



The danger of a digital censor board

There is a moral panic over a show called India's Got Latent. Much of the furore centres around some crude remarks made by a YouTuber, Ranveer Allahabadia. His remarks have been condemned by Chief Ministers, a Parliamentary Standing Committee, and even the Supreme Court.

On India's Got Latent, which was conceptualised and hosted by comedian and YouTuber Samay Raina, judges attempt to critique the "latent" talents of aspiring performers. Dank humour defines the show. Both Mr. Allahabadia and Mr. Raina enjoy immense popularity as YouTubers, especially with young people. Mr. Raina is a rising sensation who shared the KBC stage with Amitabh Bachchan and Mr. Allahabadia was extolled by the Prime Minister himself as "Creator of the Year". While many may say that their online reach is the reason behind the moral panic, the two YouTubers are mere pawns in the great game for control of our digital media.

Law on vulgarity

Notwithstanding the Supreme Court's curt remark that Mr. Allahabadia has "a very dirty mind," the law separates moral repugnancy from criminality. In *Apoorva Arora v. Govt. of NCT of Delhi* (2024), the Court quashed criminal prosecutions for foul language in an OTT show called College Romance. The Court demanded an objective test for obscenity, focusing on whether sexual or lustful thoughts were aroused and not on whether words were "decent". The Court further explained that coarse language, however distasteful or improper, does not automatically become obscene.

Its ruling is directly relevant here: Mr. Allahabadia's comments, at worst, constitute a risqué jest rather than actual obscenity. Yet fury and legal intimidation often eclipse constitutional principle. The second legal provision



Apar Gupta
Advocate and the Founder-Director of the Internet Freedom Foundation

which has been invoked against India's Got Latent is Section 69A of the Information Technology Act, 2000, which provides the Indian government with the power to block access to a website, as revealed by Kanchan Gupta, a Senior Advisor, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting. Curiously, "decency and morality" do not fall under the grounds for blocking websites under Section 69A. This statutory limit was exposed as far back as 2010, when the government tried to block the pornographic website *Savita Bhabhi*. Legality, however, has not stood in the way of the Union government's expanding appetite for censorship, as seen in the surge of blocking orders, which has been aided by the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021. Blocking decisions remain shrouded in secrecy; courts typically avoid striking them down.

Question of regulation

The Ministry of Information and Broadcasting's push for a sweeping Broadcasting Bill gathered steam before the general elections and then returned in a form that placed online creators in the same bracket as traditional broadcasters. Earlier, there was a public outcry against provisions of the Bill. Now, thanks to the recent clamour for stronger censorship, the Bill has received momentum. The Parliamentary Standing Committee of Information Technology, headed by BJP MP Nishikant Dubey, has now urged the Ministry to propose new regulations and amendments. The recent controversy has different actors playing to a familiar script: a public uproar leads to new rules which arm the government with sweeping powers.

On January 15, 2021, Amazon Prime's *Tandav* released, and was immediately accused of insulting religious sentiments. This led to criminal complaints, government intervention, and an apology from the creators, who cut supposedly

offensive scenes. Yet multiple FIRs persisted, targeting actors, producers, and Amazon Prime's India head. Amid calls for censorship, the government on February 25, 2021, introduced the Information Technology Rules. Part III now covers digital news media and OTT platforms, albeit under ambiguous jurisdiction. However, what is interesting is that to escape the clutches of criminal prosecution, OTT platforms have entered into a Faustian bargain. They now invite censorship powers of the Ministry to escape a visit to the police station or writ petitions before different High Courts. The price to pay is the discontinuation of any web series which, through its themes or dialogues, poses difficult questions to our society or political leadership. Hence, it should not come as a surprise if popular online creators, including those associated with India's Got Latent, plead for clemency in the coming weeks by pleading for "regulation" on digital platforms such as YouTube.

This present moment in time is not simply an outcome of a single controversy. Nor is it just an example of rising online vulgarity fuelled by cheap data and ubiquitous teleconnectivity. As Yamini Aiyar and Neelanjana Sircar have argued, the Indian state has undergone a fundamental change in its political economy where technology has enabled direct benefit transfers as a form of tribal allegiance rather than a right guaranteed by the constitution. Calling it techno-patrimonialism, they state that it has advanced within a framework of the Prime Minister's political appeal that relies on "a mix of cultural nationalism and welfareism populism". Hence, it should come as no surprise that political parties, after competing on direct benefit transfers, are now advocating for digital censor boards. This may explain why the entire state and large sections of society have been spurred into action by a distasteful joke.

Resurrecting 'Brand AP'

The government has been making many efforts to attract investments

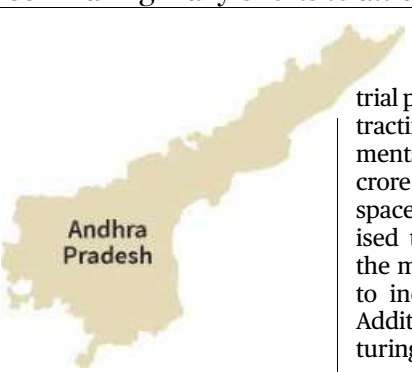
STATE OF PLAY

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The Andhra Pradesh government is in a jubilant mood over the purported flow of huge investments into different sectors over the last few months. The government has said that MoUs worth ₹6.33 lakh crore have been signed with various companies so far.

At the recent World Economic Forum, Chief Minister Chandrababu Naidu pitched Andhra Pradesh as the preferred destination for investments, especially in the clean energy and maritime sectors. While asserting that he was among the first Chief Ministers to travel to Davos in the 1990s, Mr. Naidu maintained that Davos is meant for networking with corporate titans and to get a sense of the direction in which the world is headed and not just a platform to sign MoUs. He added that the task on hand was to try and resurrect the image of 'Brand Andhra Pradesh' and revealed that he had 27 face-to-face meetings with the top executives of global companies, and also Microsoft founder Bill Gates.

Mr. Naidu listed out some of the mega projects for which MoUs have been signed since June 2024, when the Telugu Desam Party (TDP)-Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-Jana Sena Party (JSP) alliance formed the government. The TDP-led National Democratic Alliance government has made a lot of progress on the investment front in the State, which has been possible thanks largely to the support extended to it by the Central government. For instance, the Centre was instrumental in the signing of MoUs for the mega green hy-



drogen project to be jointly implemented by NTPC Green Energy and AP-Genco near Anakapalli and the establishment of the BPCL refinery at Ramayapatnam in Prakasam district with a total investment of ₹2,80,000 crore. Arcelor-Mittal and Nippon Steel are also set to establish an integrated steel project of 17.80 million tonnes capacity in Anakapalli district with an investment of ₹1.4 lakh crore.

Meanwhile, the Kadapa Steel Plant is in a limbo. Mr. Naidu says completing the steel plant remains on his agenda and he has spoken to the Jindals about it, but the project's prospects appear to be bleak in the current scenario for several reasons. Here it is important to note that both Mr. Naidu and former Chief Minister Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy laid foundations for the plant separately seven years ago and yet the project has not taken off.

The Chief Minister also stated that Google Cloud is poised to set up its facility in Visakhapatnam with a massive investment.

Industrial investments apart, the Andhra Pradesh government scored a major victory by successfully mobilising ₹26,000 crore for the development of Amaravati as the capital city (₹15,000 crore from the World Bank and ₹11,000 crore from HUDCO).

In October 2024, Mr. Naidu rolled out a clutch of six indus-

trial policies with a target of attracting ₹30 lakh crore investments, including ₹10 lakh crore in the renewable energy space alone, which materialised to some extent. One of the most significant targets is to increase the Gross Value Addition from the manufacturing sector from ₹3.4 lakh crore in FY24 to ₹7.30 lakh crore by the end of 2029 when the AP Industrial Development Policy (4.0) expires. This is a daunting task given the multifarious challenges faced by the State.

The government has set up a task force on investments under the chairmanship of Information Technology and Human Resources Development Minister Nara Lokesh. It has revived the Andhra Pradesh Economic Development Board, which had become redundant from 2019 to 2024. It has also introduced a slew of reforms to make the processes of doing business easier. It has also been offering a host of incentives for investors.

Besides, in a marked departure from the way things were handled earlier, the government has sought the help of Confederation of Indian Industry in improving the business environment, for which they have formed a joint consultative forum on the lines of the Kerala model.

In the ultimate analysis, the government has set the stage afresh for investors to become a part of the Andhra Pradesh growth story. There has clearly been positive movement since the change of guard last year. Whether it is at the World Economic Forum or other global platforms, the Andhra Pradesh government has been promoting the State to global entrepreneurs. These efforts may bear fruit sooner than later.

Agricultural protectionism pushes up India's import tariff

India's import tariffs are five times that of the U.S. and the highest among BRICS nations

DATA POINT

Samreen Wani

Tariffs levied on imports into India are five times higher than what the United States levies on its imports. The average duty levied by India was 17% in 2023, compared to 3.3% levied by the U.S. Also, the average tariff levied by India was the highest among comparable economies, especially BRICS countries. India was followed by Brazil (11%), and South Africa and China (more than 7%). The average tariff levied by Russia was 6.6% and that by the European Union was 5% (**Chart 1**).

Despite the difference in the average tariffs levied by India and the U.S., the number of products subject to tariffs remains comparable in both countries (**Chart 2**).

India's higher average was mostly due to high tariffs on agricultural products to protect domestic producers. "While tariffs on agricultural goods are really high, it is not so on manufactured products," explains Biswajit Dhar, Distinguished Professor, Council for Social Development.

Chart 3 shows that the average tariff levied by India on non-agricultural goods was less than 15% between 2018 and 2023. The duty on agricultural goods, however, has always been more than twice the duty on non-agricultural products, and exceeded 38% in all years except in 2020.

Dhar argues that the reason why India continues to levy high agricultural tariffs is to protect food security and livelihoods. He points out that since investment in agriculture is low – just about 6% of the total investment in the country – the sector remains significantly inefficient by global standards. "Agricultural tariffs cannot be brought down easily. The U.S. has very high subsidies on agricultural products. If there are many subsidised U.S. agricultural products floating about in the market,

it is very difficult for us [India] to reduce our tariffs," he says. Unless the government decides to pull up this sector by the bootstraps, it will not be able to stand up to international competition, Dhar adds.

A closer look at product-wise tariffs shows that agricultural, dairy products, beverages, and tobacco continue to attract more than 30% as import duty (**Table 4**). Duty on transport equipment, cotton, and textiles came down between 2018 and 2023. Tariffs on electrical machinery, leather/footwear, and some manufactured goods increased in the same period.

U.S. President Donald Trump recently drew attention towards tariffs levied by various countries. He suggested that the U.S. would impose "reciprocal tariffs" on countries which, he believes, have treated the U.S. "unfairly". While the finer details and the math of such tariffs are not clear yet, his remarks have caused considerable unease in India. Amid this criticism from the U.S., India has recently reduced tariffs on bourbon whiskey from 150% to 100%.

India is increasingly exporting more to the U.S., widening its trade surplus with the U.S. Goods exported to the U.S. from India have crossed \$53 billion in FY25 (April-November) and exceeded 18% of India's total exports from about 15% a decade ago (**Chart 5**).

"Tariffs are being imposed to block imports from partner countries into the U.S. But reciprocal tariffs could mean pressure on India to reduce agricultural tariffs. Because at the end of the day, the U.S. wants India to import more from them. And what better opportunity to do that than to force India to reduce its agricultural tariffs? This is going to be part of the bilateral trade agreement that they will be negotiating. India has maintained that negotiating tariffs on agricultural products, such as cereals, is off the table for Free Trade Agreements. But that will not be the case for India-U.S. bilateral negotiations," Dhar adds.

Tariff troubles

The data for the charts were sourced from the World Trade Organization and the Centre For Monitoring Indian Economy



Chart 2: The chart shows the number of applied tariff lines
■ India ■ U.S.

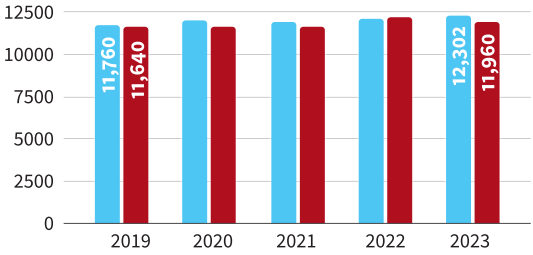


Chart 3: The chart shows the average duty (simple average) levied category-wise on imports into India (in %)

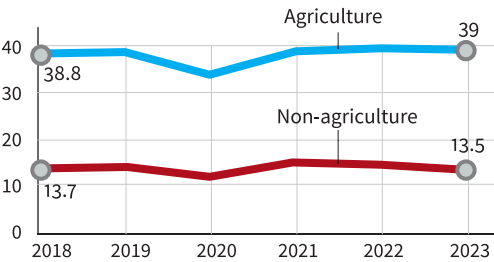
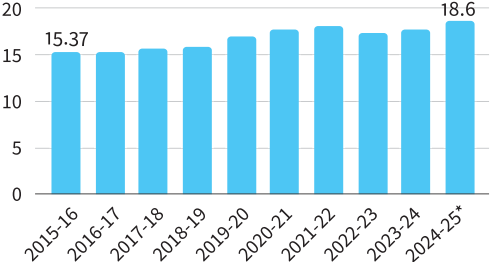


Chart 5: The chart shows the share of exports to the U.S. in India's total exports (in %)



Note: * Data for April-November FY 25

Chart 1: The charts shows the average duty (simple average) levied on imports country-wise (in %)

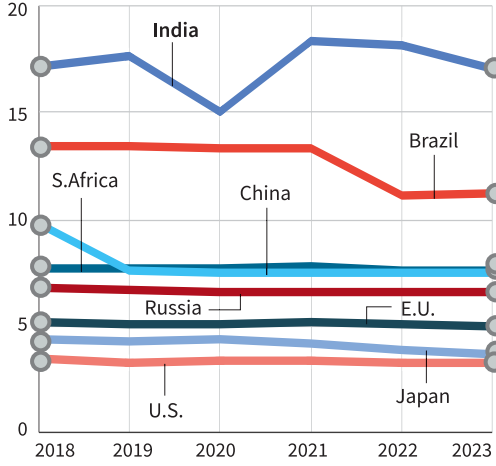


Table 4: The chart shows the average duty levied product category wise on imports into India (in %)

	2018	2023
Beverages and tobacco	74.7	74.5
Oilseeds, fats and oils	54.1	60.1
Sugars and confectionery	51.5	51.5
Coffee, tea	56.3	47.6
Cereals and preparations	37.1	37.8
Dairy products	34.8	35.2
Fruits, vegetables, plants	32.4	34.6
Animal products	32.5	32.5
Fish and fish products	30	30
Transport equipment	31.1	28.2
Other agricultural products	29	28.1
Clothing	20.5	20.7
Textiles	20.7	16
Leather, footwear, etc	12.1	15.1
Manufactures n.e.s.	11.1	12.4
Minerals and metals	11	11.9
Electrical machinery	8.8	11.2
Wood, paper, etc	10	10.6
Chemicals	10.2	10.3
Cotton	26	9.4
Petroleum	9.2	9.2
Non-electrical machinery	7.8	7.9

FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Hindu.

FIFTY YEARS AGO FEBRUARY 19, 1975

Public deposits in non-banking firms: stricter control planned

New Delhi, Feb. 18: The Finance Minister, Mr. C. Subramaniam, told the Rajya Sabha to-day that the Government was awaiting the report of the expert committees to take suitable measures to control the banking operations of non-banking companies.

Mr. Subramaniam said the Government wanted to prohibit the non-banking institutions from receiving deposits from the public. It also proposed further to tighten up the measures in regard to these non-banking companies and corporations receiving deposits.

The Minister was replying to Mrs. Margaret Alva and others who expressed concern over a large number of non-banking companies receiving deposits from small depositors and then defrauding them.

Mr. Subramaniam said the Government had not accepted the recommendation of the Banking Commission for encouraging non-banking companies, in view of the nationalisation of banks. On the other hand, it wanted to have stricter control over their banking operations and had appointed a committee to suggest measures for the purpose. The committee was expected to submit its report by the end of March. He assured the House that the Government would not take a long time for reaching a decision on the report.

Replying to the criticism that the objective of the Government's credit squeeze had been nullified by the non-banking institutions receiving deposits and using them for investment on non-priority items, Mr. Subramaniam said the Government had recently reduced the quantum of these companies to 40 per cent from the original 50 per cent.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO FEBRUARY 19, 1925

Mill strike in Shanghai

Shanghai, Feb. 18: A strike which began in a Japanese cotton mill here last week has spread to thirteen other mills and thirty thousand operatives are now involved. The strikers attacked the mills and damaged the machinery and injured half a dozen Japanese. The situation is now quieter. The trouble is partly due to the various grievances such as dismissal of employees and partly to an undercurrent of anti-Japanese feeling which it is alleged has been fomented by Chinese Bolsheviks.

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Funds for municipalities and panchayats in Kerala

1,905 In ₹ crore. Kerala Finance Minister K. N. Balagopal said that this amount is the third instalment of the development fund. He stated that Gram Panchayats will receive ₹1,000 crore, while District and Block Panchayats will each get ₹245 crore. PTI

Civilians killed in three-day Sudan paramilitary assault

200 The Emergency Lawyers group, which documents rights abuses and is monitoring the Sudan war, said the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces attacked unarmed civilians in the villages of Al-Kadaris and Al-Khelwat, in the White Nile state of Sudan. AFP

The loan given to British water supplier Thames Water

3.8 in \$ billion. A U.K. court on Tuesday approved an emergency loan for Britain's largest water supplier Thames Water, as it buckles under a mountain of debt. The loan provides a short-term solution to keeping the company, faced with £16 billion-worth of debt, afloat. AFP

Suspects detained in Turkey's operation against insurgents

282 The Turkish police have detained 282 suspects over the past five days in a operation targeting the banned Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). The detentions came despite renewed efforts between Ankara and the PKK to resolve a conflict that has claimed tens of thousands of lives. AP

Possible drop in Kazakh oil volume due to Ukraine attack

30 in per cent. A drone strike hit a pumping station of the oil pipeline in Russia, reducing flows from Kazakhstan to world markets pumped by firms including Chevron and Exxon Mobil. It will take up to two months to deal with the damage. REUTERS
COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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What is the ‘rarest of rare’ doctrine?

What was the sentence meted out to the accused in the R.G. Kar Medical College case and the Sharon murder case? How were they different from each other? Is the death penalty constitutionally valid? In what circumstances can the death sentence be given and does judicial discretion play a part in it?

EXPLAINER

Smriti S.

The story so far:

In January 22, two separate murder convictions resulted in sharply contrasting verdicts, highlighting how the Indian courts apply the death penalty. While one case led to capital punishment, the other saw the accused sentenced to life imprisonment, reigniting questions about the judiciary’s approach to the ‘rarest of rare’ doctrine, which till now does not have a statutory definition.

What were the cases?

On August 9, 2024, a second-year female postgraduate trainee doctor, who was on duty, was raped and murdered inside a seminar room at Kolkata’s R.G. Kar Medical College and Hospital. Sanjay Roy, a civic volunteer, was arrested and convicted on January 20, based on forensic evidence linking him to the crime. During sentencing, the Additional district and sessions judge said, “this doesn’t fall into the category of rarest of rare” crimes, and Roy was sentenced to life imprisonment with a fine.

In contrast, the Sharon murder case, did invite the death penalty, the courts decided. Sharon Raj, a 23-year-old student from Kerala, was poisoned on October 14, 2022 by his partner, Greeshma, who mixed poison in an Ayurvedic concoction that she offered him to drink. Eleven days later, Sharon succumbed to multiple organ failures. The Neyyattinkara Additional Sessions Court, imposed the death penalty, and classified it as one of the “rarest of rare” cases.

What are the origins of the doctrine?

The debate on the discretion given to judges to award the death sentence dates back to 1972, when the Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of the death penalty in *Jagmohan Singh versus State of U.P.* The petitioner argued that the death



In rage: Junior doctors raise slogans in protest against the alleged rape and murder of a woman medic at the R.G Kar Medical College and Hospital, in Kolkata, on October 30, 2024. PTI

sentence puts an end to all fundamental rights guaranteed under Article 19 and, therefore, the law with regard to the capital sentence is unreasonable and not in the interest of the general public. He also pointed out that judges have no clear guidelines for deciding between the death penalty and life imprisonment, which he believes is an unfair delegation of power. Lastly, he argued that the lack of clear rules for judges violates Article 14 of the Constitution, which guarantees equality before the law.

However, the court disagreed, explaining that the accused is aware of the potential for a death sentence, and during the trial, all relevant facts, including mitigating circumstances, are considered. The court dismissed the appeal and affirmed the death sentence was constitutional under Article 21. At this

stage, there were no clear guidelines on when the death penalty should be used, which meant judges had wide discretion to decide.

In 1980, the Supreme Court in *Bachan Singh versus State of Punjab*, established the ‘rarest of rare’ doctrine, marking a turning point. A five-judge Bench heard the case, and held that the death penalty should be used only in exceptional cases. However, it did not embellish what the ‘rarest of rare’ meant, leading to further confusion. It was finally in *Machhi Singh versus State of Punjab* (1983), that the Supreme Court provided a framework for the ‘rarest of rare’ doctrine.

The court identified five categories of crimes where such a punishment is justified.

The criteria are – a) manner of committing the murder; when the murder

is committed in an extremely brutal and dastardly manner so as to arouse extreme indignation within the community, b) motive of the murder; when the murder is committed for a motive which reveals total depravity, c) socially abhorrent nature of the crime; that is when a murder occurs of someone belonging to a minority community and is committed not for personal reasons but in circumstances which arouse social wrath, d) magnitude of the crime, and e) personality of the offender; when the victim of murder is a child, a helpless woman, a person rendered helpless by old age or infirmity etc.

Were there any revisions?

Despite the framework set in *Machhi Singh versus State of Punjab*, the Supreme Court in 1983, in *Mithu versus State of Punjab*, struck down Section 303 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC), which prescribed mandatory death penalty for anyone who commits murder while serving a life sentence. The court ruled that it was against Articles 14 and 21 of the Constitution. Hence, all the cases regarding murder shall be dealt with as per Section 302 of the IPC which says whoever commits murder shall be punished with death, or imprisonment for life, and shall also be liable to a fine.

In September 2022, the Supreme Court, referred to a Constitution Bench on the question of how to provide a “meaningful, real and effective” hearing on mitigating circumstances in cases that attract the death penalty. When this is *suo motu* taken up, the court may set out a uniform approach to giving an opportunity to the accused to present mitigating circumstances in the trial stage itself before their crime is deemed one which is “rarest of rare”.

The application of the death penalty in India remains complex and controversial. While the Supreme Court has given a certain framework, the unclear, universally agreed-upon definition for what qualifies as ‘rarest of rare’ continues to leave room for judicial discretion.

THE GIST

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Why are marriages in China on the decline?

Did the one-child policy play a role in the current population demography of China? How has the Communist Party of China and Xi Jinping tried to solve the crisis?

Gunjan Singh

The story so far:

There has been a major decline in the number of couples who are registering to marry in China. As per the Chinese Ministry of Civil Affairs, in 2024, across China, only 6.1 million couples registered, a drop of 20.3% compared to 2023 figures. This is the lowest number of registrations since 1986. As the general cost of living and urban unemployment has risen, with almost 44% of urban women not wanting to marry, marriages in China are declining.

What is the problem?

While stand-alone this may not appear as a very pertinent challenge, coupled with the consistent decline in population, it gets compounded. China’s population has been declining consistently for the last

three years and in 2022 the number of deaths exceeded birthrates. The primary reason for this is the one-child policy, introduced in the 1980s and implemented with great zeal. Chinese President Xi Jinping has tried to reverse the trend by introducing the two-child policy in 2016, which was later modified to a three-child policy in 2021. However, the policy shift has failed to have any major impact. Furthermore, the desire for a male child has led to an unbalanced sex-ratio as well.

Does China have an ageing people?

The declining population has now become a demographic challenge for Mr. Xi. As a result of these policies, China has witnessed a steady decline in the number of working age people (19-59 years). People above 60 years make up 22% of the Chinese population today and maybe 50% by 2050. This has also intensified the pension pressure, as the Chinese

Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) predicts that the pension fund may run out by 2035. In order to postpone such reality, the government has increased the retirement age from 60 to 63 for men and to 55 for women. This would be a temporary solution because if the gap continues to rise, it will provide only a limited respite. The falling birthrates have also increased the demand for care giving and healthcare, while a lot of kindergartens have been shutting down.

The reducing population and the challenges which this leads to directly impacts the economic future and stability of the Chinese government. Even though the government has been attempting to lure people with financial support, the cost of raising a child is proving an insurmountable deterrent to the people.

What is Chinese government doing?

Rather than accepting the reality of the

situation and its far-reaching impact, the Xi government is still attempting to resolve this with policies and diktats. Such an approach showcases that the government is still looking for ways to change ground realities with the help of top-down processes without acknowledging that these issues need to be accepted as social reality, and thus need people-centric solutions which echo with Chinese society today.

