while many Muslims cling to a misplaced pride in that turbulent past, often adopting an offensive posture. Without

a shared and nuanced understanding of history, coexistence remains elusive.

Harmony in India is not about mutual understanding but about one-sided tolerance. Twisted historical narratives crafted by the Left fuel chaos among communities. While the injustices of the past cannot be undone, why glorify and celebrate them?

One cannot allow the past to destroy the present and the future. India is not alone in facing such dilemmas; worldwide, nations struggle with historical burdens that cast long shadows over contemporary relations. Many have attempted reconciliation. India has not.

What prevents Hindus and Muslims in India from embracing reconciliation? Despite the potential, division persists. Meanwhile, in Europe, Christianity has undergone reform, embracing secularism, post-religious politics, and self-reflection. Hinduism has evolved similarly. Islam, however, has yet to experience a comparable theological and historical reassessment.

In India, there has been no official rejection by Islamic institutions of religious conquest, no apologies for iconoclasm, and no recognition of India as a cradle of civilisation rather than merely a land of invasion. Instead, Islamic zealots and Leftists continue to provoke Hindus and Sikhs by glorifying figures such as Ghazni, Ghorī, Babur, Aurangzeb, and Tipu Sultan.

The Partition of 1947 was meant to settle the civilisational question. It did not. Pakistan became an Islamic state, yet the two-nation theory survives in residual India — not as formal politics, but as a divisive mindset that keeps the communal cauldron boiling.

Communists, driven by an ideological agenda to balkanise India, promote and rationalise this bigotry. Other political parties, particularly the Congress, claiming to be ‘secular’, use Muslims as a vote bank and systematically promote Muslim fundamentalists within the community. Where does one begin the process of reconciliation? Without closure, the past continues to intrude upon the present.

An honest investigation is required to uncover the ideological and theological paradigms that fuel hatred and divide humanity into believers and non-believers. This must be followed by dismantling the false narratives and historical distortions spread through denial and sophistry.

India's quiet AI moment: How millennial women are driving tech adoption



KUNTALA KARKUN



SONAL JAIN

At 6:45 am on a Monday, the millennial Indian woman is not just scrolling through her phone; she is orchestrating a complex ecosystem. From ordering groceries to spacing out weekly household tasks and checking school calendars, she is using Artificial Intelligence (AI) to compress dozens of small decisions into frictionless commands. Across India, women in their late 30s and 40s, raised in the era of landlines and Doordarshan, have become the quiet architects of everyday AI adoption.

The 289-Minute Deficit: Solving for Time

Context matters. Even as female labour-force participation inches up, Indian women continue to shoulder a disproportionate share of unpaid work. The latest Time Use Survey shows women spending about 289 minutes a day on unpaid domestic services and another 137 minutes on caregiving, compared with 88 minutes and 75 minutes respectively for men (MoSPI, 2024).

This is the gap AI is beginning to fill, by helping women reallocate their scarcest resource: time. Not by eliminating work, but by reducing the cognitive friction that makes unpaid labour so invisible and exhausting.

AI as the Invisible Household COO

For a mid-career professional in Noida or Bengaluru, the same AI tools she uses at work to code, analyse data, or build dashboards are now running her home with near-corporate discipline. With AI adoption among Indian knowledge workers well above global averages (92 per cent vis-à-vis 75 per cent, Microsoft & LinkedIn 2024 Work Trend Index), the learning curve was crossed in offices first and then extended into personal life. At home, AI use clusters into four practical functions. First, planning and sequencing: weekly to-do lists, meal planning, reminders to order paneer, soak lentils, or pay school fees. Second, communication and documentation, from drafting emails to teachers to coordinating with apartment associations or domestic help. Third, administration and compliance, including bill payments, subscription management, and household budgeting. Finally, decision compression: converting an overwhelming set of obligations into a clear, prioritised plan.

None of this is glamorous. But precisely because it is mundane, it sticks.