For example, while delivering a speech at the Women’s Federation of China, Mr. Xi called on the women to, “actively cultivate a new culture of marriage and childbearing and strengthen guidance on young people’s view on marriage, childbirth and family”. This statement underscores the gap between the Communist Party of China (CPC) and society in China today. The CPC has a long history of interfering in the lives of Chinese women, with the most prominent example being the one-child policy. The CPC under Mr. Xi is still looking at ways to control and command society. It strongly believes that the people should undertake tasks which are commanded by the party with the premise that it knows what is best for the nation. These policies seem to be directed towards safeguarding the power of the party, and not to the needs of the larger society.

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THE GIST

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ABSTRACT



Different hues: The statue of B.R. Ambedkar adjacent to the Golden Temple in Amritsar, on January 27. PTI

How pragmatism is inadequate to understand Ambedkar’s scholarship

Pragmatism is a progressive philosophy; and therefore, thinkers like Ambedkar become important figures in the global pluralist pragmatist philosophical tradition. However, it is inadequate to annihilate caste in a Brahmanical society

Jadumani Mahanandi

After several decades, the scholarship of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar is getting global attention. In the last four years, four biographies by different scholars and four scholarly books, excluding a set of five volumes on Dr. Ambedkar’s life and philosophy, have been written. Still, scholars from different disciplines or through interdisciplinary approaches are reluctant to teach or research Ambedkar’s thoughts. In this context, it is interesting to see the scholarship of Scott R. Stroud explore the intellectual relationship between John Dewey and B. R. Ambedkar. His last book, *The Evolution of Pragmatism in India: Ambedkar, Dewey and the Rhetoric of Reconstruction*, demonstrated the scholarship of Ambedkar and Dewey within pragmatist thought. Initially, Stroud, as a Deweyan scholar, explored the Deweyan influence on Ambedkar’s political philosophy to develop the theory of Ambedkar’s navayana pragmatism. His latest article which appeared in the *Economic and Political Weekly* titled “B. R Ambedkar and the Evolution of Pragmatism in India”, responded to some of his critiques, and defended his Deweyan argument. This essay critically engages with Stroud’s article in *EPW*.

Cannot be reduced to pragmatism
Stroud’s scholarship attempts to interpret Ambedkar’s political philosophy in the global pragmatist tradition. Pragmatism is a progressive philosophy; and therefore, thinkers like Ambedkar become important figures in the global pluralist pragmatist philosophical tradition, Stroud argues. However, the range of scholarship on Ambedkar over the years demonstrates that he goes beyond pragmatism – the pragmatist-Deweyan interpretation articulates only one aspect of Ambedkar’s thought. Stroud provides

only a Deweyan reading of Ambedkar. Making a Deweyan interpretation of Ambedkar’s multifaceted activities and intellectual engagement only gives us a partial understanding of him and reduces Ambedkar’s versatile radical philosophy. In his recent book, *Ambedkar’s Political Philosophy: A Grammar of Public Life from the Social Margin*, Valerian Rodrigues explicates the wide-ranging nature of Ambedkar’s scholarship of political philosophy. Rodrigues argues that John Dewey is only one of his teachers. Therefore, merely interpreting Ambedkar’s thought through Dewey and pragmatism will give only one philosophical underpinning. For example, one of the claims Stroud developed is that Ambedkar passionately learned from Dewey’s teachings, which remained with Ambedkar for a long time, whether it was the French Revolution or a lecture on psychology. Further, Stroud created a speculative story through a book written by Nima Adlerblum, assuming it was Ambedkar who would attend each lecture of Dewey and reproduce Dewey’s words and language. Further, Stroud focuses on Ambedkar’s western education, in which Dewey’s influence was central. By doing so, Stroud wishes to portray Dewey as a permanent thinker who shapes Ambedkar’s philosophy. This however seems to omit the fact that Ambedkar was a versatile reader who explored different philosophies and utilised social experiences and scholarship in his activism. Stroud rather forcefully argues that most of the concepts and terminologies Ambedkar used in his activism and intellectual formulation accorded with Dewey. But this obsession with Dewey’s impact and pragmatism on Ambedkar creates a limited kind of scholarship.

Pragmatism falls short
Stroud defines pragmatism as “flexible,

adaptive and diverse”. Arguably, Ambedkar did adopt a kind of pragmatic approach engaging with the modern state in articulating democracy. Unfortunately, Stroud is not interested to interpret this through Dewey’s *The Public and Its Problem* – probably because he could not connect the arguments in the book with Ambedkar’s experience; the way he engages with the state with a pragmatic approach such as negotiating with Gandhi, other Indian leaders, and the later Constituent Assembly debates. Although, Stroud equates pragmatism and social democracy, it is important to see Ambedkar’s original emphasis of social democracy, and not within the pragmatist tradition. Pragmatism is important, but inadequate to annihilate caste in a Brahmanical society. Ambedkar cited Dewey in *Annihilation of Caste*, but it is not a pragmatic text. Stroud claims that Ambedkar learned the “psychology of habit and custom” from Dewey in thinking about the psychology of caste. But how could Stroud overlook the untouchability encountered by Ambedkar throughout his life – whether it is physical or psychological? Stroud’s articulations are lofty; it also implicitly indicates that Ambedkar’s originality lies in Dewey, that Ambedkar’s scholarship and experience of caste count for little, and that his reading of several texts on caste seem secondary. Stroud argues that Ambedkar’s conversion to Buddhism was a pragmatic approach. But Buddhism was a life-long philosophy that Ambedkar cultivated from his childhood; giving credit or echo to Dewey is a misinterpretation. For example, Ambedkar’s family were part of the Kabir Panth, which teaches the importance of ethics and morality. Further, Ambedkar read the *Budhha Charitra* in his early age which remained his sole inspiration. Ambedkar also wrote

a letter to Sharada stating, that “the only person to whom I owe all my being is Gautama Buddha.” Very importantly, Rodrigues shows in his recent book, a wide-ranging scholarship on the “epistemic location of Ambedkar” that includes Kabir’s legacy, Dewey’s influence, Phule’s presence in Ambedkar, the social and political discourse of Bombay and India, Fabian socialism, social democracy and so on. In the Columbia alumni newspaper, where Ambedkar expresses admiration for his “great professors, John Dewey, James Shotwell, Edwin Seligman, and James Hervey Robinson”, Stroud only picks John Dewey for his project of pragmatism. Similarly, one should also explore Ambedkar’s time in London (LSE). How can Ambedkar’s western education only focus on Dewey? The *Annihilation of Caste* was a lifelong project for Ambedkar’s emancipatory politics and philosophy. The annihilation of caste, the declaration of renouncing Hinduism and the conversion to Buddhism were revolutionary acts, not merely accorded to pragmatism. They were part of his praxis because Ambedkar could see the limitations of the modern state and constitutional democracy. He found Buddhism to be an ultimate path. His 22 vows discard the authority of Hindu gods and goddess – it is not a reformist act either, not even restructuring Hindu society. Too much reading of pragmatism into Ambedkar suggests an American project – the same American project yet to adequately address the structural and perpetual racial discrimination faced by people of colour. Ambedkar was equally aware of the limitations of pragmatism and the modern state and hence caste annihilation was his project of emancipation. Jadumani Mahanandi is Assistant Professor at O P Jindal Global University, Sonipat.

THE DAILY QUIZ

Chhatrapati Shivaji was born on February 19, 1630. Here is a quiz on one of most well-known Maratha rulers

Sindhu Nagaraj

- QUESTION 1**
To which clan did Shivaji belong to, before he carved out his own independent kingdom from the Sultanate of Bijapur that formed the genesis of the Maratha Confederacy?
- QUESTION 2**
This battle took place in November 1659, in Satara, fought between the Maratha forces led by Shivaji and the Bijapur troops under General Afzal Khan. The Marathas emerged victorious. What is the battle called?
- QUESTION 3**
This treaty was signed between

- Shivaji and Jai Singh in 1665, after the battle fought between the Mughal Empire and the Marathas. As per the treaty, Shivaji agreed to become a vassal of the Mughal empire, and to send his son Sambhaji to fight for the Mughals in the Deccan. What is the treaty called?
- QUESTION 4**
In the mid-19th century, which Marathi social reformer wrote his interpretation of the Shivaji legend, portraying him as a hero of the Dalits? His 1869 ballad-form story of Shivaji was met with great hostility by the Brahmin-dominated media.
- QUESTION 5**
Shivaji used a weapon in the form of a tiger claw during his encounter with Afzal Khan. What is it called?



Visual question:
The image shows a collapsed Shivaji statue in India, which was inaugurated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Where was this statue?

- Questions and Answers to the previous day’s daily quiz:** 1. The birth name of Ramakrishna Paramahansa and the year in which he was born. **Ans: Gadadhar Chattopadhyay and 1836**
2. The role Bhairavi Brahmani played in Ramakrishna’s life. **Ans: She was the spiritual teacher who imparted tantric knowledge to Ramakrishna Paramahansa**
3. Name the wife of Ramakrishna Paramahansa. **Ans: Sarada Devi born Saradamani Mukhopadhyaya**
4. The more famous name of Narendranath Dutta. **Ans: Swami Vivekananda**
5. Ramakrishna started out as a priest in this temple. **Ans: Dakshineshwar Kali Temple**
6. Ramakrishna Math’s emblem is said to symbolise this. **Ans: The union of the four yogas (Karma, Bhakti, Jnana, and Yoga) to realise the Supreme Self**
7. This affliction caused the demise of Ramakrishna. **Ans: Throat cancer**
Visual: The headquarters of the Ramakrishna Mission is located here. **Ans: Belur Math**
Early Birds: ViswanadhaRao Batchu| C. Saravanan| Amit Anand| Dinesh Kumar| Debarati Kar



FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know Your English

K. Subrahmanian
S. Upendran

- “Heard you have started playing tennis again. Having fun?”
“Sure. My backhand is still rusty though.”
“Backhand, rusty? You mean it’s full of rust?”
“In a sense, yes. You see, one of the meanings of ‘rusty’ is “of a poor quality or standard through lack of practice”. For example, I can say, not having danced for three years, Asha’s movements were pretty rusty.”
“You mean her movements were not smooth.”
“Exactly.”
“I see. Can I say, my brother’s driving is rusty?”
“Yes, you can. You can also say, my brother’s Hindi is rusty.”
“Well, he’s been out of the country for such a long lime it’s not surprising. But tell me, this club that you go to, is it expensive?”
“I am paying through my nose for it.”
“Paying through your nose? Does it mean it is expensive?”
“Yes, it does. When you say you’ve paid through your nose for something, it means, you’ve paid too much or a lot of money for something. For example, I can say, I’ve paid through my nose for that computer.”
“My brother paid through his nose to see ‘Lion King’.”
“Good example.”
“Thanks. But tell me, what is the origin of the expression ‘to pay through one’s nose’?”
“Way back in the 9th century, the Danes imposed a poll tax on the Irish. And this poll tax became known as the ‘nose tax’.”
“But what’s the connection?”
“You see, any Irishman who refused to pay the poll tax had his nose cut off.”
“Good grief. So the poor Irishman literally paid through his nose.”
“Exactly.”
“Oh by the way, is ‘get together’ one word, two words or three words?”
“Two. It’s ‘get’ and ‘together’.”
“And is there a hyphen between ‘to’ and ‘gether’?”
“No, there isn’t.”
“I see. I’ve often heard people say we’ll have a get-together on so and so evening. Is that correct?”
“Sounds odd. I wouldn’t say it that way.”
“What would you say?”
“Let’s have a get-together on the evening of the 28th. Or, let’s have a get-together on 28th evening. When get-together is used as a noun, there is a hyphen between get and together.”
“Shall we have a get-together at the Jabber some time next week?”
“Sure, why not? And I’ll make sure you pay through your nose for it.”
“What is the meaning of ‘fatuous’?”
It means, ‘silly, foolish’. It was a fatuous remark. I was irritated by his fatuous smile.”
Published in *The Hindu* on July 4, 1995.

Word of the day

Bulwark:

an embankment built around a space for defensive purposes; a fencelike structure around a deck; a protective structure of stone or concrete

Synonyms: rampart, wall, seawall

Usage: *The organisers see the event as an important bulwark against extremism.*

Pronunciation: newsth.live/bulwarkpro

International Phonetic Alphabet: /ˈbʊl.wərk/

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

Recovery code

MSME prepack resolution model needs relook

The Prepack Insolvency Resolution Process, which came into force in April 2021 to help small and medium enterprises impacted by Covid-19, has been quite a non-starter. As explained recently in an article in this newspaper, there have been 13 prepack applications till date, with five plans having been approved, one withdrawn and seven cases still ongoing. This comes as a surprise, given the standout benefits of the scheme on paper.



Unlike corporate insolvencies — where the resolution plan takes shape well after the entity is admitted to the IBC and the creditors take over the concern from the promoter — ‘pre-pack’ resolution plans as the term suggests are rustled up by the MSME debtor and secured creditors before initiating insolvency proceedings. They apply to defaults below ₹1 crore. The National Company Law Tribunal approves the plan, after which the resolution professional oversees the implementation; crucially, the promoter remains in control of the concern. A process that seems less cumbersome and costly for MSMEs should have evoked a better response. The Centre should inquire into why there have been no takers.

Lack of awareness in the MSME universe — according to the Budget, there are 5.93 crore MSMEs, and over 95 per cent of them are micro enterprises with a turnover of less than ₹5 crore (now revised upwards to ₹10 crore) — has been cited as a major factor. The second could be reluctance on the part of the debtor to go for a prepack, which will let the word out that his enterprise is in trouble, jeopardising its recovery chances. While prepacks deserve a push for their potential benefits (better value realisation, timeliness and revival prospects), an October 2020 report drawn up for the Ministry of Corporate Affairs anticipates two problems — lack of transparency in drawing up a resolution plan as well as less regulatory oversight relative to corporate insolvencies. It would be instructive to look into the experiences of other countries that have pre-packed insolvencies in place, such as US, UK, Canada, France and Singapore.

There is some potential to explore pre-packs for larger units, provided the interface between debtors and creditors improves. At present, there are some misgivings over how promoters have managed to get back the company at rock bottom prices in many IBC cases. Unless IBC becomes robust in terms of value realisation as well as revivals, pre-packs should not be expanded in scope. Insolvency resolution has been governed by two systems — debtor-in-possession (recoveries under Companies Act and the Reserve Bank guidelines) and creditor-in-control (IBC). In times of economic shock, debtors may not be responsible for insolvency. But in cases where debtors have created a maze of firms to siphon off funds or run the show poorly, the case for pre-pack does not exist. Creditors need to develop the skills to smell trouble in time and recover their assets. In such cases, which are only too common, pursuing any resolution plan can be a waste of time and money.

OTHER VOICES.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

The Trump shock comes to Europe

European allies knew their relationship with the second Trump Administration would be challenging. Even so, the shocks they’ve received from Washington in recent days constitute a crisis. The warning, more or less: Shape up or the Americans are shipping out. Start with the Ukraine war. This is the largest military conflict on European soil since 1945, and the Continent’s leaders recognise the stakes for their security. But Mr. Trump’s message is that the U.S. doesn’t care what Europeans think about how the war should be resolved. Mr. Trump spoke on the phone to Russian President Vladimir Putin last week about ending the conflict, a development that caught Europe by surprise. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth announced, also without consulting allies, that Ukraine shouldn’t expect to regain territory lost during Russia’s first incursion in 2014. (NEW YORK, FEBRUARY 16)



China and Europe must work towards a multipolar world

This year is the 50th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and the European Union (EU). Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi clearly conveyed China’s “worldview” to Europe and the world through his speech at the Munich Security Conference and his meetings with dignitaries: China will surely be a factor of certainty in this multipolar system, and strive to be a steadfast constructive force in a changing world. At the same time, China has always seen in Europe an important pole in the multipolar world. It has always believed that the two sides are partners, not rivals and that the trend of multipolarity has given China and Europe more possibilities to work together to seek the “common denominator”. (BEIJING, FEBRUARY 17)

The humanities are essential for STEM to thrive

STEM TO STEAM. The study of humanities is important to provide an ethical foundation to our scientific inventions



VIPIN SONDHI
AVINASH KUMAR AGARWAL

Steve Jobs, Co-founder of Apple at the launch of iPad 2, is known to have famously said, “It is in Apple’s DNA that technology alone is not enough. It is technology married with the liberal arts, married with the humanities, that yields us the results that make our hearts sing.”

The Power of Integration also echoes through the words of Elon Musk who has often emphasised that “the best engineers are the ones who think creatively”, while the former CEO of Google, Eric Schmidt’s perspective is that “the intersection of technology and creativity is where the magic happens.”

Further, in a 2013 video produced by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, George Lucas, the director of the original *Star Wars* movie and storyteller, is credited with the quote, “The Sciences are the ‘how,’ and the Humanities are the ‘why’ — why are we here, why do we believe in the things we believe in. This is what makes us human.”

In a world increasingly driven by technological advancements, it is appealing to view science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) as the sole drivers of progress. However, while STEM fields build the tools that shape our future, it is the arts and humanities that provide the ethical foundation to guide our purpose. The intersection of these disciplines is not just desirable, it is critical — thus building a path towards ‘STEAM’ (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Mathematics).

AI algorithms can, and possibly already have perpetuated bias; social media platforms have amplified misinformation and environmental innovations have sometimes ignored equitable access. These challenges arise not from a lack of technical capability,

but from a failure to consider the human context in innovation.

As many of us connected with the automobile industry and/or with academia came away from the dazzling Bharat Mobility Show recently concluded in Delhi, we understood that questions that must be addressed in the future are: “How will autonomous vehicles be programmed to make decisions in complex situations? Will they prioritise the safety of passengers, pedestrians, the elderly or children? Whose ethical principles will they follow? What happens when these automobiles cross borders that may have a different perspective?” This is not an engineering problem alone, but also a human one.

Therefore, STEM without the arts and humanities, risks becoming impersonal and dispassionate, solving technical problems while ignoring the broader questions: Who benefits from this innovation? What are the unintended consequences? How do we ensure ethical stewardship of technology?

DISCIPLINARY DIVIDE

The historical divide between STEM and the arts and humanities perhaps began as industrialisation transformed societies. With that education began to focus on specialised fields like engineering, physics and chemistry.

The arts and humanities, including literature, history and philosophy, became distinct fields of study. Further, following World War II, there was a growing emphasis on scientific and technological education to drive economic growth and national security. The term “STEM” perhaps emerged in the 1990s, solidifying the separation between these fields and the arts and

STEM without the arts and humanities, risks becoming impersonal and dispassionate, solving technical problems while ignoring the broader questions



GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

humanities. Several factors contributed to this separation. As fields became more complex, education focused on specialised training for specific professions.

The emphasis on STEM fields was driven by the need for technological advancements to fuel economic growth. The Cold War created a sense of urgency around scientific and technological education. And finally, educational institutions and funding agencies began reinforcing STEM fields over arts and humanities due to perceived economic and practical benefits. This led to students often specialising in a single field and missing out on interdisciplinary connections and broader perspectives.

However, in recent years, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of STEAM. Many institutions now offer interdisciplinary programmes, and there is a renewed emphasis on teaching critical thinking, creativity and communication skills through the arts and humanities. These skills are vital for addressing the “why” behind the “how” in STEM.

ETHICAL FRAMEWORK

For example, the development of artificial intelligence is not just about coding; it is about understanding the ethical frameworks to prevent misuse or harm. Sam Altman, the CEO of OpenAI has emphasised that “the challenge with AI is ensuring it aligns with human values and remains under control...”

Similarly, medical innovations require human psychology, sociology and communication knowledge to ensure successful implementation and accessibility.

Therefore, for example, while designing a prosthetic arm, the design team would do well to include engineers, but also anthropologists and designers who worked closely with amputees to understand their needs and preferences. Or for the development of a community-based solar energy programme, technical experts together with social scientists, economists and NGOs embedded in the community would provide a more holistic solution.

It is essential that employers increasingly seek professionals who can combine technical expertise with creativity, problem-solving and interpersonal skills. In a 21st century economy, where automation is expected to replace routine tasks, the ability to think critically, communicate effectively and innovate responsibly will distinguish professionals from one another.

In conclusion, the future of an Innovative Economy which will take us to a Viksit Bharat, will stem, from STEM giving us the power to build. The arts and humanities teaching us what — and for whom — we should build. The challenges of the 21st century, from climate change to AI ethics, demand holistic thinkers who can blend technical skills with human insight.

Vivek Wadhwa, the CEO of Bionics, wrote in an article recently: “DeepSeek also highlighted the importance of linguistic and cultural training in AI. The company hired humanities graduates to refine language models, ensuring a deep understanding of Chinese literature and philosophy...India’s intellectual tradition is vast, spanning maths, astronomy, medicine and philosophy. Vedas, Upanishads and Arthashastra offer deep insights into governance, economics and ethics. AI trained on these texts could unlock new frontiers in reasoning, ethics and innovation.”

The call to action is clear: we must bridge the divide between these disciplines, cultivating a generation of students and professionals who are as adept at coding algorithms as they are at questioning their purpose.

After all, the future is not just a technical challenge — it is a human one. To navigate it successfully, we must embrace the full spectrum of human knowledge, ensuring that our innovations are not just technically brilliant, but also ethically and socially responsible for a truly Viksit Bharat in 2047.

Sondhi is on the Board of Governors, The Lawrence School, Sanawar, and a former MD & CEO of Ashok Leyland and JCB India; Agarwal is Director, IIT Jodhpur. Views expressed are personal

Expand FPO-industry linkages further

Affordable finance, business planning, advanced tech, and market linkages are areas where more can be done

Vinayak Nikam
Sahithi Paspuleti

Farmer Producer Organisations (FPOs) have the potential to empower smallholder farmers by harnessing their collective bargaining power and economies of scale. However, their success depends on overcoming numerous challenges, including the need for trained human resources, effective business modelling, sound finance, marketing, food safety, and brand building. FPOs’ partnerships with industries hold promise in addressing some of these key challenges. Strong FPO-industry linkages that support the 3Cs strategy of consolidation, capability and capital can ensure the proper functioning and viability of FPOs and are mutually beneficial for both FPOs and the industries involved.

While some of the initiatives have shown promising results, scaling up is necessary to benefit more FPOs. Potential areas for FPO-industry partnerships include:

Capital and finance: Capital is essential for organisational growth, and it typically takes three forms: grants, credit, and subsidies. While credit drives organisational expansion, grants and subsidies create a supportive

environment. Often credit access is linked to a robust business plan, a good credit history, and collateral, making it inaccessible to FPOs. FPO-industry linkages can enable co-lending, and provide affordable financing for working capital, machinery, as well as investments. Industries can also assist in managing residual risks, such as storage, transportation issues, and unpaid farm loans, by offering meso-level insurance, ensuring financial stability for farmers.

Operation management: Industries can support FPOs in business planning and implementation by providing expertise in market analysis, financial forecasting, and strategic goal setting. They can also help FPOs identify business opportunities, develop realistic operational plans, and ensure that these plans align with market needs.

Technology: Through industry linkages, FPOs can access advanced technologies — AI, ICT and blockchain — to improve productivity, enhance precision farming, and increase supply chain transparency. This benefits industries with a reliable tech-driven supply chain, while FPOs achieve better resource management, expanded market access, and increased income.

Capacity building: Capacity building is crucial for farmers to adopt new



CREDIT: Vital for capacity building

technologies and boost productivity. Industry linkages can complement public institutions by providing business, process-related training, and Extension Advisory Services (EAS). This will help FPOs enhance their skills in management, marketing, and technology, leading to increased efficiency and market competitiveness.

Market linkages: These are the foundation for boosting farmers’ incomes, and industries can play a pivotal role in facilitating this by providing affordable and high-quality supplies; enhancing buyer relationships; enabling value addition; offering market intelligence; and establishing export connections for global reach. These linkages can also facilitate branding and

sales promotion to enhance product value and marketability, benefiting both FPOs and industries.

Compliance: Industry linkages can guide FPOs on tax regulations, food safety standards such as HACCP (Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points) and ISO certifications, and implement quality control practices. Industries can share best practices and knowledge to enhance the efficiency and productivity of FPOs. This support ensures that FPOs meet legal requirements, gain access to new markets, and build consumer trust.

However, a cautious approach is essential to ensure that FPO-industry linkages are mutually beneficial rather than exploitative to FPOs. This can be achieved by viewing FPOs as partners in development rather than input aggregators, suppliers, or buyers of products. At the same time, FPO-industry linkages should not be overly philanthropic but rather based on a genuine partnership. The orientation should not be transaction-based but rather centred around participation and interaction.

Nikam is Senior Scientist, ICAR-National Institute of Agricultural Economics and Policy Research, and Paspuleti is Ph.D. Scholar, ICAR-Indian Agricultural Research Institute. Views are personal

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Deposit insurance

With reference to ‘Govt mulls proposal to up deposit insurance limit’ (February 18), the deposit insurance limit was increased earlier in February 2020 to ₹5 lakh from ₹1 lakh, though there were persistent demands to raise the same to at least ₹10 lakh. Since 2020, annual inflation has been oscillating in the range of 5.22-6.7 per cent, thus steeply pushing down the purchasing power of the rupee. There is pressing case for increasing the deposit insurance limit to at least ₹20 lakh from the present limit of ₹5 lakh. With scams/frauds coming to light in some bank or the other at regular intervals,

the depositors risk losing their lifetime savings. The hard-earned money of people, many of them senior citizens who park their entire savings in banks expecting secured returns, needs to be protected better. Further, time has come to differentiate between public, private and cooperative banks regarding the deposit insurance premium collected by DICGC, depending on the risk profile of the category of banks.

Kosaraju Chandramouli
Hyderabad

Passing on repo rate cut

This refers to ‘Floating rate retail

loans get cheaper post RBI rate cut’ (February 18). While the report reveals that major banks have begun to pass on the MPC recommended 25 basis point repo rate cut to customers, it was intriguing to observe that none of the private sector banks has effected the desired cuts in respect of home and other loans. In all fairness, the RBI should exhort them, too, to urgently fall in line.

Kumar Gupt
Panchkula, Haryana

Corporate governance

Apropos ‘Courtesya as cornerstone of good governance’ (February 18), it is

indeed more than essential that all those candidates who did not make the cut should be informed officially. This must be made part of good corporate governance practice. The corporate world is a small place and one never knows when the services of these candidates will be required.

Bal Govind
Noida

Impact of new tax regime

With reference to ‘Reforms by stealth in personal income tax’ (February 18), how far the new tax regime would help increase the disposable income of taxpayers, stimulate the consumption levels of

individuals and, consequently, the demand for products and service remains to be seen. The deductions permitted under Section 80C, with its long-term benefits, have all along been protecting individuals with forced savings, thus acting as a back-up to meet exigencies. It would be disastrous if the tax structure encourages too much spending and investing in risky assets, given the insufficient knowledge of individuals about stocks and mutual funds. The removal of deductions under Section 80G is also not a well-thought-out move.

Sitaram Popuri
Bengaluru

Democrats in disarray

Democratic Party: In search of a message, messenger

Sridhar Krishnaswami

It really does not matter how many Executive Orders US President Donald Trump has signed since January 20. From Day One his agenda has been clear and something that has been laid out since the time of the 2024 election campaign. And there has been no wavering in moving forward either on the immigration front; gutting the federal government in the name of trimming the fat or ridding anything and everything in the name of “woke”.

Perhaps the only outlandish proposal that has come out in the last four weeks has been the real estate pitch for Gaza that is still very much there for Trump is not the one to walk back even on an outrageous idea that has been rejected by many in the Middle East.

Suddenly Gaza is more green than Greenland!

The rank and file Democrats are no doubt in shock and awe. And angry at the leadership for not standing up to what is perceived to be orders that strike at the roots of what America is all about.

The bigger thought is that the rank and file are struggling to find a place to direct their concerns: who are the lead messengers of a Party that has been trying to digest the results of the November elections, that Trump won fair and square, at the popular and electoral college levels?

Until such time Ken Martin of Minnesota became the Chair of the Democratic National Committee recently, Democrats were not even sure who to look up to: Barack Obama or Bill Clinton of yesteryears; Kamala Harris or Tim Waltz who had seemingly dropped out of sight; Hakeem Jeffries of the House or Chuck Schumer of the Senate; or the clutch of folks who were part of the Biden administration or Governors at one time thought of potential Democratic Presidential candidates?

BLAME GAME

In the immediate aftermath of the November electoral defeat the Democrats went on a blame game hunt.

Some were quick to blame the Harris-Waltz campaign strategy; and others making the point that Harris had barely three months to put together a challenge.

There were those stressing that Biden had no business being



DEMOCRATIC PARTY. Looking for direction /ISTOCKPHOTO

in the fray after supposedly promising that he was only a “transitional” candidate in 2020. All said and done, there was also a quick realization that Harris was more focused on Trump per se than hammering away at his policies.

The 47th President won on Immigration and Economy, not on his alleged fascist credentials.

CHOOSE TARGETS CAREFULLY

There is some truth to what House leader Jeffries said — that it is not possible to swing at every pitch or that targets would have to be carefully chosen.

But the larger question is if the Democrats realise that they would have to be in the ballpark to make a game out of it.

Except for a small handful of candidates, the President’s nominees have coasted along in the Senate; and very soon the test will come in the “Big, Beautiful” bill that could come in one or two parts.

And with this will come taxes, social security, medicare, to mention a few.

Suddenly it appears that Democrats are not just looking for an urgent need of a message but also a messenger.

Harping at what went wrong with Biden is as wrong as it is irrelevant.

For that matter staying confident that November 2026 Mid Term elections are around the corner and that the Grand Old Party will be shown its place in the House and Senate could turn to be another lesson in wishful thinking.

Trump and his MAGA cohorts will make the point that in less than two years America has been made great, richer by way of trade and tariffs and given the boot to all illegal criminals and lunatics, even if the numbers don’t add up.

The writer is a senior journalist who has reported from Washington DC on North America and United Nations

thehindubusinessline. TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

February 19, 2005

Hindustan Motors to hive off 2 units; Actis to pick up stake

Hindustan Motors is believed to be considering a move to hive off its Pithampur and Hosur plants into a separate company and rope in private equity investor Actis to pick up stake. According to industry sources, the auto major would retain a sizeable stake in the new company, while Actis is expected to pick up upwards of 25 per cent stake.

Damodaran takes charge at SEBI

Mr Meleveetil Damodaran took charge on Friday as the Chairman of Securities and Exchange Board of India. The 57-year-old bureaucrat has been appointed for a three-year term at SEBI. Setting the tone for his tenure, Mr Damodaran said punishments for mischief-makers in the market would be “swift and heavy”.

Chhabria family seeks to exit from SWC biz

The Jumbo Group managed by the Manu Chhabria family has put the entire array of Shaw Wallace and Co Ltd’s (SWC) business on the block and has asked interested bidders to value the company. The company has interests in gelatines, agrochemicals and maltstay liquor, besides a 50 per cent shareholding in a beer joint venture SABMiller.

Laying rules for climate finance

GREEN FUNDING. A climate finance taxonomy will help investors direct funds towards legitimate climate-friendly projects



HARSIMRAN SANDHU
ABHINAV JINDAL

Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman, in her 2025 Budget, reaffirmed the government’s strong commitment to developing a comprehensive taxonomy for climate finance. While the process is still ongoing, the structured framework being established reflects the government’s dedication to fostering sustainable investments in India.

A well-defined taxonomy will provide essential guidelines to determine what qualifies as a “green” investment, reducing ambiguity and ensuring efficient capital allocation toward impactful projects. This initiative will not only help prevent greenwashing but also enhance investor confidence in contributing to India’s green growth.

Economic Affairs Secretary Ajay Seth recently confirmed that the comprehensive taxonomy exercise is expected to be completed within the next six months. With this clear direction, India is positioning itself as a leader in climate-conscious financial markets, attracting sustainable investments for the long term.

FRAMEWORK IN PROGRESS

A climate finance taxonomy serves as a classification system that defines environmentally sustainable economic activities. It provides a roadmap for investors, banks, and financial institutions to direct funds toward legitimate climate-friendly projects rather than those merely claiming to be green.

Furthermore, with the EU set to enforce the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) by 2026, India risks losing its competitive edge in sectors like steel and aluminium unless it swiftly aligns its financial regulations with global standards.

To meet India’s Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) by



JOINING HANDS. The government has taken major strides in fostering partnerships between regulators, financial institutions, and private sector /GETTY IMAGES

2030, an estimated \$2.5 trillion is needed.

The full transition to a low-carbon economy would require an even more staggering \$10 trillion. Given this immense funding requirement, India’s climate finance strategy must be clear and well-defined to avoid regulatory ambiguity.

But developing a climate finance taxonomy requires creating a standardised system that accommodates India’s unique economic, social, and environmental contexts. The process is complex and time-consuming, involving cross-sector collaboration, data gathering, capacity building, and regulatory alignment — all while mitigating the risks of greenwashing and ensuring an inclusive transition.

GLOBAL TRENDS, LOCAL GAPS

The Network for Greening the Financial System (NGFS), which includes 89 central banks worldwide, is driving efforts to integrate climate risks into financial stability policies. Since joining in 2021, the Reserve Bank of India has

taken commendable steps, including launching green deposits, expanding priority sector lending for renewable energy, and issuing sovereign green bonds worth \$2.2 billion.

The RBI’s 2022-23 Report on Currency and Finance emphasised that the absence of standardisation introduces financial risk and complicates the identification of green assets.

Without a clear taxonomy, Indian banks struggle to design products to support climate goals.

BRIDGING THE GAPS

Fast-track the climate taxonomy: The government needs to expedite the climate taxonomy to provide

Given India’s \$10-trillion funding requirement, its climate finance strategy must be clear and well-defined to avoid regulatory ambiguity

STATISTALK.

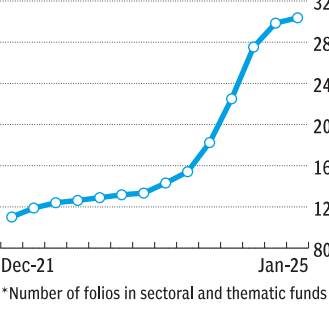
Compiled by Nishanth Gopalakrishnan | Graphic KS Gunasekar

Beware of volatile returns of sectoral and thematic funds

The raging bull market over the last three years has attracted massive flows into sectoral and thematic funds. The number of folios and the assets under management of these funds as of December 2024 have nearly tripled in three years. Such funds give outsized returns only in a favourable upcycle and the returns they deliver year on year vary widely. Investors need to be wary of this fact. The inconsistencies in performance are depicted in the charts

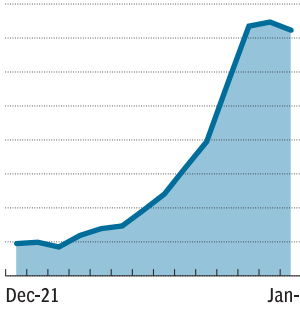
Massive rise in the number of folios

No. of folios (in lakh)*

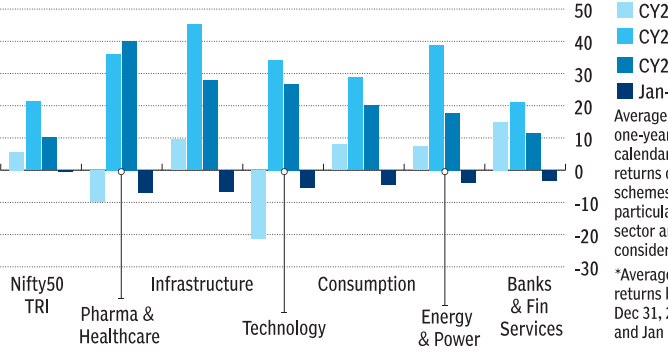


Assets under management have tripled

AUM of sectoral and thematic funds (₹ lakh cr)



How the returns compare among sectoral funds



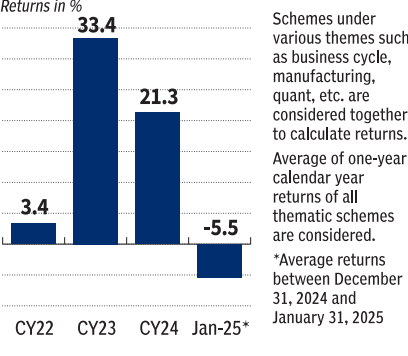
Source: ACE MF

Top performers in a year aren’t so in other years

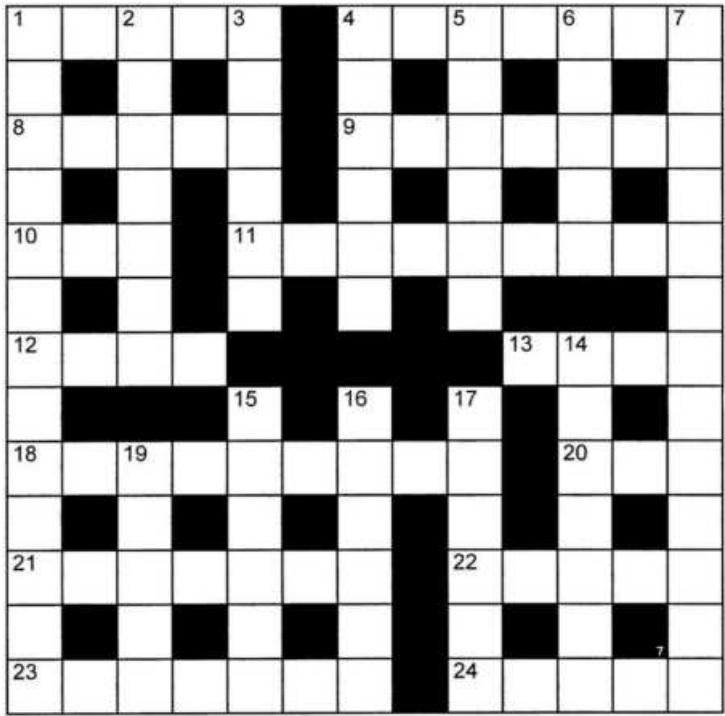
Sector	Ranking		
	CY22	CY23	CY24
Pharma & Health Care	5	3	1
Infrastructure	2	1	2
Technology	6	4	3
Consumption	3	5	4
Energy & Power	4	2	5
Banks & Fin Services	1	6	6

Ranked based on average of one-year calendar year returns of all mutual fund schemes in that particular sector

How thematic funds fared



BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2635



EASY

ACROSS

- Smooths things out (5)
- Seated (7)
- Puff up the spirits (5)
- Girl’s name (7)
- Spinning toy (3)
- Warning of conflagration (4, 5)
- One thing listed’ (4)
- Practise boxing (4)
- In an unspecified place (9)
- Facial twitching (3)
- Greek short ‘o’ (7)
- Christmas show, in short (5)
- Young felines (7)
- Regal (5)

DOWN

- Jolt one gets from bare wire (8,5)
- A ‘for instance’ (7)
- Reprimand, get rid of (3,3)
- Safe, fast (6)
- Jewelled head-pieces (6)
- The subcontinent (5)
- Type of educational establishment (7,6)
- Strength, effectiveness (7)
- Suddenly deviate from course (6)
- Ball game (6)
- Custodian (6)
- Damp (5)

SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2634

ACROSS 1. Wind machine 8. Kudos 9. Deprive 10. Faience 11. Stork 12. Lights 14. Gossip 18. Wages 19. Replica 21. Amphora 23. Pagan 24. Shepherdess

DOWN 1. Wakeful 2. Nodding 3. Mason 4. Cadger 5. Impasto 6. Eli 7. Break 13. Tussore 15. Shingle 16. Plaints 17. Preach 18. Wears 20. Piper 22. Pus

NOT SO EASY

ACROSS

- Nevertheless the South makes it smooth (5)
- Session that’s sharp and painful about it (7)
- Last crane, being behind time, to lift one up (5)
- She causes a ducal collapse about one (7)
- It’s the principal spinner (3)
- As a result of which the brigade can go to blazes (4,5)
- It’s a piece of news and it sets me back (4)
- A bit of wood to fight about (4)
- May be placed, but in an unstated position (9)
- Soundly, the second uncontrollable movement (3)
- Room in Corinthian capital the Greeks wrote round (7)
- It shortly goes to show it’s wintertime (5)
- Knitters may have no right to be young and catty (7)
- Produce the eggs, or return to being blue-blooded (5)

DOWN

- Too much hair producing sparks? (8,5)
- An instance that used to be plenty (7)
- Take one to the station to reprimand one? (3,3)
- Make certain of being tight (6)
- Headwear shown by Academician I sat for (6)
- Where one met naïad without a mixture (5)
- Where one is taught not to split infinitives? (7,6)
- Copy ‘X’ with this sort of strength (7)
- Verse form around the West will go off course (6)
- A number do wrong to be upset in sport (6)
- The man behind the wicket may look after the animals (6)
- One gets in the greatest damp situation (5)

A stable banking system

Deposit insurance must be extended substantially

The Reserve Bank of India's recent decision to impose curbs, including withdrawal restrictions, on Mumbai-based New India Cooperative Bank has once again brought attention to how individuals suffer due to the inefficiency and mismanagement in banks. Lives depend on savings deposited in banks. There is an ongoing debate whether India still needs cooperative banks, given the increased reach of commercial banks, enabled by technology. Another related area worth debating is whether individuals should suffer in such cases, which are essentially a result of inadequate regulatory oversight and mismanagement by the bank concerned. In this regard, to protect depositors, deposits of up to ₹5 lakh are insured by Deposit Insurance and Credit Guarantee Corporation. However, as a report in this newspaper showed on Tuesday, in terms of value, only about 43.1 per cent of accessible deposits are insured. The government is reported to be considering increasing the insurance limit.

While the government would do well to decide in this regard as early as possible, there are several related issues worth considering. The business of banks is based on trust because bank balance sheets are inherently unstable. Banks usually have relatively short-term liabilities in terms of deposits and they issue loans for relatively long terms, creating an asset-liability mismatch. Further, while depositors can withdraw money relatively freely, banks cannot recall their loans as quickly. The adoption of technology has made management even more complicated. Depositors can shift their deposits in real time without even visiting a branch. Therefore, it is important for banks to be seen as healthy and stable at all times. Even a rumour of a run can bring the bank down. The ensuing panic can impact other banks, as was seen in the United States in 2023, starting with Silicon Valley Bank (SVB). A crisis of confidence can bring down the banking system, which has implications for the wider economy.

This is why banks must be properly regulated. However, mishaps cannot be entirely ruled out in a functioning market economy, with shareholder pressure to perform. It is thus important to be prepared. This is not to suggest that there are any such risks in the Indian banking system, but to provide enduring stability, it will be important that most bank deposits are insured. To begin with, insurance cover can be extended to all individual accounts. A depositor should not be expected to constantly evaluate the position of a bank. It is the job of the regulator and must be performed by the regulator. A bank account is a basic need for citizens and the state must ensure its safety.

But there will be associated costs. These costs can be shared among depositors, banks, and possibly the government because the banking system's stability is vital for the smooth functioning of the economy. If depositors know their money is safe, they will not rush to withdraw deposits and exacerbate the problem. Insurance was extended to all deposits in the SVB crisis in the United States, which helped prevent a bigger banking crisis. Increasing insurance coverage in India will also help level the playing field between private and public-sector banks. However, it can be argued that such a guarantee of safety will lead to moral hazard and encourage bank managements to take excessive risks, rendering the system more vulnerable. This will be a possibility. However, it is for the regulator to ensure risks are properly managed. It is important to note that safety cover should be extended only to bank deposits, not to other financial instruments chosen by individuals for higher returns.

Caveat influencers

An ethics council is a good start

Launching the India Influencer Governing Council (IIGC) last week underlines the explosive growth of the influencer market in India and the need to establish some sort of standards to govern it. Unlike its conventional counterpart, the brand-endorsement business on print and TV, the ambit of social influencers, is many orders of magnitude larger owing to the power of social media. From political and social commentary to brand and product endorsements to YouTube and instant video apps in a multitude of languages, this sprawling area has infinite visibility. No surprise, populous India is one of the world's fastest-growing influencer markets, expected to surpass ₹3,375 crore by 2026. A note introducing the IIGC, comprising senior executives from leading digital-services companies as the founding leadership team and over 65 board advisors across influencers and brand leaders on board, recognises this. It refers to the "colossal scale" and "challenges around transparency, promotions, and regulatory uncertainty" and aims to set standards, protect influencer rights, and promote responsible content creation. The question is whether this agenda would be sufficient.

Last year, the Advertising Standards Council of India (Asci) had come up with a set of self-regulatory guidelines for influencers build around disclaimers and disclosures. The Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi) has regulations for influencers peddling financial products. Importantly, Sebi's regulations involve penalties — recently invoked, for example, in the case of Asmita Patel and her Global School of Trading. Likewise, the United States Federal Trade Commission and the Advertising Standards Authority, and the Competition and Markets Authority in the United Kingdom have rules about honesty and disclosures for brand influencers. Transgressing these could attract penalties, fines, and legal notices. It is unclear whether the IIGC will have the authority to do so. Without some sort of deterrent capability in place, the efficacy of the IIGC may be muted.

Establishing standards will also be challenging. As with social media comment, unexceptionable recommendations for fairness, balance, and propriety may preclude brash interjections for which influencer Ranveer Allahbadia finds himself facing death threats and police cases, and he has been upbraided by the Supreme Court. But the line between comment (in this case supposed comedy) and opinion is a fine one and recent experience in India has shown that a person's views may be another person's insult, a problem that is easily amplified on social media, where posts go viral in seconds. Equally, establishing influencer rights may also be necessary. The legal threat by Mondelez to an influencer for highlighting the high sugar content in bestselling children's drink Bournvita is a case in point. The influencer took down the video and apologised since he lacked the resources to go to court. The fact that Cadbury subsequently reduced the sugar content in Bournvita suggests an unfair balance of commercial power. One solution would be to partner the government to establish standards. For instance, it was the memorandum of understanding between Asci and the Ministry of AYUSH aimed at monitoring misleading advertisements of AYUSH drugs that enabled a case to be lodged against the proprietors of the ayurved major Patanjali. Despite these challenges, the IIGC is a good beginning. No doubt, it will refine its approach with experience to gain real traction. Till then, *caveat emptor* remains the motto.



ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

Dark enlightenment

The geopolitical dimension of what is unfolding in Washington will have significant collateral impacts on India

The Trump presidency is dismantling virtually all the pillars of the American federal bureaucracy and his hatchet man is the billionaire Elon Musk, who heads a new Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE). It is important to understand the ideational underpinning behind these events in Washington. Most of these ideas are from intellectuals who are "techno-optimists". They see technological advancement, in particular artificial intelligence (AI), as the road to unprecedented and universal human advancement. Technological progress, they assert, is both inevitable and irresistible. Rather than trying to slow it or install guardrails, it is best to get out of its way.

Democracy with its notion of checks and balances is rejected as an outdated system that retards technological advancement. Such thinking has given rise to the notion of "dark enlightenment", negating the liberal progression since the 16th century European Renaissance and its vision of 18th century Enlightenment through the gradual embrace of humanistic and liberal values. First brought into the high-tech vocabulary by the British scholar Nicholas Land, it has been adopted by several Silicon Valley entrepreneurs like Peter Thiel. "Accelerationism" is an aspect of dark enlightenment. It argues that since technology, in particular AI, will lead to the massive creative destruction of the current industrial economy and widespread political and social disruption, it is best to hasten the process of change to reach its ultimate destination, whatever that may be, sooner rather than later. This is also linked to the notion of "singularity", associated with Ray Kurzweil, who believes that we are approaching a point where AI will surpass human intelligence and will then keep advancing exponentially. Mr Kurzweil welcomes what many would consider a dystopian future. What is ominous

is that Silicon Valley's many leading lights, including people like Mr Musk, who are influencing Mr Trump's policies, share this techno-optimism even if not in its most radical versions. The dismantling of the federal government and the sweeping away of regulation across the board are the first shots towards enabling "accelerationism".

Mr Land has described another phenomenon associated with this tech-led transformation. This is "hyperstition", or hyper technological change co-existing with the resurgence of superstition. As he describes the term, it is something "equipped between fiction and technology". Technology is taking on attributes of magic but also enabling the unmediated deluge of social media, which breeds alternative and fictional realities. This is already familiar in India. While technology barons are hyper-elitist, they control the instruments of mass manipulation, which become attractive instruments to the political class. But the ultimate manipulators are not political leaders but the tech-elite.

Corporate lobbies have always influenced politics and government. But today they aspire to run government and believe that "capitalist corporate power should become the organising force in society". The politician is just a convenient instrument. If there is any doubt on this score, just go back to the TV clip of Mr Musk holding forth in the Oval office, with Mr Trump present as just another prop in the scene. Mr Musk is wearing casual clothes and is letting his young son have the run of one of the most hallowed offices in the country. The message sought to be conveyed is as obvious as it is disturbing.

The case for corporate power has been made by former Silicon Valley entrepreneur Curtis Yarvin. Mr Yarvin argues that governments have become dysfunctional and democratic governments even more so and are incapable of delivering good governance



SHYAM SARAN

Move fast on high-speed rail

When the first Rajdhani left Delhi for Howrah on March 1, 1969, at 5:30 pm, it collapsed a journey that took more than 24 hours to 17 hours. The ticket price was ₹280 for air-conditioned (AC) first class and ₹90 for AC chair car. The gleaming red and white fully AC train, with quality meals thrown in, zipped past iconic stations in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar at 120 km per hour without stopping. It is amusing to recall that many editorials then branded it "elitist" and a luxury that a poverty-stricken India could ill afford.

Well, the transformational agenda now is clearly high-speed rail (HSR); and once again, we should be careful not to confuse leapfrogging technology development with elitism. HSR is poised to get mainstreamed into India's railway passenger network at a time when four parallel developments are underway.