Beyond Metros: Rural and Small-Town AI Use

The story unfolds just as meaningfully beyond urban India. In small towns and rural districts, teachers, nurses, and panchayat workers are turning to voice-led AI interfaces in Hindi, Bengali, and other Indian languages to draft letters, plan events, and coordinate with government departments. For women who once relied on handwritten notebooks and manual follow-ups, AI has become an equaliser, bridging gaps in language, literacy, and time.

Smartphones remain the primary gateway. While female internet adoption in rural India still lags, it is rising steadily, and voice interfaces are lowering entry barriers. ASHA workers and anganwadi supervisors use AI-enabled apps to schedule home visits, immunisation drives, and nutrition days, often auto-generating WhatsApp messages in local languages. Members of women's self-help groups rely on simple chatbots to track loan repayments, meeting schedules, and basic bookkeeping. Here, AI is not a productivity hack. It is administrative infrastructure.

Millennial Women as India's Real AI Evangelists

What makes this moment distinctive is the generation driving it. The most striking feature of this shift is not the technology, but who is driving it. These are not digital natives who grew up on touchscreens. They are women who watched technology arrive in phases: landlines, cable television, early internet, then smartphones and apps. This generation of millennial women is uniquely placed.

At work, they are senior enough to influence how AI tools are deployed and model their adoption. At home, they act as gatekeepers of digital behaviour — deciding children's AI use, guiding ageing parents, and delegating household cognitive load. Across urban and rural India, these women are not merely users but norm-setters. How they trust AI today will shape how Indian society adopts it tomorrow.

A Scaling Moment, Not a Pilot

These macro trends are producing a distinctive behavioural pattern. India has more than 900 million internet users, with a majority outside metros. Smartphone access exceeds 80 per cent of households, and 4G coverage is near-universal (DoT, MoSPI). Voice interfaces, cloud computing, and vernacular AI have lowered the skill barrier for adoption.

At the same time, India stands out globally on women's AI readiness. India's AI skill penetration for women stands at 1.7, significantly higher than in the US (1.2) and Israel (0.9), a sign of comfort with digital tools, not just exposure (Stanford University Human-Centred AI (HAI) Index). These macro trends translate into a clear behaviour-

al pattern: AI adopted first for office productivity is being repurposed for domestic logistics, and then informally taught to others in families, offices, and communities.

The Cautionary Margins

None of this amounts to a techno-utopia. A persistent gender gap in device ownership means many women still depend on shared phones or borrowed access. Digital literacy varies widely across states, castes, and income groups, and many women remain passive consumers rather than active users of AI.

Privacy, data governance, and biased AI outputs are real concerns as households increasingly rely on algorithmic recommendations for finance, health, and education. Finally, most AI products are still designed for urban, English-speaking, middle-class consumers, leaving rural and low-literacy users struggling with interfaces that do not match their reality.

Policy and Product Nudges That Would Help

First, voice-first and vernacular interfaces must become the default rather than the exception. This matters because over 95 per cent of new internet users in India access the web primarily through mobile phones (IAMA-Kantar, Internet in India 2024).




Second, essential household AI features - reminders, scheduling, health alerts, and basic planning - must function in low-bandwidth and offline modes. While India's 4G coverage is near-universal, average mobile data speeds and reliability still vary sharply across districts. Third, community-level digital training is essential. Public-private partnerships that embed simple, task-oriented AI solutions into anganwadis, primary health centres, and SHGs — institutions that interact daily with women — can significantly boost uptake.

Treated as digital public goods rather than premium lifestyle products, AI can move decisively from novelty to necessity.

The Bigger Picture

In an economy that often equates productivity with factories and firms, the quiet AI revolution inside households is easy to miss. Yet India's most immediate AI dividend is being realised not in boardrooms, but in kitchens, calendars, and communities — where millions of millennial women are steadily reclaiming their time and redefining productivity, one prompt at a time.