One, the railways is itself going through an era of rejuvenation. The focused expansion of the rail network, dedicated freight corridors, imminent completion of the Bullet Train project, growing numbers and variety of Vande Bharat trains, Regional Rapid Transit Systems (a la Delhi-Meerut and others), station redevelopment, and modern 'Kavach' safety systems are all a testimony to the unfolding vision for this crucial national transporter. HSR should be an integral part of the rejuvenation.

Two, the Indian railways operates 13,000 passenger trains daily, ferrying 24 million passengers (just 2 million short of the population of Australia). Of this about 10 million are non-suburban, long-distance passengers, and about 0.5 million (5 per cent) travel in AC coaches. This is the well-heeled segment that is increasingly threatened by affordable air travel, and inter-city luxury coaches.

Three, India's economic indicators suggest the country is primed for a transformative leap in rail technology. India's per capita gross domestic product (on a purchasing power parity basis) is at par with

the gross domestic product of other countries at a time when they pioneered HSR several decades ago — pointing to the fact that this is the right time for India to make the leap from conventional to HSR.

Four, an HSR training institute is being developed in Vadodara and it will have high-end facilities to train about 4,000 people on an ongoing basis. Capacity-building for HSR is underway.

With all these, HSR is in many ways an inevitable option because the Indian Railways' network is so large and complex that upgrading the existing setup to meet contemporary travel demands may take decades. According to the International Union of Railways, the upgrade of existing lines to a maximum speed of 200-220 km per hour qualifies as HSR, as much as a new alignment designed for speeds of 250 km per hour or more. This definition offers India a flexible approach to modernising with an HSR thrust. It is interesting to note that the Ahmedabad-Mumbai bullet train is expected to have a top speed of 320 km per hour — the same as Japan's Shinkansen. In China, the Shanghai Maglev reaches a top speed of 431 km per hour.

The beneficial fallouts of HSR are many. Shifting AC I and AC II passengers to HSR will free up capacity for sleeper and second-class travel. It will ease continuing congestion on the high-density networks of the Indian Railways with its separate lines. It will accelerate dispersing urban agglomerations — often popularly referred to as "sleeper towns" — and play a potent role in decongesting major cities. Every kilometre of HSR provides five times the capacity of conventional rail and can play a crucial role in developing Tier-II and -III cities.

It is well recognised among railway specialists that HSR is a complex system requiring seamless integration of various technologies, including rolling stock, track design, signalling, centralised control, safety, and operating and maintenance systems. While India has



INFRATALK

VINAYAK CHATTERJEE

held grudges. Mr Romig talked to many of her friends and acquaintances who singled out her warmth, her love for family and friends, her openness to debates and discussions, and her propensity to not let disagreements mar her relationships with people. The ones close to her were used to these facets of her personality. In a poignant section, Mr Romig wonders: "Perhaps she expected her gibes to roll off her targets the same way their attacks rolled off her. She didn't hold grudges, so she underestimated the grudges of others. And what was her murder but a bloody grudge?"

While Gauri Lankesh is at the centre of this book with Mr Romig exploring "not just the investigation into her murder but also her life, the world she came out of, and her beloved city, Bangalore", it also includes two stories as interludes. The first explores the legends surrounding Thomas the Apostle who is

and prospects for growth and prosperity. His preferred government is one that mimics a successful corporation headed by a powerful chief executive officer, who runs her or his company like a monarch. He gives the example of the iPhone, which could have been designed and produced only by an Apple led by an autocratic leader. Or whatever may have been the achievements of state-led Nasa (National Aeronautics and Space Administration) in the past, it is now Mr Musk's SpaceX that represents the future with its dreams of establishing settlements on Mars and beyond. American Vice-President JD Vance has publicly acknowledged the influence of Mr Yarvin's ideas on him, including that the current deeply entrenched US (United States) establishment — the so-called deep state — needs to be uprooted and transformed before it can meet the challenge of the future. A particular target is DEI policies — diversity, equity and inclusion — which are integral to any pluralist democracy. Not only are these being abandoned in the US, right-wing parties in Europe are being actively encouraged to follow suit. Anti-immigration policies are the most visible demonstration of this and India's active encouragement of the export of its manpower of different categories will face headwinds.

Trump 2.0 is very different from Trump 1.0. It would be a mistake to think that tactics which worked in the earlier phase can just be repurposed in the current phase. The institutional edifice of the American state, which draws its legitimacy from the US Constitution, is being dismantled brick by brick. The system of checks and balances is being subverted to usher in an imperial presidency.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has had, by all accounts, a very successful visit to Washington. It has been successful in at least deflecting the greater harm that the US is now capable of inflicting on friend and foe alike. The pomp and show at the White House were preceded and then followed by the demeaning spectacle of Indian citizens — illegal immigrants though they may be — of being repatriated in humiliating circumstances to the country. That should give us pause.

As a self-styled autocrat, Mr Trump professes affinity with the likes of Russia's Vladimir Putin and China's Xi Jinping. He believes he can do a deal with both. The recent Munich Security Conference witnessed the brutal cutting down to size of Europe by Mr Vance, who said that neither Russia nor China was a threat to Europe but Europe itself and that the US could not handhold Europe any longer. In determining Ukraine's fate in its war against Russian aggression, Europe will not figure in the forthcoming negotiations between Mr Trump and Mr Putin. Mr Trump believes that the world's problems can be solved in what could be a latter-day Yalta (where a meeting of Franklin Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, and Joseph Stalin took place in the closing days of World War II) among the US, Russia, and China. This would reduce the Quad to a tactical gambit from having been billed as a cornerstone of US Indo-Pacific strategy. The geopolitical dimension of what is unfolding in Washington will have significant collateral impacts on India.

The author is a former foreign secretary

The legacy of Gauri Lankesh



BOOK REVIEW

AREEB AHMAD

September 5, 2017, was just another day for Gauri Lankesh. It was Tuesday, which meant that week's edition of the *Gauri Lankesh Patrike* had to go to press the next day. She spent a good portion of the afternoon catching up with some old friends who had dropped by the newspaper office. She didn't set out for home until around 7:30 pm, which was early for her. Driving through Bengaluru traffic, she didn't register a bike tailing her during the last stretch. She arrived home shortly after 8 pm. It was a small house that belonged to her mother who also lived with her. No sooner had she opened the gate than the bike's pillion rushed at

her and shot at her three times. She was hit twice; the third bullet missed. By the time Gauri died on her front step, the biker had long vanished.

Her death sent shockwaves through the country. The crowd at rallies and protests in her honour — "writers, students, activists, Dalits, Adivasis, transgender women, autorickshaw drivers, landless farmers, sex workers, Muslims, Christians" — spoke to the diversity of lives Gauri had touched via her work. As a special investigation team concluded in November 2018 with a charge sheet almost 10,000 pages long, her murder was part of a series of politically motivated killings of prominent left-wing writer-activists by a nameless group with close links to Sanatan Sanstha, a Hindu nationalist organisation headquartered in Goa. The first one was Narendra Dabholkar in August 2013 followed by Govind Pansare in February 2015 and M M Kalburgi in August 2015. Rollo Romig's landmark book, *I Am on the Hit List*, is a

detailed, contextual examination of Gauri Lankesh's murder.

Born in 1962, Gauri Lankesh was an Indian activist, journalist, translator, and writer from Bengaluru, Karnataka. She was the daughter of P Lankesh, a powerhouse versatile personality in his own right as writer, journalist and filmmaker. He started the Kannada language weekly newspaper called *Lankesh Patrike* in 1980 and was its editor until his death in 2000 after which Gauri took over. She left it in 2005 due to increasing ideological differences with her younger brother who was the paper's proprietor and publisher. Gauri then started her own Kannada paper, *Gauri Lankesh Patrike*. Both papers relied solely on subscribers and never published any advertisements. While Gauri's paper never matched the circulation of her father's paper, both were renowned for their irreverent, even salacious, coverage of socio-political events in Karnataka and India.

To put it briefly: "[Gauri's paper] was a tabloid in every sense, gleefully sensational and indifferent to decorum. Its mission was earnest, but its tone was typically puckish." It was yellow journalism, but geared towards causes close to her heart. Gauri was not someone who prioritised nuance, hearing both sides, or objectivity: "To her there was

nothing complex about fighting the oppression of women, religious minorities, and the so-called lower castes — a fight she came to see as her journalistic mission. She couldn't see the point in pretending to be impartial, or, more dangerously, in stating with caution anything she felt sure was true, even if it was inflammatory or unproven." Naturally, she gained enemies and vocal critics over the years, not to mention vicious trolls.

It also did not help that Gauri publicly criticised both friends and foes, a quality she shared with her father. Yet, she never



I AM ON THE HIT LIST: Murder and Myth-making in South India
Author: Rollo Romig
Publisher: Westland
Pages: 372
Price: ₹799

said to have preached the Gospel in India after landing in Kerala in mid-1st century and was killed two decades later. The second one focuses on P Rajagopal, who started the now global South Indian restaurant chain, Saravanaa Bhavan, in Chennai and who was also a convicted murderer later in life.

Using Gauri's murder as a starting point, the book discusses the rising intolerance and polarisation in India especially in terms of young men (and women) getting radicalised to hate without being open to understanding each other. It focuses on the rise of right-wing ideas and Muslim hate across the globe and criticises the Sangh Parivar for undermining the syncretic values that have defined India for so long. Most significantly, Mr Romig mourns the inertia of the Indian justice system and the capitulation of democratic institutions. *I Am on the Hit List* is a tribute to the writers, journalists, and activists who continue to speak truth to power and work towards a brighter tomorrow.

The reviewer is a Delhi-based writer, critic, and translator who loves to champion indie presses and experimental books

Tasks before the new CEC

The Election Commission's reputation as an independent institution needs to be protected

Gyanesh Kumar takes over as the chief election commissioner (CEC) of India at a time when the authority and integrity of the Election Commission of India (ECI) has come under challenge. The outgoing CEC, Rajiv Kumar, on demitting office said that “losers” must not target ECI. He has a point — the commission’s institutional integrity has been repeatedly questioned, particularly by the Congress, after the latter’s electoral losses in the Haryana and Maharashtra assembly elections — but it must also be said the statutory body needs to do its bit to win back the trust of the Opposition and sceptics in civil society.

The perception that ECI allows far too much leeway to the ruling party and its leaders during the election campaign or allegations that voter turnout and electoral rolls have been manipulated are at worst, mere allegations, or at best, data points shorn of context as of now, but the institution will need to walk the extra yard to clear the air on them. For Ceaser’s wife must be above suspicion. ECI must ensure that its well-deserved reputation as an independent authority that is committed to holding elections in a free and fair manner and without bending to the whims of the executive authority is not compromised. That, perhaps, is the foremost challenge for Kumar, who is likely to oversee at least 20 assembly elections during his tenure as CEC.

How the Supreme Court concludes the Opposition’s plea on the constitution of the panel that selects the ECI may have a bearing on the fraught relations between the institution and the Opposition. In March 2023, the apex court had asked the Centre to invite the Chief Justice of India to be on the selection panel until Parliament legislated on the matter. The government quickly brought in a law but changed the composition of the three-member panel to include a Union minister besides the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition. The new law has tilted the scales in the government’s favour, which the Opposition has argued goes against the spirit of the apex court’s order that preferred the inclusion of a third, neutral party in the panel.

Just as the apex court settles the debate, the CEC should put in measures to make the election process more transparent. The point is not just to hold elections in a free and fair manner but also to be seen as doing so.

500 days of war later, Gaza’s fate uncertain

Gaza, now a ghost town, stares at greater uncertainty than it faced at the beginning of the Israel-Hamas war just over 500 days ago. In the interim, an immense human cost has been paid, with 1,200 dead on the Israeli side more than 48,000 on the Palestinian side, and hundreds of thousands of Gazans rendered homeless. Sure, a tenuous peace has been achieved, and Israeli bombs are not raining down for now, but this peace remains fragile. The primary issues that led to the war — the Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands, the Palestinian’s right to movement, and, most importantly, the question of Palestinian Statehood — have expectedly not disappeared. But there are new thorns emerging for lasting peace in the region.

US president Donald Trump’s stance — which could eventually translate into the United States’ Gaza policy — of clearing Gaza of Palestinians and Benjamin Netanyahu’s high-stakes pursuit of total elimination of Hamas have only stoked apprehensions about what Israel and the US intend to do there. Trump wants Gazans to relocate to Jordan and Egypt, which the Arab world has already rejected. Netanyahu has seconded this line of ethnic cleansing enthusiastically, saying Israel would be up for the job of clearing out Gaza.

Attempts to erase the Gazans’ claim to their homeland may serve only to further radicalise not just the Palestinians but also sympathisers of Palestine in the larger Arab world. Gaza, in its present condition, remains uninhabitable, with skeletons of homes standing amid the rubble and its health systems, water and other utilities having completely collapsed. It needs to be rebuilt, and the global community must come together to do this, but with Gazans and the larger Palestinian community having the final say.

Follow-through will be Trump’s test for India

Not since the nuclear deal has there been as much pressure on the Indian system to walk the talk on the US relationship

Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi confronts problems directly. His visit to Washington DC, straight into the lion’s den, was proof of Modi’s willingness to do so. And it paid off. The visit went off without any embarrassing incident, a fact that can never be taken for granted when Donald Trump is around. Trump was more personally effusive about Modi than he is about foreign leaders. And the joint statement laid out a truly ambitious blueprint to deepen defence, economic and technology ties.

But pleasing Trump involved making serious commitments that will test Indian economic policymakers, the defence establishment, and the political leadership in the next six months. Trump is likely to make his visit to Delhi and appearance at Quad contingent on the deliverables on the bilateral stage.

The first test for the economic establishment involves working with Trump’s team to arrive at the first tranche of a bilateral trade agreement (BTA). Don’t assume this is just about reducing tariffs, which in itself will be a challenge given political sensitivities. And don’t assume that buying more energy by itself will make Trump happy. Trump’s order on reciprocal

taxes factors in the entire menu of policies that can be seen as favouring domestic businesses over foreign businesses (subsidies, tax regimes, regulatory actions). The United States (US) has its eyes on India’s data rules, treatment of American e-commerce and tech companies, and any non-tariff barrier that can be remotely interpreted as distorting a “level playing field”.

This is not about whether Trump is right or wrong — the hypocrisy inherent in America turning protectionist and asking India to open up more is glaring. This is not about whether the external push may well result in helping the Indian economy — and indeed the economy does need a reboot and more openness to draw investment.

This is about being aware of the choice between Trumpian retribution that will inevitably hurt exports and investment, two essential engines at the time of an economic slowdown, and a fairly high degree of US-centric trade liberalisation and economic openness that will inevitably trigger resistance from strong domestic business lobbies and the bureaucracy.

Navigating this will require tough political calls. It will require the ministries of finance, commerce, and electronics and information technology, to work together very closely. And it will require ensuring that domestic regulatory authorities aren’t seen as tools of domestic national champions.

The second test is for the defence

establishment, which has to show Trump real money within the coming year. But don’t assume this is just about a couple of systems here and there. Trump has walked into office expecting much greater Indian defence integration with the US. Again, this may be something that works for Indian security in itself, but it is useful to be aware of the expectations and the choices it entails.

Trump’s reference to “billions of dollars” of sales is serious. The fact that Trump cleared the Predator drones but India took seven years to buy the drones (under the next presidency) is something that his ecosystem remembers.

His team also knows how Trump forced India to speed up the acquisition of Apache attack helicopters and Sea-Hawk helicopters, by threatening to announce it in Ahmedabad unilaterally and making the success of his 2020 visit contingent on it. This time, Trump wants to sell more systems and quickly.

It is in this context that one has to understand the F-35 riddle. India doesn’t have the money for it and doesn’t quite want it. It shows the US’s willingness to go far on technology contingent on acquisitions, and this is good, especially if the US really reviews export control regulations. But Delhi is now in a curious position where it is privately hoping that the older American defence establishment actually blocks even talk of an F-35 sale. If Trump does open the doors for it, and this gets into his head, then the pressure on Delhi to



Prashant Jha

Challenging the Chinese with drones and robotics

Rahul Gandhi’s recent criticism of India’s drone industry, while brandishing a banned DJI drone, highlights a misunderstanding of India’s technological capabilities and a disregard for the threats posed by China. Ironically, his actions underscore the very need for supporting, not questioning, India’s burgeoning drone and robotics sectors.

China’s dominance in robotics, drones, and electric vehicles, while seemingly impressive, is built on a foundation of State control, espionage, and exploitation. Companies such as Unitree and DJI are not simply industry leaders; they are extensions of a government focused on global surveillance and dominance.

The dangers are evident: DJI drones used for unauthorised surveillance over United States (US) military sites are just one example. State subsidies and intellectual property theft have artificially inflated the success of Chinese companies, but this facade is crumbling. The US and Europe are finally taking action, implementing bans and tariffs to protect their own industries. China’s golden age in these sectors is waning.

This creates a significant opportunity for India. The country is at a historic crossroads, poised not only to fill the void left by a retreating China but to redefine global markets. India’s approach is fundamentally different. It relies not on underhanded tactics or espionage but on its talent, innovation, and integrity. India’s success in IT services and pharmaceuticals demonstrates its ability to dominate industries through capability and trustworthiness.

India’s robotics industry has tremendous potential and companies such as Addverb Technologies are setting new benchmarks in manufacturing and innovation. Addverb built its ecosystem from the ground up. From designing and manufacturing all its electronic components in-house to establishing a world-class facility capable of producing 100,000 robots a year, Addverb has shown what Indian ingenuity can achieve. And it’s not stopping there. With advancements in cobots and quadrupeds, Addverb is targeting industries like defence and petrochemicals, delivering solutions for the most challenging environments.

I recently visited Addverb’s facility in Noida and was blown away by the technologies they’ve developed and the boldness of their vision. Its CEO, Sangeet Kumar, candidly outlined the challenges: India needs cost-effective actuators, a highly trained workforce, and patient venture capital. These are not insurmountable obstacles — they are opportunities for India to rise above and create a robotics ecosystem that the world can trust.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) integration is another arena where Indian companies are making ground-breaking advances. Bharat Forge is leveraging AI to redefine defence technologies, exemplified by the Bharat 150 multi-payload drone, engineered for high-altitude operations with unparalleled precision. My visit with Baba Kalyani and his team in Pune revealed their relentless drive to bolster India’s self-reliance in unmanned aerial systems. Their partnership with Gen-

eral Atomics Aeronautical Systems to produce components for remotely piloted aircraft underscores their dual commitment to cutting-edge innovation and indigenous manufacturing.

India’s drone sector is equally promising. Companies such as EndureAir Systems and Idea Forge are rewriting the rules of what drones can achieve. In 2019, EndureAir tested their drones at high-altitude locations like Changla Pass, proving their unique UAVs that merge helicopter-like design with unmanned efficiency.

EndureAir’s drones, such as the Sabal, inspired by the Chinook, are now the preferred choice of the Indian armed forces for high-altitude missions. Their Alakh nano drone is used in counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism operations and can also function as a kamikaze drone. During my visit to EndureAir’s Noida facility, I learned of their impressive ability to blend advanced engineering with cost efficiency to deliver cutting-edge technologies.

Similarly, Idea Forge, a trailblazer in India’s drone industry, has developed several innovative solutions to address both defence and commercial needs. Its successful IPO last year is a testament to the market’s confidence in its capabilities and its immense potential for global leadership in the drone sector.

The Indian government is laying the groundwork for this revolution with policy rather than subsidy and theft. Policies like the 2021 drone policy and the 2023 robotics policy have provided a clear roadmap for growth, promoting technology development, entrepreneurship, and skill-building. Innovation hubs at the Indian Institutes of Technology and the Indian Institute of Science, funded by the National Mission on Interdisciplinary Cyber-Physical Systems, are fostering cutting-edge research in robotics and drones.

There is, however, still much to do. India needs to scale up research and development investment, streamline regulations, and foster public-private partnerships to accelerate this momentum. Above all, it needs venture capitalists who are willing to play the long game — supporting high-growth sectors without expecting instant returns.

All the companies I met have big ambitions. For example, Addverb aims to become the largest producer of robots globally and serve 100 countries — this is precisely the kind of energy and determination India needs.

India’s robotics and drone industries represent a transformative opportunity to reshape global supply chains and position India as the world’s most trusted leader in advanced technologies. Unlike China’s dominance — built on exploitation and control — India’s ascent is rooted in integrity and innovation.

The world is ready for a new leader, and all signs point to India. So perhaps Rahul Gandhi should visit the same companies I did and provide them with lots of encouragement rather than praising Chinese technologies.



Vivek Wadhwa



New Delhi is now in a curious position where it is privately hoping that the older American defence establishment blocks talk of a F-35 sale. REUTERS

acquire it will only increase in the next few years. And even if that’s not the path Delhi traverses, expect pressure to buy other systems, to work on other mechanisms of military coordination in other theatres, and to incorporate this deeper alignment in the 10-year framework that will be signed this year.

All of this eventually will test the political leadership. Modi has been honest about the US as a valued partner since 2014 itself. He knows deepening both economic and military ties is in India’s interest. He knows the Indian street like the US. And he has become better friends with the US in a masterful way that has allowed India to retain its autonomy. But India has been able to do this largely because the US was a polite transactional power under Barack Obama and Joe Biden, and Trump, in his first term, was finding his feet.

The US is no longer a polite transactional power, but a ruthless extractive power. When a veteran like the Singaporean defence minister Ng Eng Hen says that Washington now sees Asia much like a “landlord seeking rent”, India better know what it is dealing with. And nothing symbolises this more than the depor-

tation flights. The fact that Indian diplomacy in DC failed to manage either the timing or nature of the flights speaks of how little influence it really has in Trump’s world.

This is just a microcosm of the real political challenge now at hand. India has wisely decided to deepen ties with the US. This will require India to do more than it has in the past. It has to do more at a time when the US isn’t necessarily going to be respectful of India’s political needs, or even as dependable, and is fighting with both its allies and much of the global south. All of this means that the political costs of aligning with the US will grow both domestically and externally.

The nuclear deal saw an Indian government stake its survival for the sake of its relationship with the US. The reward was clear: Entry into an elite strategic club. Not since then has the Indian system been put under the same pressure to walk the talk on the US. This time, the reward is the lack of punishment, and then, hopefully, continued capital inflows, trade ties, technology transfer and strategic insurance.

The views expressed are personal

{ BHUPENDER YADAV } UNION ENVIRONMENT, FOREST, AND CLIMATE CHANGE MINISTER

We need to move away from the take-make-dispose mindset and adopt recycling and reuse as an alternative economic model

India must steer its camel economy over the hump

The International Year of Camelids will conclude on March 31, 2025. It succeeded in turning the spotlight on these animals that are a godsend for food security in times of the deepening climate crisis. The world’s camel population has more than tripled in the last 50 years, rising from less than 13 million in 1961 to an estimated 40 million now. In this general trend of growing camel popularity, India stands out as the one country where camel numbers have declined dramatically, falling from more than 1.1 million in 1970 to around 200,000 now. This represents an almost 90% reduction over the course of half a century.

The reasons are largely cultural, but an unsupportive policy environment is also at work. Contrary to the situation in other countries where they are an important source of nutrition, camels in India were never used for food, but almost exclusively as a means of transportation; and demand for their services as draught animals has gradually petered out since the 1990s.

But the straw that really broke the camel’s back was a law enacted in 2016 that prohibits its export across the borders of Rajasthan where it has been declared the state animal. This legal provision was meant to protect the animal but eliminated the few remaining income opportunities for Rajasthan’s camel breeders, leading them to abandon their ancestral occupation in droves.

India is not alone when it comes to a rapid fall in camel numbers, but other countries that saw this have successfully managed to reverse the trend. One example is the United Arab Emirates (UAE) where camel population numbers dipped dangerously low in the 1960s, when motorised transport gradually became more common.

The animal might have drifted into oblivion, had it not been for the wisdom of the ruler of the UAE, Sheikh Zayed Al Nahyan, who recognised the need of his people for a symbol of national identity. He focused on supporting camel racing which has a long tradition among the Bedouins, and by now, this has ballooned into a huge industry that acts as a mechanism for sharing oil wealth through its huge prize money.

The UAE model may not be appropriate for India, but we can take a cue from developments in Central Asia. Kazakhstan had less than 100,000 camels in 1998 but by now they have more than doubled to close to 250,000.

Its government subsidised the setting up of factories for manufacturing camel milk powder for export to China. China almost doubled its camel population between 2009 and 2021, from a low of 220,000 to more than 460,000, by declaring Alashan, one of its administrative units in Inner Mongolia, as “camel country” and marketing the products of free-ranging camels as green and ecological, while also supporting camel-related tourism.

In India too, we can turn the situation around, although not through the routine schemes applied to other farm animals, such as by the National Livestock Mission. Camels are not really farm animals: They wither away if kept in confinement and thrive only in nomadic systems where they have the freedom to move around and browse on trees and shrubs. According to the traditional herding knowledge of the Raika, a herding community from Rajasthan, camels forage on 36 different trees, shrubs and other plants. All these plants are known for their healing properties in Ayurveda.

The biodiverse vegetation that camels feed on is part of what makes India’s traditional camel management system unique in the world.

Another important angle is the knowledge and values of the country’s camel herding communities that look at camels as family members — an antithesis to the industrial mode of farm animal production — and keep them as part of the landscape so that they function as desert gardeners that spread seeds and support the germination of hardy desert trees.

While conserving desert biodiversity, they also generate camel milk that provides a unique taste experience and is replete with health-enhancing phytochemicals.

The secret to reviving India’s camel economy lies in supporting its ancestral camel herding communities to combine the conservation of camels and desert biodiversity to produce camel milk which is a nutritional treasure and gastronomic rarity. Ethical camel milk can become one of India’s USPs. This is what we should thrive for, as the proof of concept already exists.

Ilse Köhler-Rollefson has researched and worked with Rajasthan’s camel breeders for more than 30 years. She is co-founder of Camel Charisma, a social enterprise aimed at conserving Rajasthan’s camels. The views expressed are personal



Ilse Köhler-Rollefson



OUR VIEW



Trump has rattled Nato: Brace for a big shake-up

Geopolitics quaked after America left its European allies in the lurch over a Ukraine peace deal. Nato's rupture isn't all. A worst-case scenario may see China gain. India must stay alert

The Earth's core might be shifting shape invisibly, as scientists suspect, but its surface is clearly in for the seismic shock of a geopolitical rupture. This week, the US under Donald Trump sent shudders across Europe with a stern message on the latter's security. By asking its trans-Atlantic allies to fend for themselves, America might have begun to pull the rug from under the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (Nato), a steady alliance of Western countries bound by a pledge of all-for-one and one-for-all. To the alarm of European leaders, what exactly the US shift implied was still sinking in when news broke of Washington's pursuit of direct talks with Moscow on a peace deal to end the Ukraine War. Neither Kyiv nor any EU representative was invited to a warm-up meeting of American and Russian officials held in Riyadh. The stark reality of Europe's voice being kept out, placed in the context of US hints that Russia may get to keep occupied Ukrainian territory, has stunned not just America's closest Nato allies, but also others around the world. Pushed by a sudden US tilt away, European leaders went into an emergency huddle of their own. Apart from a joint defence plan that doesn't hinge on US backing, they also need a say in what Europe's map will look like if and when hostilities end. Diplomats elsewhere have been pushed to the edge of their seats too. After all, if America could leave Nato in the lurch so brazenly, can it be relied upon to honour its other global commitments?

With all bets off, scenario planners in India face greater complexity as well. Trump only has a four-year term in office, but his 'America First' agenda already has bipartisan support on trade; other aspects of it could plausibly endure too.

While the Biden White House saw democracy ranged against autocracy, a Cold War II with China and Russia as adversaries, echoing the earlier split, Trump seems both dismissive of ideology and bent on maximizing economic value. This is not at odds with India's neutral stance in global geopolitics, whether we call it 'non-aligned' or 'pro-peace,' which should continue to assure us leeway in world affairs, the reason we did not officially 'ally' with the US even as ties warmed. Nato's rupture, meanwhile, could get the EU to toughen its defences and project US-free power, reducing the world's bipolarity and making space for India to enhance its sway. But we must not gloss over a worst-case scenario. What if Beijing emerges as a winner? Whether it had any role in today's conflicts, the Gaza one being closer home, is a matter of speculation. But signs of a China-Iran-Russia axis had begun to cast its shadow on the world map. Should Trump somehow spot value in a three-way deal to maximize US, Russian and Chinese interests, to the exclusion of US allies and partners, it would take Biden's formula apart. It may even scuttle the Quad's vision of a free and open Indo-Pacific. So far, we have few hints of what other security measures may be set adrift by 'America First.' But, going by the signals being sent, we cannot rule out the scenario of a China empowered by the withdrawal of a US defensive shield from Asia.

That the US is ready to strike big-ticket armament deals with India should reassure us on a key front. So long as our direct relations with the US do not wobble (and money talks), we can shop for arms. Thankfully, the Quad was never a defence pact and India has always been ready to defend itself. But a seismic shock from the West could reach the East. We must stay alert.

GUEST VIEW

Budget: Tax cuts may not boost GDP growth that much

NIKHIL GUPTA



is senior group vice president, Motilal Oswal Financial Services and author of 'The Eight Per Cent Solution'

Ahead of the Union budget, there was a demand from various economic participants to stimulate consumption. The government delivered this in a balanced way by boosting the disposable income of individuals through tax cuts while keeping a tight leash on its fiscal deficit. No individual needs to pay any tax on their salary income up to ₹12 lakh per annum in 2025-26, up from ₹7 lakh in 2024-25. The tax outgo for richer individuals has also been cut. This will cost the exchequer ₹1 trillion, according to government estimates.

Two obvious questions arise. Will these tax changes be sufficient to create a virtuous cycle of private final consumption expenditure (PFCE)? What would be the likely boost to real GDP growth? With more money in the hands of individuals, their spending will surely increase. But there are several caveats to consider when we look at the impact of these changes on GDP growth.

The positive impact of higher individual spending on GDP growth can be measured

through the marginal propensity to consume (MPC). It measures incremental consumption out of additional disposable income. The higher the MPC, the greater the positive impact of a rise in disposable income on consumption. India's household savings are about 25% of disposable income, implying that consumption takes up three-quarters of it. The MPC would logically be higher than 75% for low-income individuals and much lower for the country's richest.

To estimate the likely MPC that's relevant to the budget's tax-cut boost, we must study who the potential beneficiaries of tax reduction are. Our calculations suggest that more than 85% of all tax benefits would accrue to individuals with an annual income above ₹10 lakh, which is about four times the national per capita income. On average, individuals with an annual income between ₹10 lakh and ₹12 lakh would save about 5% of their income, making them the biggest beneficiaries. The MPC of this section is likely to be lower than the national level. While there is no way to put a number to this, let's assume it is 10-20 percentage points lower than India's average, meaning an MPC of 65%.

Before we estimate the likely positive impact on private consumption, there are two more adjustments to consider.

First, it is highly likely that a part of the increase in disposable income would go towards the repayment of consumer debt. Household debt has risen from 35% of income a decade ago to about 52% now. Assuming that just 5-10% of the incremental disposable income (i.e. ₹5,000-10,000

crore) is used to repay debt, it would reduce the rise in disposable income to ₹90,000-95,000 crore.

Second, any PFCE surge would be partly offset by higher imports (which is why imports are deducted from the sum of consumption, investment and exports to arrive at GDP). The import intensity of India's PFCE has fallen over the past decade. Consumption-related imports (i.e., all imports excluding capital goods, mainly for re-exporting, gold and silver) account for about 20% of PFCE now, compared with 25-26% a decade ago. In simple words, about a fifth of the rise in nominal PFCE could be offset by higher imports. Thus, the effective MPC could fall to 50-55% after adjusting for imports.

An MPC of 50-55% (or 0.5-0.55 as a fraction of I) would mean a consumption multiplier of 2-2.2 times, using the formula $[1/(1-MPC)]$. A rise in disposable income of ₹90,000-95,000 crore (after adjusting for possible debt repayments) would thus result in additional consumption of about ₹2 trillion. With total PFCE expected at about ₹200 trillion in 2024-25, it would mean additional growth of 1 percentage point in India's nominal PFCE. With PFCE at some 60% of nominal GDP, this would suggest an increase of about 0.6 percentage points in nominal GDP growth. With a GDP deflator of 1.8 times, it would imply a rise in real GDP growth of about 0.30-0.35 percentage points.

The story is not over yet. Tax changes are effectively a redistribution of resources from the government to individuals. Importantly, the government chose to keep a tight lid on the fiscal deficit by curtailing its spending. So, higher PFCE growth will be offset by slower growth in fiscal spending.

The Centre's total spending (revenue expenses plus capital expenditure minus interest payments, subsidies and loans and advances) accounts for 9-10% of nominal GDP. It is budgeted to grow 5.3% in 2025-26. Without forgone tax revenue of ₹1 trillion, the government's total spending could have increased by 8.6% next year. This means that slower fiscal spending may shave off about 0.30-0.35 percentage points (3.3 percentage points of growth forgone in total spending multiplied by 9-10% share in GDP) from India's nominal GDP growth. This would result in a real-GDP-growth drag of around 0.2 percentage points.

Overall, the positive impact of 0.30-0.35 percentage points of higher private consumption on real GDP growth would be offset by the negative impact of about 0.2 percentage points due to slower fiscal spending. The net positive impact of tax cuts on real GDP growth, therefore, would be only 0.1-0.2 percentage points in 2025-26.

Granted, the MPC of tax-cut beneficiaries may be higher or lower, the import intensity of incremental PFCE could be different, debt repayments might not materialize and fiscal-spending growth may turn out differently. Still, all said, the net boost of these tax cuts to real GDP growth would be negligible.

MY VIEW | ON THE OTHER HAND

The Centre's luck could run out on its securities transaction tax

A big spike in trading had sent STT collections soaring but market conditions have changed now



VIVEK KAUL
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already traded close to 100 billion contracts or 30 times more than in 2018-19. This is where the substantial jump in STT has come from.

So, how did we get here? In March 2020, the stock market plummeted once investors grasped the reality of the pandemic's spread. Foreign institutional investors looked at it as an opportunity and in 2020-21 bought stocks worth ₹2.74 trillion or \$37 billion. This pushed up stock prices and got many more retail investors buying stocks and equity MFs in the years that followed.

Further, the Reserve Bank of India cut interest rates to push up economic growth. This sent retail investors in search of higher returns, and they hoped to earn those returns from the stock market. In this quest, they were helped by many new-age low-cost brokerages, which made it very easy to open demat and/or trading accounts using smartphones. Also, the brokerage fee charged on futures and options transactions was made very low or zero. These accounts had very good user interfaces in comparison with those of legacy brokerages, making trading very easy. They were helped by the fact that internet data charges had crashed.

Indeed, with the spread of the pandemic, work-from-home became the order of the day, allowing individuals to trade any time when the stock market was open, something that couldn't have been so easy if they had been working from their offices.

In this mix came financial influencers, supposedly looking to sell courses on how to invest in stocks and their derivatives, but basically selling the idea that it was easy to make money by investing in stocks and their derivatives. Many influencers, who spoke in a crisp, clear and confident way, attained huge popularity among retail investors. In fact, what retail investors buying into this display of confidence didn't know was that these influencers were being financed by stock brokerages through affiliate marketing programmes.

All these factors came together and sent trading volumes soaring, particularly of derivatives, pushing up the STT collected by the government.

Now, just because buying and selling stocks and derivatives had become easier, it did not mean that making money had become easier too. Retail investors lost thousands of crores in the process. A report by the Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi) found that 90 out of 100 lost money trading derivatives.

So, Sebi has been trying to disincentivize people from trading in derivatives and has initiated several moves of late. This has had an impact on trading volumes. The number of derivatives contracts traded in January at the NSE was just 30% of the number traded in October. In February, the number is likely to be significantly lower than in January.

What does this tell us? Several factors can randomly come together and create a beneficial situation—or what we call luck. In this case, the government got lucky. But the price of that luck was paid by confident retail investors who did not realize their lack of understanding.

Further, retail investors could turn their confidence into trades simply because of the convenience of technology, or to put it in a slightly sophisticated way, the so-called democratization of finance. Of course, influencers cashed in on this and helped build that confidence. It led to a point where asset markets incentivized a certain kind of behaviour among people and institutions looking to profit from them, irrespective of whether it's good for the world at large or not. Sebi now seems to be catching up with these influencers.

Finally, we must confront the question of how the government hopes to make ₹78,000 crore from STT in 2025-26, given that even cash market volumes have fallen slightly from their levels in the first six months of 2024-25. While the confidence of retail investor in derivatives has rightly come down, that of the government in its STT mop-up is still going strong.

10 YEARS AGO



JUST A THOUGHT

What do you think a derivatives trading desk is? It's a casino in drag. They make the witch doctors look good.

CHARLIE MUNGER

MY VIEW | CAFE ECONOMICS

MINT CURATOR

India must not let Trump's stance on tariffs weaken its global trade

Negotiating a way ahead may be hard but we should keep import duties low and strike trade deals to make the gains we can



NIRANJANA RAJADHYAKSHA
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Game theorist Thomas Schelling once wrote that coercion depends more on “the threat of what is yet to come than on damage already done.” He added that countries in conflict situations would want “an impressive unspent capacity for damage be kept in reserve.” Schelling wrote his classic works on strategy in the context of the Cold War between the United States and the erstwhile Soviet Union, two superpowers with massive stockpiles of nuclear weapons.

His words should resonate again as US President Donald Trump opens his second innings at the White House with threats of tariffs against countries that he believes are harming the economic interests of his country. The way Trump suspended broader tariff hikes on imports from Canada and Mexico makes many believe that this will be his game plan—threaten a country but not carry out his threat.

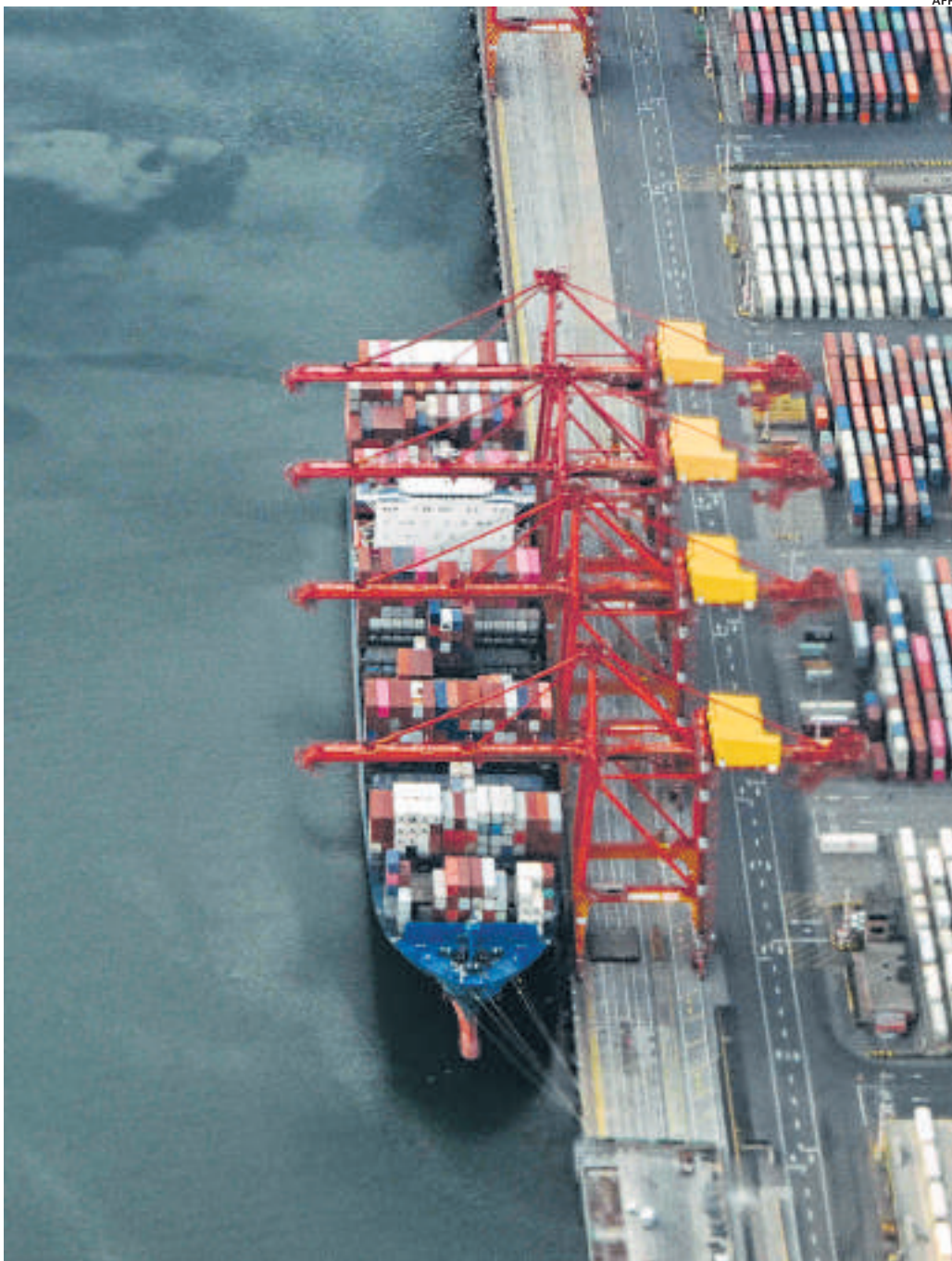
The problem is that soon others will begin to see his words as a series of hollow threats which will not be carried out. He will, at some point, have to impose punitive tariffs on some major country or economic bloc so that his statements are seen as credible by the rest of the world. A street bully has to occasionally beat someone up for others to fear him.

We could be headed into a situation in which the US will work through a series of bilateral deals with individual trading partners rather than be the bed-rock of the multilateral trading system that has served the world well since 1945. And the rolling negotiations—the threat of what is yet to come as well as unspent capacity for damage that Schelling wrote about—will likely keep the world on edge till a new equilibrium is established. Jagdish Bhagwati had argued that multiple preferential trade agreements between countries would end up like a tangled spaghetti bowl of deals that would hamper global trade. The problem could become even more acute now.

Economic logic will not come in the way of Trump. One of the core tenets of the theory of international trade is the gravity model. Just as the attraction between two celestial bodies is based on their size and distance between them, so too is trade between countries deeply influenced by their economic size as well as how close or far apart their borders are. It is thus no surprise that the US trades more with Canada and Mexico than with Japan and China.

As Trump continues to upend the international trade system, there are three possible outcomes worth considering.

First, a spiral of retaliatory tariff hikes raises barriers between countries to an extent that it could end globalization.



Second, Trump manages the threats so deftly that countries gradually bring down their average tariffs to US levels, and thus actually increase global trade.

Third, the other major economies in the world respond to American trade uncertainty by signing between themselves a series of regional agreements.

The third possible outcome would mean not the end of globalization, but a new version built around more regional trade, as alternate supply chains are slowly built. The net impact of this new system of global welfare will depend on whether it leads to trade creation or trade diversion, a distinction famously made in 1950 by Canadian trade economist Jacob Viner.

Trade creation broadly entails a move from more expensive to less expensive producers. Trade diversion leads to a move from less expensive to more expensive producers.

Trump has threatened India on two issues. India has higher average tariffs on American imports than the other way round. And it hopes to move some of its international trade to currencies other than the US dollar. The question is whether India

should respond by deepening its trade ties with the US by bringing down tariffs on American goods or by striking a more comprehensive trade deal with that country, or enter a pan-Asian trade deal such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) that includes China, or move ahead with a blend of these various options.

India's complicated choices will involve both strategic as well as empirical calculations. As far as the latter is concerned, a lot depends on the extent to which trade between India and the US is complementary rather than competitive, in which sectors comparative advantages lie for the two countries, and the intensity of trade between them in the years to come. There could be trade turbulence ahead, and it will be a challenge to negotiate it so that the Indian economy is not harmed.

India has been a beneficiary of the wave of globalization that began at the end of the previous century. It should remain a trading nation rather than withdraw behind protectionist walls. Keeping tariffs low as well as closing trade deals should remain on the agenda even as the international situation changes, or even worsens, as Trump's threats play out.

More people are staying single but is it bad for the economy?

It results in negative externalities but liberty is more important



ALLISON SCHRAGER
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I was having a conversation recently about the future of wealth—what can I say, I am an economist—when I heard an argument that was so retro I thought it was 1982: America should revive the stigma against being single. As a single person, my first reaction was indignation. Then, after a few moments, another thought occurred to me: Maybe that's not a terrible idea.

Americans are not marrying as much as they did. In some ways that reflects a more liberated society in which people can live the lives they want, with no judgement. But the rise in singleness—as distinct from unmarried live-ins—is creating what economists call a negative externality.

Personally, if I must endure some cost to being single, I would prefer the disapproval of society over being taxed. It'll be more cost-effective. But I am getting ahead of myself. The question of whether singleness needs to be stigmatized, and if so how, depends on why more people are unpartnered in the first place.

One popular theory is that men have become less compelling to women. The sexual revolution and shift to a more service-oriented economy resulted in a rise in stature for women: They have more education and better paid jobs, while many men are struggling. Women find these guys unappealing, the theory goes, and see singleness as a better alternative. But “men are unappealing,” true as it may often be, is not enough of a reason to not get married. Marriage is growing less common because there is less of a stigma to being unmarried, and that's because the nature of marriage changed as the US economy did.

For most of human history, marriage was a necessary economic and social agreement, especially for women. The world was risky; there was little or no safety net, and people were more likely to die young. Women had few jobs available to them and limited ways to improve their social status. Finding a partner was their best hedge; hence the stigma against being single.

Consider France between the two World Wars. It lost about a fifth of its young male population in World War I, which meant there were fewer men to marry. And yet marriage rates spiked after the war and stayed high for the next decade. Research shows that French women ended up marrying men they might have not otherwise considered: men out of their preferred age range, foreign men, men who in normal times would not have been ‘competitive’ in the marriage market (read: early 20th century versions of incels), and men who were widowed or divorced.



Singleness in the US may be contributing to social inequality.

Back then, the economic and social consequences of being unmarried were worse. So women settled because they had to.

Now women don't have to settle. Not only do they have better economic prospects, but there is no stigma against singleness or single motherhood, even if it is more expensive. And there is now an expectation that a partner should be an intellectual, social and emotional equal. Assortative mating—marrying someone with similar economic and educational attainment—has become the norm.

College-educated women are still marrying, for the most part—even men without college degrees. The decline in marriage rates is most stark for American men and women without a college degree.

In some ways, these are all positive developments. Women have more choices—both to wait for a good marriage and leave a bad one—and are more empowered. They can marry someone they have more of a peer relationship with, which may make for a more satisfying marriage. That may explain why divorce rates, like marriage rates, are also down.

But there are negative externalities to a society with less marriage. Now, assortative mating may mean better marriages for those who do marry, but it also worsens economic inequality—with the worst consequences for the poorest, who are now less likely to marry and struggle more on a single income. The fall in marriage may also explain some of the decline in fertility, and the US needs more people.

Perhaps the stigma against being unmarried, even when there is less of an economic and social need to be married, had some value. At the same time, I shudder at the notion that my choices would be stigmatized, or that I would feel pressure to marry someone I am incompatible with—even if I do pose a cost to society. And while a single stigma might not be a bad thing, there is a limit. There would be no economic benefit from a return to the days when women felt compelled to enter or stay in terrible marriages.

All of which raises the question of whether a societal stigma can be calibrated just so. After all, those ‘compensating marriages’ of inter-war France did not result in more divorces. Then again, what choice did they have?

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MY VIEW | EX MACHINA

Data systems can transform India's electricity supply

RAHUL MATTHAN



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We have gotten so accustomed to the near-universal availability of electricity that we barely spare a thought for the infrastructure behind it. Generating stations dotted across the length and breadth of India produce power that is fed into an electricity grid which carries it to our homes and offices. The entire system works so reliably that we have come to assume there will always be a socket on the wall to charge our phone from, no matter where we are in the country.

The core design of our energy ecosystem hasn't changed in over a century. Whenever new technologies and systems became available, they were bolted on, like a patchwork job, without altering the way the system works. Since much of our energy infrastructure was built in a pre-digital era, we still have to physically verify various contractual obligations and performance metrics. New solutions designed for specific aspects of the energy ecosystem, such as charging networks for electric vehicles (EVs), have not

been integrated into the grid, despite the fact that doing so will improve its overall efficiency. And our laws, written a long time ago, come in the way of integrating small distributed energy generation systems into the grid.

While we have muddled along despite these shortcomings, of late, all this has started to come apart at the seams. With fast-rising demand for cooling systems, EVs and data centres, there is an urgent need to increase energy supply. We will go a long way towards meeting this demand if we integrate distributed and renewable sources of energy into the grid, except that our energy infrastructure is not designed to deal with variable sources of energy supply.

We need to redesign our energy ecosystem to align it with our current and future needs. But what exactly we need to do and the precise shape it will take is not yet clear.

A recent paper published jointly by the International Energy Agency and FIDE proposes a novel approach. Rather than overhauling existing systems and installing new equipment, it recommends implementing an open, interoperable protocol for energy that will unify various elements of the energy ecosystem so they can communicate more efficiently with one another. This will

allow us to take better advantage of distributed sources of energy and unlock greater efficiencies in our existing system.

The design of this Digital Energy Grid (DEG) comprises three basic elements: identity, data formats and verifiable data portability. First, every entity in the energy ecosystem—be it a power plant, the national transmission grid, a commercial battery farm or a rooftop panel—will be assigned a globally unique identity. The data these entities produce will be associated with this identity and expressed in a standard machine-readable format that can be digitally processed. A set of robust verification procedures will be put in place to ensure that all data is both portable across the ecosystem and cryptographically tamper-evident. Once overlaid on our current energy ecosystem, these three elements will work together to transform our siloed energy systems into an efficient “network of networks.”