The authors are, respectively, Senior Visiting Fellow, and Head of Communication and Partnerships, Pahle India Foundation

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VIKAS YADAV

In India, agriculture is far more than a means of earning a livelihood; it is a way of life that has shaped villages, traditions, culture, and social relationships for centuries. Farming rhythms influence festivals, food habits, family structures, and community bonds, making agriculture deeply woven into Indian identity. Even today, nearly half of India's population depends directly or indirectly on farming and allied rural activities. Because such a large section of society relies on the countryside, empowering rural communities is not only vital for economic growth but also essential for building a just, inclusive, and resilient nation. As India moves towards the vision of Viksit Bharat, or a developed India, it is important to reflect on leaders who placed villages and farmers at the heart of national development. Among them, Chaudhary Charan Singh stands out as a powerful and enduring voice of India's farmers.

Chaudhary Charan Singh (1902-1987) is widely remembered as a champion of rural India and an unwavering advocate for farmers' rights. Born into a farming family in present-day Uttar Pradesh, he experienced rural life closely and understood its struggles, uncertainties, and strengths from a young age. This lived experience shaped his political thinking and convinced him that India's progress could never be complete if villages remained neglected. For him, agriculture was not a backward sector to be replaced by industry but the backbone of the nation's economy, society, and democracy. He believed that the well-being of farmers ultimately determined the well-being of the country. At a time when national policies largely focused on rapid industrialisation and urban growth, Charan Singh questioned this imbalance in development priorities. He argued that small and marginal farmers, who formed the majority of India's agricultural population, were the real custodians of food security and social stability. Ignoring their needs, he warned, would widen inequality and weaken democratic foundations. For Singh, empowering farmers was not merely about increasing production; it was about ensuring dignity, self-respect, and a meaningful voice for rural citizens in shaping India's future.

Charan Singh's vision of agrarian politics extended beyond cultivation. One of his most significant contributions lay in land and tenancy reforms, particularly in Uttar Pradesh. He worked to protect the rights of sharecroppers and actual cultivators, giving them greater security over the land they tilled. By challenging exploitative landlord systems and feudal structures, these reforms sought to restore dignity to farmers and




reduce rural inequality. He firmly believed that secure ownership and tenancy rights were essential for social justice and economic independence in villages.

Rural indebtedness was another major concern for him. For generations, farmers had been trapped in cycles of debt, often at the mercy of moneylenders charging exorbitant interest rates. Charan Singh strongly supported the expansion of cooperative banks and institutional credit so that farmers could access loans on fair and transparent terms. Affordable and timely credit, he believed, was crucial for breaking poverty cycles and enabling farmers to invest in seeds, tools, irrigation, and improved farming practices.

Singh also consistently emphasised the importance of fair prices and stable markets for agricultural produce. He understood that small farmers were particularly vulnerable to price fluctuations and market exploitation. Without fair returns, farming became unsustainable and demoralising. Measures such as minimum support prices, regulated markets, storage facilities, and better market access were therefore central to his thinking. Protecting farmers' incomes, he argued, was as important as increasing output, because economic security gave farmers confidence and stability. Infrastructure and decentralisation formed another pillar of his rural vision. Charan Singh believed that basic facilities such as roads, irrigation, electricity, and storage were necessities rather than luxuries for rural development. Equally important was local decision-making. Development, he argued, could not be imposed from above; it worked best when communities actively participated in planning and governance. His faith in grassroots democracy reflected his belief that empowered villagers strengthened the nation's democratic fabric.

Although Indian agriculture today faces challenges such as climate change, shrinking landholdings, market pressures, and digital inequality, the core principles of Charan Singh's ideas remain relevant. Most farmers still cultivate small plots, making it essential that reforms, technologies, and digital platforms serve them rather than only large agribusinesses. His emphasis on local knowledge, crop diversification, water conservation, and community participation offers lessons for resilience. A truly developed India cannot exist without strong villages and empowered farmers. The vision of Viksit Bharat goes beyond economic indicators to include dignity, equality, sustainability, and opportunity. Charan Singh's life and work remind us that national progress begins in India's fields and villages, and that adapting his vision to present realities is essential for shared and lasting development.

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