Think of it like an internet for energy sys-

tems. Just as HTTP allows websites that incorporate different image formats and other digital artefacts to be accessed by anyone with a browser, the DEG would offer a unifying framework that connects energy devices and systems, regardless of their design and manufacturing origins.

A digital energy grid could link up the power sector to unlock efficiency and serve our future needs

Deployed at scale, it will allow a range of different participants to share information directly with each other instead of through a control centre. This will transform a system designed for one-way (top-down) flows to one that is more flexible and bi-directional. This, it is hoped, will open up new opportunities for innovation and efficiency. Apart from enabling real-time balancing of supply and demand and ensuring that the ecosystem can better withstand disruptions, it will offer new market opportunities and make it easier to effectively coordinate thousands—and eventually millions—of distributed resources.

The rewards could be significant. Neighbourhoods could use this new architecture

to make themselves self-sufficient. They could keep their EVs and other devices charging when prices are low and offer their batteries as stores of available energy when demand is high. They could form micro-networks that make the grid more fault-tolerant by offering nodes capable of taking up the load if others fail. As we make the shift to distributed sources of renewable technology (like rooftop solar), this will allow us to better coordinate the production and consumption of energy, making it possible for us to stabilize the grid more effectively.

None of this will be possible without a change in the country's regulatory mindset. This calls for a dismantling of existing laws that limit the integration of small distributed energy generation systems and the enactment of amendments that allow a more interoperable approach. Since security and resilience have been built into the design of the DEG, we will not need to legislate for it, but trust that the protocols will ensure compliance. Finally, since it is regulators that will decide how those protocols will be implemented, it will put them more directly in control. This will enable greater private-sector participation in the energy ecosystem while still ensuring competition and consumer protection.



The Indian EXPRESS

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RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

HIT REFRESH

New CEC can begin by being more welcoming of questions, responding in the impartial voice of a constitutional authority

NEW CHIEF ELECTION Commissioner Gyanesh Kumar comes to his office in a challenging moment for the Election Commission. To begin with, there is controversy over the appointment. Leader of the Opposition Rahul Gandhi, part of the three-member panel, has made his protest over the “midnight decision” public, alleging it was “disrespectful” and “discourteous” of the government to go ahead while the appointment process was being challenged. The government acted as per the law it enacted after being prodded by the SC; this controversy will be resolved after the issue gets its day in court. But the new CEC’s task is an arduous one. He takes charge amid a heightened political polarisation — on one end is a government entering a third term with a pared-down tally but notching up successive electoral gains, and on the other, an Opposition with a larger foothold but still flailing for a way forward. The EC also shows signs of an institutional fraying that is both the cause and result of a larger denting of public trust — the graph of the sleepy institution that was awakened to its formidable constitutional mandate and powers by then CEC TN Seshan in the 1990s can be said to have waxed and waned after that, even as it continues to draw admiration for its administration of one of the most unique and complex tasks of election management.

In recent elections, the Opposition has stepped up the decibel levels of questions about the fairness of the poll process. These have ranged from a clamour over the alleged unreliability of EVMs to doubts over delays in making turnout data public to accusations of illegitimate additions and deletions in electoral rolls. There is more noise and little evidence for many of these allegations — which have not withstood the scrutiny of the court. The impression that they are being used as stand-ins for a harder reckoning by the elections’ losers is also unavoidable. Outgoing CEC Rajiv Kumar has a point, therefore, when he expresses concern over the spread of rumour, and for the EC being “unfairly blamed by those unwilling to accept electoral outcomes”. Having said that, however, CEC Gyanesh Kumar must pause and ask what the EC has done, and what it can do, to shore up faith in one of India’s most distinguished institutions. There are genuine concerns that the powerful are able to tilt the playing field, or the election calendar, to their advantage, and anxieties that the poll monitor has given the ruling party the benefit of the doubt. Rajiv Kumar had joined the poll panel amid a controversy over the EC’s alleged double standard over Model Code of Conduct violations in 2019 — and it was in his tenure as CEC that the Commission’s decision to send notices to party presidents for words spoken by their leaders marked a dubious first.

The EC needs to address apprehensions about its conduct in an open and transparent manner. It must engage with all players and stakeholders — as the monitorial institution, it cannot appear either evasive or combative vis-a-vis the Opposition’s concerns. The new CEC could begin by opening the doors of his institution to all those who might have a question — and draft his responses in a tone that echoes the impartial voice of a constitutional authority, not that of an angry outburst by a party spokesperson. Welcome, CEC Gyanesh Kumar.

A STATE’S SPECTRES

As Assam CM takes on political rivals, he must desist from giving the impression that he is weaponising law in a witch hunt

ASSAM CHIEF MINISTER Himanta Biswa Sarma is an astute politician who has been a part of the state government across dispensations. For much of this year so far, his focus has been on the Advantage Assam 2.0 summit, meant to attract investors to the state. Sarma has met foreign dignitaries and travelled to multiple countries to promote the event. Yet, the BJP leader seems not to realise that the push for FDI sits uneasily with a politics that stokes spectres of the “foreign hand”.

Over the last several days, Sarma has strenuously peddled allegations that Congress leader Gaurav Gogoi is involved with Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and other foreign agencies, through his wife, a British national. The Assam Police have filed an FIR against Pakistani climate policy expert Ali Tauqeer Sheikh — Sarma’s political rival’s wife’s colleague — which includes charges under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA). The apparent basis for this — along with the CM’s rash accusations from the pulpit — is a series of tweets by Sheikh on Assam’s treatment of minorities. It is difficult not to see the controversy as contrived for political ends. Even in the deeply polarised political conversation of the day, it is rare to see families and spouses dragged through the mud in this manner.

There was a sense recently that Sarma was looking to frame a politics that went beyond conspiracies and communal dog whistles. His focus on the Advantage Assam summit, highlighting the Rs 2,700-crore semiconductor plant by the Tatas and the push towards dealing with infant and maternal mortality, appeared promising. It seemed that the CM could envision a politics beyond “land jihad”, “fertiliser jihad”, “flood jihad” and the spectres of illegal migration. Through this divisive rhetoric, he may be aiming for political capital, but this strategy is self-defeating. First, it takes a pessimistic view of what the voter wants. Second, such a pitch often delivers diminishing political returns, and comes in the way of establishing a reputation for governance. Third, a climate of parochialism and fear is not conducive to kindling the animal spirits of entrepreneurs and investors. Sarma is free to take on his political rivals, including Gogoi. But Sarma would do well to desist from giving the impression that he is weaponising the law and police in a witch hunt.

CALORIES IN, GUILT OUT

DMRC’s ‘calorie counters’ point to the all-round pressure to lose weight. Who needs these constant reminders?

CALORIES IN, CALORIES out. When Bertrand Russell said that mathematics contains not only truth but also supreme beauty, he couldn’t possibly have known how burdensome the seemingly simple maths of weight loss would be for the health-conscious individual today. From calculating how many more steps one needs to walk in order to lose X number of calories to weighing out the exact quantity of protein needed after a gym session, numbers have taken on terrifying new dimensions. Not helping matters, arguably, is the Delhi Metro Rail Corporation (DMRC), which has put “calorie counters” on the staircases in five Metro stations in the capital in an effort to promote “healthier commuting habits and environmental consciousness”.

The DMRC, no doubt, means well. Climbing stairs certainly burns more calories and uses less electricity than taking the escalator or elevator would. In a country that is battling pollution while labouring under the growing burden of non-communicable, lifestyle-related ailments like diabetes and heart disease, the numbers pasted on a Metro station staircase could well prompt a shift to better habits. But at a time when the pressure to lose weight is everywhere, from “fitspiration” articles to Instagram reels, and when even restaurant menus display calorie counts alongside prices, a gentle reminder could well become an admonition that causes shame and guilt.

The commute is an exhausting fact of everyday life. Yet, the minutes, even hours, spent getting from point A to point B can open up room to breathe, or to plop down and pull out one’s phone or book, or to simply allow the mind to drift. Metro stations symbolise this much-needed pause in the daily bustle. One can choose the lazier, less healthy option, or scarf down a kachori or samosa while at it. In other words, calories in, guilt out.



SUHAS PALSHIKAR

THE GATECRASHERS’ PARTY has finally been thrown out of the first gate it crashed 10 years ago. In the process, another party that fundamentally disrupted India’s politics has eased out the “disruptor” who sections of the media and middle classes romanticised 10 years ago. Through this clash, Congress continues to be the loser. These developments in the politics of the NCR bear interesting lessons for the configuration of the party system more generally.

AAP is one of the more recent examples of a new party successfully entering the competitive arena. It is not easy to form a party, register early successes and then sustain the pressures of competition. The established system of competitive politics, the reign of established families, financial constraints, set terms of voter appeal and voter alignment, are all often stacked against new entrants. In particular, a spectacular gatecrashing is very rare. AAP was lucky that it took on a beleaguered Congress at a time when another challenger was already pushing it into a corner. The so-called anti-corruption agitation was converted into a national spectacle through full-time media exposure. It was almost as if civil society was taking charge of politics.

However, AAP quickly ended up being just another party. Its heavy dependence on a personality cult was only a pale imitation of what the BJP has achieved since 2014. From its stance during the Delhi riots to its stand on Jammu and Kashmir’s autonomy, it sought to look like the BJP either because it was actually much closer to the Hindutva ideology or at least because it cynically wished to retain Delhi’s pro-Modi vote by not antagonising it.

Above all, AAP had little to offer substantively to electorates beyond Delhi. From Goa to Gujarat, it attempted to breach the existing structure of party competition but failed. Its success in Punjab, like in Delhi, was based on the exhaustion of an existing local party — if in Delhi, it was Congress, in Punjab, it was the Akali Dal. The AAP experiment, therefore, shows that irrespective of spectacular entries, the space for new entrants is narrow, uncertain and dependent on equations among existing players. As the BJP consolidates its dominance, the failure of the AAP model signals that competitiveness is un-

Opposition needs to carve it out amid BJP’s near-dominance. That’s the challenge

Clearly, the Delhi elections, the withering of the Maha Vikas Aghadi in Maharashtra and the overall dispersal of the INDIA bloc signal that the Opposition is losing steam — mainly because the ideological flourish that characterised the christening of INDIA has quietly faded away. This is mainly because beyond the immediate and the intermediate, the Opposition lacks in perspective.

likely to emerge from self-proclaimed extra-systemic mavericks.

But if “outsiders” are unlikely to pose a challenge to the BJP, is a party like Congress, representing an old order, any better placed?

In Delhi, Congress has again shown that it is oblivious to the critical role thrust upon it by the present moment. If routine internal feuds marked its failure in Haryana and organisational laziness caused its debacle in Maharashtra, a suicidal approach marked its third consecutive failure in the NCR. Since 1989, Congress has ceased to be an all-India party; it’s a multi-state party at best. It has not been able to put up a fight in traditional strongholds like Maharashtra, nor take advantage of bipolarity in states like Madhya Pradesh or Gujarat; it has not even captured the opposition space in a state like Odisha. In the backdrop of these limitations, the party needed more tactical acumen to ensure the BJP was kept out of power in Delhi.

After the Lok Sabha elections, Congress may have been under the impression that the BJP was now a weaker party in government. But just about 100 seats do not make an Opposition strong. The pyrrhic victories in getting a few bills sent to select committees do not make the government any weaker. Unless the opposition parties are able to force changes in draft bills, unless unacceptable proposals are forced to be withdrawn, unless alternative proposals — as in the case of election schedules or the UCC etc. — are made popular, unless undemocratic governance practices are de-popularised, there is no political pushback.

The lessons from the Delhi defeats, for Congress, AAP and other opposition parties, are not just about where they went wrong tactically. Beyond such immediate considerations, they have three intermediate lessons to learn. One is about the challenge of expanding one’s own party and at the same time building bridges with other parties. This balancing requires a hard-nosed understanding of one’s limitations and an investment in organisation-building.

The second lesson is the need to identify the most proximate voter for the party. It’s true that every party would want to attract voters across social sections, but beyond that broader ambition, it is essential to locate the strongest

support the party is likely to gain. Tactically, it is useful to know the disappointed BJP voters, but that need not mean giving up on the core social base visualised by each of the non-BJP parties. Of late, much has been said about possible middle-class disenchantment, but the Opposition needs to ask whether it wants to fight on the BJP’s turf and for the BJP’s own strongholds or wishes to gain from a different register of social support. It needs a balance between the proximate voter and the ruling party’s disgruntled voters.

The third lesson — starkly exemplified by AAP’s case — is: How to be different. If AAP doesn’t take on the BJP’s Hindutva, if the TMC doesn’t adopt a more democratic governance model, if Congress in Karnataka or Telangana is not content merely to compete with the BJP in terms of so-called “welfare schemes”, only then can the Opposition carve out a space for itself in the present moment of near-dominance of the BJP.

Clearly, the Delhi elections, the withering of the Maha Vikas Aghadi in Maharashtra and the overall dispersal of the INDIA bloc signal that the Opposition is losing steam — mainly because the ideological flourish that characterised the christening of INDIA has quietly faded away. This is mainly because beyond the immediate and the intermediate, the Opposition lacks in perspective.

More than anything else, the opposition parties forget two critical things about the current political moment: One, in the continuing reign of the ruling party, there is a continuing erosion of space for the Opposition itself — therefore, there is a very selfish reason the parties need to get their act together. Two, the only pushback the ruling establishment would really recognise is an electoral pushback. Therefore, a few stray judicial observations, a few legislative compromises or some occasional softening of the rawness of power don’t really mean much in the long-drawn battle.

If after June last year, the Opposition has not shown awareness of the first critical point, the Delhi elections show that Congress and AAP have both chosen to ignore the second — something central to their own survival.

The writer, based in Pune, taught Political Science



GURU PRAKASH

IN THE WORLD of politics and social activism, there are few figures who embody the ideals of simplicity, devotion, and perseverance as much as Kameshwar Chaupal. A true embodiment of the values of “simple living, high thinking”, Chaupal’s contributions were immense, yet his name often remained in the shadows of the much larger narratives of modern Indian history. He was a rare gem — an RSS swayamsevak, a two-time Member of the Legislative Council (MLC) in Bihar, a member of the Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Kshetra Nyas Trust, and a leading figure in several important organisations like Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP), Vanvasi Kalyan Kendra, and the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad.

Chaupal was from the Dalit community, and for him to scale the heights that he did, both politically and socially, stands as a remarkable achievement and a beacon of inspiration. Born on April 24, 1956, in Bihar’s Supaul district, Chaupal dedicated his life to social work and the upliftment of Dalits. He played a pivotal role in shaping the socio-political landscape of Bihar and beyond. In particular, his association with the Ram mandir movement in Ayodhya remains one of his most defining legacies. He was the kar sevak who laid the first brick of the Ram mandir in 1989. This simple act, which holds immense symbolic value, showcases not only his devotion to the cause but also the deep connection he felt to Hindu culture. The Ram mandir, after all, is

SETTING AN EXAMPLE, QUIETLY

Kameshwar Chaupal’s life inspires generations of Dalit youth, cultural nationalists

not merely a monument but a symbol of the resurgence of Hindu pride.

However, it is the quieter, often overlooked contributions of Chaupal that truly make him stand out. His association with the Ram Janmabhoomi Trust, for example, went largely unnoticed in the media and public discourse. Yet, his role was invaluable. In a country where the Dalit community is often seen through a narrow lens, Chaupal’s participation in the Ram temple movement serves as a powerful reminder that Dalits have a long and proud history in Hindu culture.

Chaupal’s journey was not without its challenges. In an interview from January 2024, he passionately spoke about the significance of the first *shilanyas* (groundbreaking ceremony) of the Ram temple. For him, the Ram mandir was not merely about religious rituals but about the triumph of truth, the assertion of Hindu identity, and the preservation of India’s civilisational heritage. His words resonated deeply, especially when he expressed his belief that the Ram temple was essential not just for Hindus, but for the nation as a whole. It was a clarion call to all Hindus to embrace their faith.

Chaupal’s commitment to Hindu culture was unwavering. He was deeply concerned about the conversion of Dalits to other religions, particularly Islam and Christianity, a concern that was amplified after the Meenakshipuram conversions in Tamil Nadu

in the 1980s. These conversions, in Chaupal’s view, were a direct challenge to the preservation of Hinduism and its values. His involvement with the RSS and the VHP became more pronounced in the aftermath, as he believed that the cultural and religious identity of Dalits needed to be safeguarded.

One of the most significant aspects of his life was his unwavering belief that Dalits and Hindus were inseparable. Critics of the Hindu nationalist movement often claim that Dalits have no place in the lexicon of Hindu culture. Chaupal’s life and legacy are a direct rebuttal to such claims. He was a living testament to the fact that Dalits have always been an integral part of Hindu society and that their cultural and religious identity cannot be separated from the larger Hindu community.

Chaupal’s passing is a moment of profound loss for the nation, particularly for Bihar, where his influence was deeply felt. But his legacy is one that will continue to inspire generations of Dalit youth and cultural nationalists alike. As someone who comes from a similar background, I can personally attest to the profound impact Chaupal’s life has had on me. His dedication to Hindu culture, his pride in his identity, and his commitment to the upliftment of Dalits are qualities that I, too, hope to emulate.

The writer is national spokesperson, BJP, and an academic

FEBRUARY 19, 1985, FORTY YEARS AGO

STUDENT AGITATION

IN A STORMY development, likely to have a bearing on the coming elections, Madhya Pradesh is now on the brink of a caste feud that has already engulfed most of the 45 districts of the state. The anti-reservation agitation of students has spread like wildfire. A senior police official admitted that the police just watched the situation unfold because they did not want a confrontation with the students. The agitation, which began a week ago, is to protest against a government announcement on the eve of the Lok Sabha election to give a 25 per cent reservation in admissions to professional colleges and jobs to backward classes.

BANK OFFICIALS SACKED

TOP OFFICIALS OF three nationalised banks were sacked by the government, with no reason given. The three executives, whose terms have been terminated through a notification, are S L Baluja, chairman and managing director of Punjab National Bank, BV Sonalkar, chairman and managing director of the Central Bank of India and S S Master, executive director of Bank of Baroda. The government had initiated the process of reconstitution of boards of directors of public sector banks last month. In the case of 10 banks, the government had already notified that the existing directors would cease to hold office at the end of their three-year tenure.

SGPC PROBED

THE CBI IS holding an inquiry into the foreign donations to the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee amounting to about one million rupees since 1978, according to authoritative sources. The CBI in this respect has reportedly sought records from certain banks in Amritsar to verify whether the SGPC sought permission from the government for receiving such donations as required under the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act, 1976. Meanwhile, the SGPC has sought “general exemption and realisation” under the Act to avoid infringement of the law and to facilitate relief work.



Walls on the field

Uncertainty is built into the game but there was a beauty of certainty to cricket between India and Pakistan. The neighbours' refusal to host each other is tragic



SANDEEP DWIVEDI

DAYS BEFORE THE Champions Trophy, a Pakistan cricketer texted a curt reply when asked if their fans would miss watching Indian superstars Virat Kohli and Rohit Sharma. “Why don’t you ask these questions to Indian players?” Clearly, India’s refusal to cross the border hasn’t gone down well in Pakistan.

In 2023, after much hand-wringing, Babar Azam’s team travelled to India for the 50-over World Cup. Having taken the first step, the Pakistan Cricket Board had expected reciprocity. This ICC event means the world to them. India and its fans would have lit up the Champions Trophy, certified normalcy in the troubled country and given a fillip to its tottering economy.

Reacting to the snub, Pakistan has now decided to avoid all India trips in the future. This isn’t rhetoric but a signed and stated official stand endorsed by the ICC. The cricket door between the two cricket-mad nations isn’t just shut, it’s been sealed and bricked.

It wasn’t always this bad. The last time Pakistan got to conduct a tournament of this magnitude was in 1996, when it co-hosted the 50-over World Cup with India and Sri Lanka. Eden Gardens had the opening ceremony, Gaddafi Stadium the final. It was an event that gave Pakistan an unprecedented windfall and also showcased the strength and solidarity of cricket’s now defunct Asian block.

Even before the first ball was bowled, a crisis would emerge. In a sudden turn of events, Australia, citing safety concerns over LTTE’s bombing threats, refused to travel to Sri Lanka. Overnight, a joint Indo-Pak cricket team was formed and put on a plane to Colombo to play an exhibition game against Sri Lanka. This was to make a point, show the West that Sri Lanka wasn’t what they perceived.

That friendly game would start with Pakistan captain Wasim Akram getting Lankan Romesh Kaluwitharana caught by Sachin Tendulkar at short cover. For years to come, the most cynical subcontinent cricket reporters, after downing a few drinks, would get misty-eyed describing the sight of Akram and Pakistan players running towards Tendulkar and wrapping the Little Master in a big collective hug.

At that one-of-a-kind game, Indian captain Mohammad Azharuddin would say: “This proves to the world that we are together.” Akram would underline the subcontinental brotherhood. He wanted more such “joint team” games. Pakistan manager and former captain Intikhab Alam, a good old peacenik like his Indian friend Bishan Singh Bedi, called the occasion “historic” and “the turning point in the relationship of the two countries”.

Since that 1996 game, there have not been many such turning points. Wars, border skirmishes, terror attacks, and surgical strikes would build an overbearing atmosphere of mistrust between the two countries. Periodically, there would also be summit talks,



C R Sasikumar

breakthroughs, student exchanges and other peace initiatives. Depending on the political climate, India and Pakistan have toggled playing sworn enemies or long-lost brothers separated at Partition. As for Indo-Pak cricket, it remains the weathercock, relationship metre and, sadly, a perpetual victim of circumstances.

But this time, the neighbours seem to have drifted way too far. Reconciliation seems far-fetched. India’s insistence on not stepping on Pakistani soil resulted in rescheduling. One semi-final was moved to Dubai. And, in case India reaches the final, the host will also lose the right to keep the title clash in their country. So much for being the ICC-approved sole host. The hurt and anxiety can be felt in the voices from Pakistan.

The TV studios are brimming with anger. The fiery Pakistan cricketer wants a piece of paper when he is asked to predict the last four line-up. In both Urdu and English, he writes that India won’t reach the semi-final. He doesn’t give a cricketing reason, it’s what his *dil* tells him. That’s a heartfelt wish he shares with most of Pakistan. Which host nation would want the final, the climax of a grand event, to be wheeled out to foreign shores?

With stakes so high, the collective anxiety of the nation is rising. A recent loss to New Zealand in a pre-Champions Trophy warm-up tournament final brought them face-to-face with their fears. The nervousness would manifest as anger.

Sikandar Bakht, a lively pacer who bowled alongside fast-bowling legends Imran Khan and Sarfraz Nawaz, can’t wrap his head around his country picking a medium-pacer in the Champions Trophy side. “These selectors are *nalayak* (good for nothing). *Khuda ka khauf karo* (Fear God), you have picked a 125 kph bowler in the team,” says the former player of a nation with a sparkling pace legacy. Rashid Latif, a seasoned World Cupper, sits for a rapid-fire round in another TV show. Name one player who doesn’t deserve to be in this team? “One? ... There are six to seven,” he shoots back.

It’s not that 1996 didn’t have chaos and the usual subcontinent disquiet. Four years after they had blown away England in the 1992 World Cup final, Pakistan wasn’t quite

This time, the neighbours seem to have drifted way too far. Reconciliation seems far-fetched. India’s insistence on not stepping on Pakistani soil resulted in rescheduling. One semi-final was moved to Dubai. And, in case India reaches the final, the host will also lose the right to keep the title clash in their country. So much for being the ICC-approved sole host. The hurt and anxiety can be felt in the voices from Pakistan.

the favourite but not as inadequate as now.

In the post-Imran era, the team had lost the aura. There was infighting, Akram and Waqar didn’t get along. The two were also among the four players caught smoking up on a beach in the West Indies. There were also match-fixing whispers. Team selection, too, was questioned. The inclusion of 38-year-old Javed Miandad, too, had a cloud of intrigue. It was because of pressure from Karachi. Had he not been named, MQM, the party of *muhajirs*, would not have allowed the event to unfold peacefully, it was reported.

Benazir Bhutto was the prime minister and the Muslim League was in the opposition. Corruption and income disparity had made the population cynical and politicians unpopular. But Pakistan, at that point in history unlike now, had the support of its neighbours, a better team and that one precious possession — hope.

They knew the two Ws could still be trusted to win games. Imran Khan, while raising funds for his cancer hospital, was slowly transforming from a social activist to a political alternative. The dream did come true but didn’t last long. Some years back, that hope virtually died. Today, Imran languishes in jail.

Back in 1996, the World Cup had a theme song sung by the rock stars of the globally popular band Junoon. They kept repeating that one phrase: *Pehchaan kabhi na bhulo*. They were reminding the team and nation not to forget its identity and legacy. It was about coaxing the team to do a 1992 again, roar like Imran’s caged tigers. They couldn’t, losing to India in the quarter-finals.

This time around, the PCB has picked another famous singer to promote the event. Atif Aslam, like Junoon, has shot a video on the streets. But this time, the players aren’t in salwar-kameez, as in the Junoon video. They are in three-quarter shorts and keep mouthing — *Kuch bhi ho sakta khel mein* (Anything can happen in a game). In cricket’s unpredictability lies Pakistan’s hope this time.

Uncertainty is all very well on the cricket field. But there was a beauty of certainty to Indo-Pak cricket. The end of them hosting each other is cricket’s greatest tragedy.

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WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

“In this transformative world, further cooperation between China and Europe will be beneficial in building a more equitable and reasonable international order, jointly crafting a new narrative for a multipolar world.” — THE GLOBAL TIMES

Papering over failure in Manipur

President’s Rule is about hiding the abdications of the ruling party



A BIMOL AKOIJAM

DECLARING THAT “A situation has arisen in which the government of that state cannot be carried on in accordance with the provisions of the Constitution of India”, the Government of India has taken over the administration of Manipur. The move is, some say, “too little, too late”, while others welcome it as a step to restore constitutional order and peace in the state. These views, while commonsensical, obfuscate the reason behind this decision and the Union government’s dubious role in the making of the Manipur tragedy.

The imposition of President’s Rule in Manipur is not because there is “absolutely no law and order... an absolute breakdown of constitutional machinery in Manipur”, as the Supreme Court had observed two months after the violence erupted on May 3, 2023. It’s worth remembering that the Prime Minister — who has all the time to visit places across the world and even extend his good offices to bring peace in Ukraine — has not visited Manipur to date. He has insisted, including in Parliament, that “violence has gone down”, the “situation is normal” and “like normal times schools, colleges and offices and other establishments are functioning” in the state.

N Biren Singh was ordered to resign as chief minister by the party leadership in New Delhi not because he had failed to deal with the lawlessness and violence in Manipur. He has been their man Friday and a convenient alibi for the BJP’s surreptitious agenda, sustaining him with a pretext for divisive forces to polarise society and communalise the polity. Lest we forget, Amit Shah admitted on the floor of the House that the then CM was “co-operating” with the Union government just as Singh had also told the media that whatever he did was with “the consent” and “the advice” of the Prime Minister and the Home Minister.

Without resorting to legitimate constitutional measures, the Union government encroached on what Babasaheb Ambedkar called states’ “sovereign and plenary” authority. From the appointment of the chief secretary and the director general of police of the state to the decision as to who shall head the institution that deals with the crucial coordination of the security and law enforcement agencies, the Union government had

been dictating to the state government from day one of the crisis.

Incidentally, Singh had publicly admitted to this encroachment in many ways. For instance, he openly rued that the CID of the state police had not been reporting to him for 15 months. Instances of central security agencies refusing to follow his orders and open confrontations among security and law enforcement agencies were also widely reported in the media.

Emboldening the divisive and communal politics that belligerently pursue the bifurcation of the state based on exclusivist communal identities, Singh told the media after meeting the Home Minister that law and order in “the valley” and “the hills” were being looked after by him and Amit Shah, respectively. It’s public knowledge that the Modi-Shah-led BJP sought the help of Kuki armed groups under the Suspension of Operations agreement during elections in exchange for the consideration of their demands.

The result of this subversion is there for all to see — despite the presence of more than 60,000 central troops over and above the local police, this beautiful state has been subjected to unprecedented pain and humiliation, resulting in the colossal loss of lives and properties of innocent denizens.

Thus, to see President’s Rule as a move by the Government of India to restore the constitutional order in the state is a cruel joke inflicted on a suffering people. This latest move is an attempt to hide the failures of the ruling party and its double-engine government. There has been growing resentment amongst the members of the BJP-led ruling alliance against Singh’s style of functioning. Many of them could sense the growing public dislike for the BJP due to its handling of the ongoing crisis and the tangible prospect that the party will be routed in the next state Assembly election if the present situation continues. As a result, the BJP faced the likelihood of an open rebellion, including a possible no-confidence motion in the Assembly.

These developments compelled the party bosses in Delhi to act against Biren Singh, who is seen by many as a part of the problem. Yet, despite enjoying an overwhelming majority in the state Assembly, they could not come to a consensus on who should replace him. Hence, the decision to impose President’s Rule.

For normalcy to return to Manipur and for justice for the people of the state, there has to be accountability, including for the conduct of the Union government. Only a Joint Parliamentary Committee to examine the multiple dimensions of the crisis in Manipur can fix this accountability, not President’s Rule.

The writer, faculty at JNU, is a Member of Parliament (Lok Sabha)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

UNJUST PEACE

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, ‘A fork in the road’ (IE, February 18). If Donald Trump’s efforts come to fruition, it would mark a breakthrough in bringing Vladimir Putin to the table, given Moscow’s resolve to press on with its war plans. Otherwise, the terms of the negotiation hinted at so far by the Trump administration make it likely that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy will have to accept an unpalatable outcome. This appears inevitable given that US Defence Secretary Pete Hegseth suggested that no US troops would be committed to Ukraine in any future security arrangement. This is likely to have a profound — and damaging — impact on the security and economy of not only Ukraine but also of the EU. Trump has been vague about his specific intentions for Ukraine and Russia — other than suggesting that a deal will likely result in Ukraine being forced to cede territory that Russia has seized since it annexed Crimea in 2014. It’s a waiting game for now.

SS Paul, Nadia

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, ‘A fork in the road’ (IE, February 18). This is not merely a question of deepening divisions in Europe. President Donald Trump’s one-sided engagement with Russia without accounting for Europe and NATO at large or even Ukraine speaks of prioritising a faster resolution over a safe and equitable one. His recent comments on Gaza without heeding the voices of the displaced residents themselves need to serve as a warning to the leaders of Europe that the current US dispensation may sacrifice all other dissenting opinions just to give the appearance of being decisive and “getting things done”.

Anany Mishra, Bhilai

TO TRUST EC

THIS REFERS TO the report, ‘EC Gyanesh Kumar new poll panel chief; LoP files dissent’ (IE, February 18). The appointment of Gyanesh Kumar as the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) and Vivek Joshi as the Election Commissioner has sparked a fresh debate. While the government’s prerogative in such appointments is acknowledged, the timing of the decision raises concerns, especially given the ongoing case before the Supreme Court regarding the composition of the selection panel. The Opposition’s request for a brief deferral until the court hearing was reasonable. The fact that the meeting proceeded despite the pending judicial review not only undermines the legitimacy of the appointment process but also casts a shadow over the independence and credibility of the Election Commission (EC). As the body responsible for overseeing free and fair elections, the EC must remain beyond reproach.

Sanjay Chopra, Mohali

SIMPLICITY IS KEY

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, ‘Ease of taxpaying’ (IE, February 17). Simple tax laws foster greater public compliance, integration with global best practices, and tax stability, all of which are essential for a country’s economic growth. The current Income Tax Act has grown verbose and unwieldy as a result of over six decades of tinkering with its provisions, many of which have outlived their purpose. The late NA Palkhivala even called the Act a national disgrace. The government deserves credit for translating years of complexity into simplified legislation that aligns with the new tax regime. A comprehensive review of the Bill with all stakeholders should occur before it becomes law.

Kamal Laddha, Bengaluru



ANUJA AGRAWAL

Policing, not protection

UCC regulations on live-in relationships can expose people to many risks

THE QUESTION OF A Uniform Civil Code (UCC) is extremely fraught in India. Non-marital relationships have never been debated within its purview. However, the Uttarakhand UCC’s emphasis on live-in relationships and its regulations have brought forth many debates ranging from legal to social.

There are hardly any empirical studies that tell us about the extent, form, and contentions in different variants of non-marital relationships of cohabitation, popularly referred to as “live-in relationships” in India. Most of what we believe about such relationships is derived from anecdotal evidence, popular culture, and media coverage of cases such as the 2022 murder of a young woman, Shraddha Walkar, by her live-in partner. The number of cases filed against the backdrop of live-in relationships across states has grown exponentially in the last decade-and-a-half. But Uttarakhand does not figure prominently among the states with such litigation. Moreover, the UCC does not seem to be an appropriate response to the concerns that have been brought to the court.

Admittedly, right from the onset of the 21st century, non-marital relationships of cohabitation have been a subject for discussion for the Indian judiciary, policymakers, feminists, and legal scholars. The issue gained prominence with aborted attempts to broaden the definition of “wife” in the Criminal Procedure Code. The moral panic around statements by celebrities such as Tamil actor Khushboo that

were seen as an endorsement of pre-marital sex also amplified public attention. However, the inclusion of “relations in the nature of marriage” within the purview of domestic relations in the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005, brought into full view the contentious questions around the legal regulation and recognition of non-marital sexual relationships.

While there are many complex legal questions that the domain of non-marital relations, including those among same-sex partners, gives rise to, it is a mistake to assume that such relations have a single variant. Among other possibilities, non-marital cohabitation can be a form of trial marriage; an alternative to conventional marriage; or a relationship in which the divorced and widowed enter later in life. The period for which people may be in such a relationship and the ensuing obligations can also be extremely varied. The patterns are also not entirely new as, in many parts of India, some variations of such relations have been customarily accepted. In some contexts, this can be a relationship in which one of the partners (or both) is also married to someone else. Most of this is not appreciated in calls for legal regulation of such relations and is certainly not factored into the UCC.

Indeed, it is often forgotten that the initial impetus that brought live-in relationships into the legal purview had to do with the protection of women in secondary unions: In cohab-

itation relations with already married men. The Malimath Committee, for example, sought to extend the definition of “wife” in Section 125 “to include a woman who was living with the man as his wife for a reasonably long period, during the subsistence of the first marriage”. This was an acknowledgement of the fact that many women find themselves in relationships that are “like marriage” but have no legal protection, often because their male partner is an already married man.

Our legal system has, however, been very resistant to a recognition of rights within such variants of live-in relationships. Almost from the onset, legal innovations such as those in the Domestic Violence Act of 2005 have been interpreted by courts in a manner that restricts the kind of relationships to which protection is offered. This has been abundantly obvious in judgments given in *Velusamy vs D Patchaialamm* (2010) and subsequently in *Indra Sarma vs V K Sharma* (2013), in which the Supreme Court offered a restricted definition of “relationships in the nature of marriage”.

The UCC in Uttarakhand also operates within the logic of a restricted definition by not only making registering such a relationship mandatory but also imposing restrictions on who can enter such relationships and creating a regulatory apparatus with a highly coercive potential. This Act’s apparent legal approval of a form of non-marital relation-

ship is counterintuitive. It imposes all the trappings of a conventional marriage, which undermines the experimental nature of such relationships, especially among the young, who seem to be the target of the new law. Instead of providing protection, these regulations can expose men and women in live-in relationships to many risks, including moral policing. Like previous lawmaking on such issues, the poor drafting of the law may also have unintended consequences. In no other part of the world has such a law been enacted in the name of offering protection to those in such relations.

Do those in such relations need to be legally regulated? Should the law offer some kind of protection to those in such relationships or should it monitor and police them? What kind of rights and obligations should be attached to those in a non-marital relationship? What about those who continue to remain outside the purview of such a law, such as those in same-sex relations or those who are in a relationship with an already married person? While answers to such questions are not easy, they do not seem to have been considered at all in the UCC’s maiden attempt to codify relationships that are not necessarily in need of such regulatory attempts.

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What is deposit insurance cover, and how will raising it help you?

HITESH VYAS &
AANCHAL MAGAZINE
MUMBAI, NEW DELHI, FEBRUARY 18

THE GOVERNMENT is considering increasing the insurance cover for bank deposits from the current limit of Rs 5 lakh, Financial Services Secretary M Nagaraju said on Monday.

The deposit insurance cover is offered by the Deposit Insurance and Credit Guarantee Corporation (DICGC), a specialised division of the Reserve Bank of India (RBI).

What has the government said on deposit insurance?

Asked what the government was doing in the matter of the New India Co-operative Bank against which the RBI took action last week, Nagaraju said that a proposal on “increasing (deposit) insurance” was “under active consideration”, and “as and when the government approves, we will notify it”.

What actions has RBI taken in the New India Co-operative Bank case?

RBI has imposed several restrictions on

the Mumbai-based bank, including superseding its Board of Directors for 12 months, citing supervisory concerns and “poor governance standards”.

The RBI has directed the loss-making bank to not grant or renew any loans and advances; make any investment; incur any liability including borrowing funds and accepting fresh deposits; or disburse or agree to disburse any payment without prior written approval. The restrictions came into effect after close of business on February 13, and will be in force for six months.

The bank has 30 branches in Mumbai, Thane, Navi Mumbai, and Pune, and in Surat in Gujarat. At the end of March 2024, the bank had a deposit base of Rs 2,436 crore, and it had posted losses of Rs 22.78 crore in 2023-24 and Rs 30.74 crore in 2022-23.

How are the deposits of customers insured against failure of the bank?

The objective of the DICGC is to protect “small depositors” from the risk of losing their savings in case of a bank failure. The insurance cover of Rs 5 lakh per depositor is for all accounts held by the depositor in all

branches of the insured bank.

DICGC insures all commercial banks, including branches of foreign banks functioning in India, local area banks, regional rural banks, and co-operative banks. However, primary co-operative societies are not insured by DICGC.

Savings, fixed, current, and recurring deposits are insured. The DICGC does not provide insurance for deposits by foreign, central, and state governments, and for inter-bank deposits.

The premium for deposit insurance is borne by the insured bank. DICGC collects premiums from member financial institutions at a flat or differentiated rate based on the bank’s risk profile.

How can depositors of New India Co-operative Bank apply for the DICGC’s insurance?

DICGC has said it will make payments to eligible depositors of the bank as per Section 18A of the DICGC Act, 1961, subject to submission of a claim list by the bank within the statutory timeline of 45 days.

Depositors have been asked to submit deposit insurance claims to the bank, along with an official proof of identity, a “willingness declaration” to receive the amount lying in their accounts up to a limit of Rs 5 lakh, and details of a second account where this amount can be credited. The money can also be credited to their Aadhaar-linked bank account.

The last date for submission of claim or willingness declaration to New India Co-operative Bank is March 30. DICGC will make the payment to all eligible depositors by May 14.

How does the limit for DICGC’s coverage work?

In 2021, a new Section 18A was inserted in the DICGC Act, 1961, which enabled depositors to get interim payment and time-bound access to their deposits to the extent of the deposit insurance cover through interim payments by DICGC, in case of imposition of restrictions on banks by the RBI.

At present, DICGC offers insurance cover on bank deposits up to Rs 5 lakh within 90 days of imposition of such restrictions. Since DICGC insures both the principal and inter-

est amount held by a depositor in a bank, this is how the cover works:

Say, a depositor has Rs 4,99,800 in her account, which includes the principal amount of Rs 4,90,000 and Rs 9,800 as interest accrued on it. In this case, DICGC will provide insurance for Rs 4,99,800, which means the depositors will get Rs 4,99,800, if their bank fails.

However, if the principal amount is Rs 5,00,000 (or more), and the interest accrued is, say, Rs 10,000, the interest accrued will not be covered, as the depositor would have exhausted the cover limit of Rs 5 lakh.

If the bank goes into liquidation, DICGC is liable to pay to the liquidator the claim amount of each depositor up to Rs 5 lakh within two months from the date of receipt of the claim list from the liquidator.

The liquidator will have to disburse the right claim amount to each insured depositor.

Has the depositor’s insurance ceiling always been Rs 5 lakh?

The cover was raised from Rs 1 lakh to Rs 5 lakh from February 4, 2020, after RBI took action against Punjab and Maharashtra Co-operative Bank Ltd.

Deposit insurance was introduced in India in 1962, and coverage has thus far been enhanced six times — from Rs 1,500 per depositor held in the same right and same capacity at all the branches of the insured bank to Rs 5 lakh now.

The deposit insurance scheme was started with 287 banks in 1962; the number of insured banks was 1,997 as of March 31, 2024.

What is the case for revising the deposit insurance upwards?

According to RBI Deputy Governor M Rajeshwar Rao, as of March 31, 2024, fully protected accounts were 97.8% of the total, higher than the international benchmark of 80%.

However, challenges were likely going forward, Rao cautioned, given that a growing and formalising economy such as India’s can be expected to see a sharp increase in both primary and secondary bank deposits.

An increase in cover will not only protect to a greater extent the interest of depositors in case of a bank failure such as that of New India Co-operative Bank, it will likely also strengthen their trust and confidence in the banking system.

EXPLAINED SCIENCE

No, you can’t be gulped by a whale. Here’s why

A 23-YEAR-old Venezuelan kayaker named Adrián Simancas was briefly swallowed by a humpback whale in the Strait of Magellan off Chile’s Patagonian coast on February 8. The video of the incident — shot by Simancas’s father who was also kayaking in the vicinity — shows the whale surfacing, engulfing Simancas and his yellow kayak for a few seconds before letting him go. Simancas did not sustain any injuries.

In an interview, Simancas said, “I felt something hit me from behind — all this happened in a second — something dark blue or white enveloped me, and a slimy texture brushed my face.” After a second or so, he said, “I began to feel the life jacket pulling me up and then suddenly I was out again.”

Whales with/ without teeth

There are broadly two families of whales — baleen whales and toothed whales. There are 14 species of baleen whales including blue whales, humpback whales, and grey whales. Instead of teeth, these whales have baleen, which is essentially a filter-feeding system inside their mouths. Baleen is made of keratin — the same protein that makes up human hair and fingernails. Baleen whales use this system to filter small prey such as krill, plankton, and small fish from the water.

Toothed whales have teeth. There are more than 70 species of these whales including sperm whale, beaked whale, and killer whale. Dolphins are a type of toothed whale. “These whales actively hunt larger prey such as fish, squid, and sometimes even seals,” Anaïs Remili, a researcher at Canada’s Simon Fraser University, wrote in a blog post on her website ‘Whale Scientists’.

Notably, toothed whales do not use their teeth to chew food — they use them to usually only grab prey before swallowing them whole.

Cannot swallow a human

Neither baleen whales nor toothed whales can swallow a human. Although



A humpback whale in French Polynesia. Wikimedia Commons

they have huge mouths, their throats are much smaller — a humpback’s throat is roughly the size of a human fist. Toothed whales have a larger oesophagus than baleen whales. However, they too are incapable of swallowing an entire human.

Sperm whales are an exception. They are the only whales with throats large enough to swallow a human. But it is a billion-to-one thing for a sperm whale to swallow a human, in part because encounters are extremely rare.

The humpback whale that briefly took Simancas in its mouth could have done so by mistake, according to experts. Dianna Schulte, a co-founder and director of research at the Blue Ocean Society for Marine Conservation in New Hampshire (USA), told *The New York Times* in an email, “Humpbacks often feed in the manner seen in the video, by charging to the surface with their mouths open to capture concentrated prey (small fish or krill)... It likely did not know the kayaker was above it, especially given the cloudy conditions and the assumed concentration of the prey.”

As humpbacks rely primarily on their hearing, and small, motorless vessels such as kayaks make very little sound, it is possible that the whale did not know that it was there, according to Schulte.

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE

DAMINI NATH & RITIKA CHOPRA
NEW DELHI, FEBRUARY 18

PRIME MINISTER Narendra Modi, Home Minister Amit Shah and Leader of Opposition Rahul Gandhi met on Monday evening to select former IAS officer Gyanesh Kumar as the new Chief Election Commissioner of India. Kumar succeeded Rajiv Kumar, who retired on Tuesday.

The 30-minute meeting saw Rahul give a dissent note, asking the government to defer the appointment until the Supreme Court had decided on the petitions challenging the new process of making the appointment.

This was the first time that a selection panel appointed the head of the constitutional body that conducts elections in India.

How were Chief Election Commissioners of India appointed before this?

The Election Commission of India (ECI) is a three-member body comprising the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) and two Election Commissioners (ECs). The CEC is first among equals at the ECI, in some ways like the Chief Justice of India among the judges of the Supreme Court.

No law of Parliament existed earlier for the appointment of the CEC and ECs. The President made the appointment on the advice of the Prime Minister. Incumbent CECs have traditionally been succeeded by the next senior-most EC. Seniority was usually determined based on which EC was appointed earlier to the Commission.

However, both Gyanesh Kumar and Sukhbir Singh Sandhu, the ECs who served on the ECI alongside CEC Rajiv Kumar, were appointed to the Commission on the same day, March 14, 2024 — and both are IAS officers of the 1988 batch. So who would be considered senior among them?

Sources within the government and Commission said it is Gyanesh Kumar, since his name appeared first in the appointment notification issued by the Union Ministry of Law and Justice.

Thus, under the old system, the President would have appointed Gyanesh Kumar as the CEC upon Rajiv Kumar’s retirement. However, this time was different.

So how was the new Chief Election Commissioner appointed this time?

The new CEC has been appointed under a new law — The Chief Election Commissioner And Other Election Commissioners (Appointment, Conditions of Service And Term of Office) Act, 2023 —



Gyanesh Kumar was chosen by the three-member Selection Committee to be the new Chief Election Commissioner of India on February 17. File

which lays down the procedure for the appointment of both the CEC and ECs.

Under the procedure prescribed in the Act, a Search Committee headed by the Law Minister (currently Arjun Ram Meghwal) and having two senior officials serving as Secretaries to the Government of India must draw up a shortlist of five candidates. This shortlist is to be sent to a Selection Committee made up of the Prime Minister, the Leader of Opposition, and a Cabinet Minister nominated by the PM. Section 8 of the Act gives this Committee the power to also consider names outside the shortlisted five.

The current Selection Committee comprises, besides Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Leader of Opposition Rahul Gandhi, Home Minister Amit Shah. The Committee met on Monday evening at the Prime Minister’s Office in South Block to select Rajiv Kumar’s successor. Notably, Gyanesh Kumar and Sukhbir Singh Sandhu were appointed to the Commission in March 2024 under the same process.

Sources said shortlists of five names each for the posts of CEC and EC were placed before the Committee, which made the selection for both positions. Rahul Gandhi’s dissent note was recorded in the proceedings of the meeting.

Based on the recommendation of the Committee, an official notification was released on Monday night, saying that in exer-

cise of the powers conferred on him under the 2023 Act, the President had appointed Kumar as the CEC with effect from February 19. Vivek Joshi, an IAS officer of the 1989 batch, was appointed as an Election Commissioner “with effect from the day he assumed charge of his office”.

While the new process did not rule out Gyanesh Kumar from becoming CEC — his name was among the five shortlisted — it did allow the government to cast its net wider, which it could have potentially used to bring in a CEC other than the two existing ECs.

Does the new Act specify eligibility conditions?

While the government usually appointed retired senior bureaucrats to the Commission in the past, the Act makes the qualifications for the jobs clear.

“The Chief Election Commissioner and other Election Commissioners shall be appointed from amongst persons who are holding or have held a post equivalent to the rank of Secretary to the Government of India and shall be persons of integrity, who have knowledge of and experience in management and conduct of elections,” Section 5 of the Act states.

The Act also specifies the terms of service of the CEC and ECs. “The Chief Election Commissioner and other Election Commissioners shall not be eligible for re-

appointment. Where an Election Commissioner is appointed as Chief Election Commissioner, his term of office shall not be more than six years in aggregate as the Election Commissioner and the Chief Election Commissioner,” it states.

Why was the process of making appointments to the ECI changed?

The 2023 Act was brought after an intervention from the Supreme Court, following a clutch of petitions filed between 2015 and 2022 that challenged the Centre’s exclusive powers in picking the Election Commissioners.

The court had noted that the framers of India’s Constitution had never intended to give the Executive exclusive appointment powers. Concerned about the “devastating effect” of leaving appointments solely to the Executive, the top court established a new process. In its judgment of March 2, 2023, it ruled that a Selection Committee comprising the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition in Lok Sabha and the Chief Justice of India would select the CEC and ECs until Parliament enacted a law.

Thereafter, before any vacancy could arise in the Commission, the government brought the Bill in Parliament, which was passed in December 2023. The Act changed the composition of the Selection Committee from the one recommended by the Supreme Court — it replaced the CJ with a “Union Cabinet Minister to be nominated by the Prime Minister”, effectively giving the government the final say on who is selected.

Do the new appointments settle the matter now?

No. The Supreme Court, as the LoP said, has been hearing petitions challenging the new appointment process. The nonprofit group Association for Democratic Reforms has challenged the removal of the Chief Justice of India as a member of the Selection Committee under the new law.

The key constitutional question raised by these petitions is whether Parliament has the legal authority to override or modify a judgment of a Constitution Bench through legislation or by promulgating an Ordinance. Although the petitioners sought an early hearing before Rajiv Kumar’s retirement, the Supreme Court scheduled it for February 19 — a day after his exit.

However, SC judge Justice Surya Kant assured the petitioners that the “consequences” of the court’s decision on the validity of the new Act would apply even if appointments were made in the interim.

Allahbadia bail condition: SC’s gag order and the question of free speech

APURVA VISHWANATH
NEW DELHI, FEBRUARY 18

THE SUPREME Court on Tuesday granted interim protection from arrest in the FIRs registered against podcaster-influencer Ranveer Allahbadia for his comments on a YouTube show.

However, a Bench of Justices Surya Kant and N K Singh imposed crucial conditions, including that Allahbadia or his associates cannot air any content on social media until further orders.

The SC also sought the assistance of the Attorney General for India in the next hearing to tackle the “vacuum” in the regulation of online content.

While Allahbadia was granted relief, the gag order raises some questions of free speech. The order also flies in the face of an

SC judgment that said such a condition could have a “chilling effect on the freedom of speech”.

Petitioner’s plea

The petitioner had moved the SC seeking clubbing of FIRs against him, and an interim order preventing his arrest.

Essentially, the relief would be akin to granting anticipatory bail. Such pleas are routinely entertained under Article 32 of the Constitution for the enforcement of fundamental rights as a safeguard against arbitrary police action.

The pattern of filing multiple FIRs in different jurisdictions for the same cause of action or alleged offence has been noted in several cases as restricting liberty.

Courts club the FIRs or allow investigation in one FIR, while the others are stayed so the petitioner does not have to appear in

multiple courts. Ultimately, even if convicted, the accused would serve a common sentence, and not consecutive sentences.

SC’s gag order

The court stayed the FIRs registered in Jaipur and Guwahati, and also any future FIRs on the same set of allegations. It allowed Allahbadia to approach the police for protection in the event of any threat.

But the SC imposed two conditions: that Allahbadia deposit his passport so he does not leave the country, and that he “or his associates shall not air any show on YouTube or any other audio/video visual mode of communication till further orders”.

Bail conditions

Section 438(2) of the CrPC stipulates that the High Court or the Court of Sessions can

direct a person to be released on conditional bail. The court shall impose conditions in the context of the facts of a particular case.

For example, the condition of depositing a passport is to address situations where the accused could be a flight risk. Bail could be set for a high monetary value to ensure the accused joins the investigation. Another common condition is that the accused should periodically present himself before a police officer.

In other cases, courts have imposed onerous bail conditions like sharing a Google map PIN or residing in a particular locality. In a 2023 case in which the accused was asked to deposit a huge amount with the court for grant of bail, the SC had observed that setting such onerous bail conditions amounted to “selling bail”.

“How many times have you stood in the

Supreme Court and High Court objecting to such onerous conditions? How can we start selling bail like this?” a Bench headed by Justice Ravindra Bhat had said.

However, a gag order, while granting protection from arrest, is an unusual condition because it is in the nature of a prior restraint — when speech or any other expression is prohibited before it can take place.

A body of jurisprudence in India bars the state from making prior restraint laws. In hate speech cases, the court could observe that the accused cannot make similar statements, essentially tailoring the gag order narrowly to not interfere with speech entirely.

Past SC ruling

In 2022, while granting bail to Alt News co-founder Mohammed Zubair, a three-judge Bench headed by Justice D Y Chandrachud rejected the Uttar Pradesh

government’s plea that the accused must be barred from tweeting while on bail.

“Merely because the complaints... arise from posts that were made by him on a social media platform, a blanket anticipatory order preventing him from tweeting cannot be made. A blanket order directing the petitioner to not express his opinion — an opinion that he is rightfully entitled to hold... — would be disproportionate to the purpose of imposing conditions on bail. The imposition of such a condition would tantamount to a gag order against the petitioner. Gag orders have a chilling effect on the freedom of speech,” the court said.

The court noted that Zubair would need to use social media as a medium of communication for his work, and said that a gag order would “amount to an unjustified violation of the freedom of speech and expression, and the freedom to practice his profession”.

Vertical fiscal gap

Centre’s fiscal prudence is laudable, but should not constrict states’ resources and spending capacity

THE GOVERNMENT’S COMMITMENT to prudent fiscal management and consolidation of public finances is unmistakable. *FE* has recently reported that the Centre has managed to save a considerable ₹75,000 crore in interest costs in the five years through FY24 thanks to efficient cash management, a remarkable feat given the spike in accumulated debt after the pandemic. Market participants and rating agencies recognise the government’s fiscal efforts and transparency. Tighter controls have been kept on government borrowings, despite pressing challenges, and reasonably strong public capital expenditure. Over and above these, a new element of the policy is “just-in-time” release of funds for assorted centrally sponsored schemes (CSSs) through the Reserve Bank of India, instead of state-government treasuries. The objective is to curb “floating of funds” and fund diversions. The so-called Single Nodal Agency-SPARSH model also includes a procedure for return of unspent balances lying with state treasuries and state-level nodal agencies, with penal interests being charged for violations.

The Centre is certainly entitled to keep better track of Budget funds and ensure their optimal use for the intended purposes. However, a review of some of the criteria for allocation and release of CSS funds may be warranted. This is especially because the Centre has assumed a much greater — if not exclusive — role in deciding what the CSS funds are to be used for, after the dismantling of the Five-Year Plans. Tighter regulation of CSS funds has resulted in savings and imparted a push to economic reforms, but it also led to significant under-utilisation of allocated sums in recent years. According to the revised estimates of 2024-25, spending on CSS is estimated to be lower by over ₹90,600 crore (18%) over the Budget estimates.

States now have to pitch in with 40% share to be eligible for CSS funds. While fiscal indiscipline and a tendency to pander to the electorate with largesse do exist, in a country with wide regional disparities, states could legitimately have development priorities different from the ones specified under the pan-India norms imposed by the Centre. Many states may want to spend according to local realities. Moreover, the stricter CSS norms coincide with a situation where tax transfers by the Centre to the states have hovered around 30-33% of the gross tax receipts in recent years. This is at variance with the Finance Commission (FC) objective of higher devolution to states to address the vertical (Centre-state) fiscal gap. The mandated 41% share of the divisible tax pool for states is inevitably honoured, but with the growth of the pool itself being compressed. Also, untied grants to states now have a much-reduced share in composite transfers (CSS grants exceeded untied FC grants by over 100% in FY23, for instance).

It is in this context that many state governments complain about receipts of CSS funds being far lower than the original Budget outlays, and/or being deprived of their “legitimate shares”. The West Bengal government, for instance, has highlighted that its rural housing scheme is entirely funded out of the state exchequer, in the alleged absence of central funds; the Tamil Nadu government is peeved at being allegedly deprived of Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan funds, and Kerala has raised the issue of an impractical timeline to spend a ₹529-crore capex loan granted as Wayanad landslide disaster relief. Fiscal prudence is indubitably a worthy goal, but it should not be taken to an extent that states’ spending abilities are hit.

The world's most important market sends a warning

FINANCIAL MARKETS ARE neither ideological nor do they have an agenda. They’re dispassionate observers, indispensable for helping to discern whether assets are cheap, expensive or fair based on current and historical relative values. So it’s worth taking notice when the \$30-trillion market for US government securities — the one that guides every other and helps set the cost of money worldwide — is sending an alarming message about the outlook for inflation.

For all the criticism the Federal Reserve received for being “behind the curve” in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, US Treasuries never failed to signal elevated inflation rates would recede under President Joe Biden. And they did, with the consumer price index falling faster than at any point in modern times, to 2.4% in September from a peak of 9.1% in June 2022. The bond market essentially validated assessments that the abrupt cost-of-living increase in 2021 reflected “a combination of supply and demand shocks, not excessive monetary stimulus”.

“I was on ‘Team Transitory’, which made me much smarter than the majority of my peers in analysing inflation so far this decade,” because the late 1940s, following the Second World War and early 1950s, during the Korean War, “had much more to teach us” about their “impact on prices” than the late 1960s and early 1970s, University of California at Berkeley economics professor J Bradford DeLong wrote in a December 15 Substack column.

Such confidence disappeared in the bond market this month as evidenced by the two-year breakeven rate exceeding the 3% rise in January’s CPI. When the breakeven rate is below CPI, traders are in effect betting inflation will slow in the next two years. When it is above CPI, traders are betting inflation will accelerate. Not since President

Donald Trump announced on Twitter that he and First Lady Melania Trump tested positive for Covid-19 in October 2020 has the breakeven rate hovered above the CPI as it does today. Contrast that with the past four years, when the US economy outperformed the world as gross domestic product expanded an average of 3.6% annually and the bond market eschewed any notion that inflation wouldn’t abate.

Even when it is asserted that such short-term outlooks are nothing more than speculation because the two-year breakeven rate is driven by two-year Treasury notes, the bond market’s longer-dated maturities show an abrupt departure from the sanguineness of 2024. The outlook for inflation during the next decade as measured by 10-year breakeven rates is the highest since March 2023, before the Fed signalled any intention to lower interest rates after the century’s most aggressive tightening of monetary policy. The 30-year breakeven rate similarly is the highest since November 2023 before the Fed decided to ease.

Global investors are becoming all-too-familiar with the unprecedented chaos unleashed during the first month of the second Trump administration, including:

- Impounding of billions of dollars appropriated by Congress to United States Agency For International Development (USAID), National Institutes of Health, department of education and the Environmental Protection Agency in violation of the Constitution.
- Pardons for 1,500 insurrectionists, who assisted Trump in his attempted coup on January 6, 2021.
- Disobeying court orders to release federal funds.
- Threats to break treaties with Canada, Denmark, Mexico, and Panama.
- Tariffs that raise prices for consumers and reduce manufacturing jobs.

As for the grocery prices Trump promised on the campaign trail in August to bring down “starting on day one” if he was elected, they, too, are part of the chaos. Eggs in January contributed an additional 1.4 percentage points to food inflation, the most since 2013, according to data compiled by *Bloomberg*. That’s when our colleague Michael McDonough, *Bloomberg*’s chief economist for financial products, realised he had to spend 6.1% more for a breakfast of bacon, eggs, cheese, and coffee.

And yet, whatever the bond market is saying about what comes next for inflation under this administration, Trump blames Biden.

ON SHAKY GROUND

TRUMP-MODI TALKS AUGUR THAT TRANSACTIONS MAY NOT BE THE BEST WAY TO STRENGTHEN INDO-US RELATIONS

Don’t count on ‘friend’ Trump

WITH DONALD TRUMP as America’s president, no friend or ally needs enemies. Ask America’s European allies, who are shocked that he seems ready to sell Ukraine’s sovereignty and their defences to a 21st century imperialist Russia.

Additionally, he wants the US to swallow up neighbouring North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) ally Canada and Greenland, which is ruled by Denmark, another NATO collaborator. India, which once fought a great freedom struggle against British imperialism, is silent on Trump’s imperialist intentions, just as it has refused to condemn Russia’s in Europe. And Trump’s intent to throw Palestinians out of Gaza and to create a rich man’s Riviera in West Asia pleases Israel — but hardly any other country. International law and territorial integrity are clearly not among Trump’s top priorities; shouldn’t they be more of India’s?

India is silent on these crucial global issues. That does not imply that the mutual admiration society that the transactional Trump and Prime Minister Narendra Modi appear to be forming signals a trouble-free Indo-American relationship. India, as the weaker transactional country, must keep this in mind as it tries to extract goodies from Trump.

Before Modi’s arrival in Washington, Trump repeated warnings that he gave several times during his election campaign. He attacked Indian tariffs as the highest in the world. While threatening India with reciprocal tariffs, Trump has declared that India is a very difficult place for business. At the same time, he and Modi boast that Indo-US trade will soar from the current \$190 billion to a

mind-boggling \$500 billion by 2030.

That prospect did not stop Trump from carrying out a threat, made during his presidential campaign, to use the US military to carry out a mass deportation of undocumented migrants.

Delhi was silent as 104 Indians, shackled and handcuffed by American authorities, returned to India. This was followed by Modi’s statement that he was looking forward to meeting “my old friend” Trump in Washington. Modi pinned the blame on unscrupulous international human traffickers who dupe ordinary people, without explaining why there are so many illegal Indian immigrants in America in the first place. And why didn’t India follow the example of some other countries who sent their own planes to bring back their illegal immigrant citizens instead of letting them be subjected to inhumane treatment in an American military aircraft? But then, Delhi has not been able to explain how some 90 Indians ended up fighting for Russia in Ukraine. Some have died; others are missing although Modi raised the issue with Putin during his official visit to Moscow in June 2024. Clearly, India is bad at ensuring civilised treatment for its citizens.

Trump has long attacked India’s

favourable trade balance with America. To reduce the US trade deficit with India, he has offered India the sophisticated F-35 combat aircraft which the Biden administration refused to give because of India’s heavy dependence on Russian weapons. The delivery of Russian arms has stalled since Moscow mounted its invasion of Ukraine in 2022 — so any American material is welcomed by India, whose border dispute with China remains unsettled. But the problem of transferring sensitive American technology to a non-ally will remain.

Trump wants India to increase its buys of American oil and to reduce the large purchases of Russian oil that it has made since February 2022 on the grounds that a sanctioned Russia was selling its oil at discounted prices. Trade with Russia has grown, but India has far more trade with the US and Russia’s main strategic partner, China, which threatens India’s territorial sovereignty while being its second-biggest trading partner, after America.

Together, more American arms and energy buys will increase India’s dependence on Washington, which already buys 16% of its exports. Russia buys less than 1%. That will strengthen the Indo-US mil-

Before Modi’s arrival in Washington, Trump repeated warnings that he gave several times during his election campaign

Policy layering & execution: Mind the gap



ARADHNA AGGARWAL

Senior advisor, Trade, Technology and Skills Team, National Council of Applied Economic Research

THE WORLD IS at a crossroads, navigating unprecedented economic, technological, geopolitical, and environmental challenges. Donald Trump’s uncompromising “America First” policies and the use of coercion to achieve his objectives have heightened economic and geopolitical uncertainties, compelling nations to strike a balance between global integration and self-reliance. Against this backdrop, the finance minister presented a Budget that articulated the multipronged strategy adopted by the government to navigate these challenges and seize emerging opportunities. The Budget is anchored on a well-designed framework founded on four key pillars of the economy: agriculture, micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs), manufacturing, and exports, incorporating a strategic mix of structural reforms, targeted investments, productivity growth, skill development, digital transformation, innovation, and green energy on the supply side. This is besides enhanced consumer spending power on the demand side to drive growth and competitiveness, while addressing social welfare concerns.

However, the thrust has been on announcing new programmes and policies across the four sectors, in addition to existing ones. This phenomenon, known in emerging literature as policy accumulation or policy layering, raises concerns about the effectiveness of implementation and governance.

Over the past few years, India has witnessed phenomenal policy dynamism, with policies/programmes piling up across sectors. However, this has not been reflected in macroeconomic indicators of structural change, growth, and competitiveness. Could it be that the ever-

increasing policy stock, without commensurate strengthening of administrative and governance capacities, has resulted in an implementation deficit that negatively affects policy effectiveness? This issue is explored at the sector level, with a focus on MSMEs.

A major highlight of the Budget is enhanced support for MSMEs, through a revision of the classification criteria that enables businesses to scale efficiently without losing government benefits. The investment limits for MSMEs are set to increase 2.5 times with micro-enterprises’ limit rising from ₹1 crore to ₹2.5 crore, small enterprises from ₹10 crore to ₹25 crore, and medium ones from ₹50 crore to ₹125 crore. Turnover limits are also proposed to double, with micro-enterprises increasing from ₹5 crore to ₹10 crore, small enterprises from ₹50 crore to ₹100 crore, and medium enterprises from ₹250 crore to ₹500 crore. To further support MSMEs in achieving economies of scale, the Budget directly addresses their most pressing challenge — access to finance — through several new initiatives, including a ₹5 lakh credit card for micro-enterprises registered on the Udayam portal, a loan scheme targeting first-time entrepreneurs (particularly women and Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribe applicants), enhanced credit availability with a guarantee cover for MSMEs, start-ups, and exporters, an extension of tax benefits under Section 80-IAC to all eligible start-ups incorporated before April 1, 2030, a deep tech Fund of Funds to catalyse next-generation start-ups, and

an Export Promotion Mission to facilitate export credit access, cross-border factoring support, and assistance in overcoming non-tariff barriers.

The fact is that numerous government schemes have already been launched or revamped over the past two decades to support MSMEs. These include Mudra loans for financial assistance, the Credit Guarantee Fund Scheme, the Zero Defect Zero Effect certification scheme to encourage quality manufacturing, the Prime Minister’s Employment Generation Programme for micro-enterprise establishment, the Credit Linked Capital Subsidy Scheme for technology upgrades, the Micro and Small Enterprises Cluster Development Programme for common facility centres and industrial estate upgrades, and the Reserve Bank of India (RBI)-initiated Restructuring of Advances scheme for loan restructuring under specific conditions. Yet, their effectiveness remains questionable. An analysis of the World Bank’s Enterprise Survey for India (2022) reveals that out of 9,003 MSMEs, only 663 (7.4%) reported receiving any government support in the previous fiscal year. Among them, 40% found the schemes ineffective in driving business growth, implying that only 4.4% MSMEs benefitted meaningfully. The most accessed schemes were the Cluster Development Programme (155 enterprises, 35.5% satisfaction), Restructuring of Existing Loans (141 enterprises, 75% satisfaction), Mudra loans (80 enterprises, 56% satisfaction), and the production-linked incentive scheme in textiles,

food, and miscellaneous sectors (75 enterprises, 89% satisfaction). Other schemes had minimal impact. The overall low adoption and satisfaction rates suggest an implementation gap.

One of the primary challenges faced by MSMEs is delayed payments from larger companies, leading to cash flow shortages and inadequate working capital. The MSME Act, 2006, (Section 16) mandates that buyers must settle dues within 45 days of accepting goods or services, failing which they are liable to pay compound interest at thrice the RBI-notified bank rate. However, compliance remains weak. To address this, the RBI introduced the Trade Receivables Discounting System (TReDS) in 2014, enabling MSMEs to discount invoices via an auction mechanism. According to survey data, out of 814 MSMEs that uploaded invoices on a TReDS platform, 452 received funding, with 97% securing it within 45 days. However, adoption remains low, with only 962 enterprises (less than 11%) of the 9,003 surveyed registered on the platform. In 2017, the government also launched the MSME SAMADHAAN-Delayed Payment Monitoring System, yet 45% MSMEs selling on credit in the sample still reported payment delays, negatively impacting liquidity.

Evidently, extreme policy dynamism — introducing multiple programmes each year while maintaining existing ones — can overburden bureaucracy, strain resources, and compromise the implementation of initiatives. A shift in focus from continuous expansion to ensuring sustainability and effectiveness of programmes is imperative for achieving policy success.

Views are personal

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Cost-cutting does not aid growth

Apropos of “Cost-side story” (*FE*, February 18), high valuations in the stock market were a result of high demand for stocks created by new entrants to the market who thought that investing in stocks was the easiest way to make money. Reality has now hit them as growth continues to languish. There is barely any topline growth and profits are equivalent to

inflation. Cost-cutting can make a difference to the bottom line, but there is a limit to it. It would be fatal if companies reduce the employee count in order to maintain profits. The ultimate outcome of such a move would be a further drop in demand. Let us hope there would be a reduction in goods and services tax rates like the raising of tax exemptions on income, which would help boost demand and spur growth. —Anthony Henriques, Maharashtra

Pension reforms

Apropos of “Transforming pension and PF services” (*FE*, February 18), employees contend with bureaucratic delays in getting their pension and availing of Employees’ Provident Fund (EPF) services, thanks to the inefficacy in processing applications and lapses in sending documents by the employer to the authorities. The pension reforms will create landmark changes with the

auto-settlement of provident fund claims, simplification of the process, and information technology-enabled databases giving immediate financial updates to retirees. Yet, the incumbents in the pension system must render inclusive service to the pensioners and EPF holders by absorbing the reforms with the right perspective. —NR Nagarajan, Sivakasi

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WELFARE SCHEMES ARE NECESSARY, BUT THEY NEED FUNDING PLANS

THE Supreme Court's remark that the handouts announced liberally during elections could be creating "a class of parasites" was an unkind cut made while hearing a case about providing shelter to the homeless. The backdrop was the competitive populism practised by every political party in India today. Caught in the middle of populist politics and conservative economics are crores of Indians still in the throes of poverty, for whom the so-called freebies are a much-needed lifeline.

It's true that political parties have been tripping over each other to offer newer 'guarantees' to grab votes—cash transfers, free foodgrains and farm subsidies among them. The central government runs one of the largest schemes, giving 81 crore people free grains under the PM Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana, a Covid-era scheme extended till December 2028. All state governments offer welfare schemes of one shape or another. According to a recent report from a private bank, a fifth of India's adult women are now eligible for the cash transfers offered by various state governments.

It's also true that at stake is taxpayers' money, which is spread thin to keep the schemes going and the politicians in business. But a cash-for-votes model can dent both democracy and development. Such largesse is seen going against the belief in ambition, enterprise and competition, and fostering resentment against the 'brother's keeper' philosophy. But in truth, hardly anyone turns down the opportunity to work and earn a dignified keep, as MGNREGA has proved. The Supreme Court had sought to know how long such freebies could be sustained and if jobs could be provided; it is soon due to hear related petitions.

Competitive populism may be endemic in an elections-only democracy, but it's not sustainable. Voters must demand sound financial plans from populist politicians to avoid thrusting their future generations into tougher economic realities. How to fund development and welfare should be made clear first; and taxation cannot be the only way. Crores of Indians face various levels of poverty. So it's the welfare state's responsibility to explain how it will provide for all that has been promised.

EXPAND REVENUE BASE BEYOND MINING ROYALTY

ODISHA Chief Minister Mohan Charan Majhi's first full budget does not carry screaming announcements. Instead, it adopts a pragmatic approach that bets big on infrastructure to push growth, while not losing sight of the social sectors. The ₹2.90-lakh-crore budget for 2025-26 presented by Majhi, also the state's finance minister, gives due weight to agriculture with a 12 percent jump in allocation focusing on cold storage chains, crop diversification, irrigation and research. Health and education have received necessary provisions, while the government's flagship Subhadra scheme, under which women get yearly cash transfers of ₹10,000 for five years, has been given more heft. A whopping ₹13,000 crore for decongesting Bhubaneswar and setting up a mega metropolitan region over 7,500 sq km are also welcome decisions. The budget also had its share of welfarism, as it unfurled 16 new schemes.

The proposals make a compelling pitch to build industrial corridors, and develop ports and expressways that can address regional disparity, a crucial aspect ignored for long. In its allocation of ₹62,206 crore, the Majhi government has thrown its weight behind infrastructure development in both urban and rural areas. A string of road projects that link ports to the hinterland, a push for new port projects, and ₹6,500 crore for developing 3,000 km of roads to industrial and mineral belts will go a long way in supporting industry and trade. "These transformative infrastructure projects will fuel industrial expansion, trade and employment, bringing us closer to our vision of a prosperous and self-reliant Odisha," Majhi said in his speech. He backed it with a capital outlay of ₹65,012 crore—more than 6 percent of the state gross domestic product, a high proportion among the major states.

The CM has adopted a balanced approach to development while sticking to a moderate rise in outlay, since slow spending is a concern. Given the state's own non-tax revenues of ₹60,000 crore, 80 percent of which comes from mining royalties, there is a cushion on the credit side that the government enjoys. However, the vision for having a \$500-billion economy by 2036 will require the Majhi government to expand its revenue base, spend much more and then use the capacity created. The bolder decisions await round the corner.

QUICK TAKE

DO UNTO OTHERS

A 20-year-old Nepali student's death by suicide at KIIT Bhubaneswar should worry us for several reasons. Among them are Indian institutions' continuing inability to deal with harassment allegations in time and the shadow the tragedy casts on India-Nepal relations. But as we keenly watch lakhs of Indian students going abroad every year, we miss the tens of thousands who make the reverse journey—a stream that Prakriti Lamsal had joined. The latest government numbers show more than 46,000 foreign students were studying in India in 2021-22, with Nepalis forming the largest cohort. We must accord them the safety and courtesy that we demand of our children abroad.

EARNING from the mistakes made during the era of the League of Nations, the global community came together at the end of the Second World War for yet another experiment—the United Nations. However, the term 'global governance' truly acquired more profound dimensions after a wave of economic reforms washed over the world. Remarkably, the processes of economic and political liberalisation walked hand-in-hand.

It entailed an acceptance of the rules of a free-market economy, the evolution of and adherence to global benchmarking mechanisms, and recognising the inevitability of the institutionalisation of global governance without undermining the cultural sensibilities of every nation. But though it promised a level playing field, globalisation didn't mean a one-size-fits-all approach.

Yet, to a great extent, at least some features of the LPG trio—liberalisation, globalisation and privatisation—have now become irreversible. The free-market economy has, understandably, impacted the development economy too. Meanwhile, the four Ts of travel, trade, technology and trends in life-styles have changed to large degrees. The remarkable ease of travel that globalisation has brought into other spheres is important, even if not always welcome.

At the same time, we need to appreciate the emergence and importance of agencies and organisations that are into setting global benchmarks of economic and social development on the basis of their own measuring rods. They routinely undertake studies and surveys that are evolved later as globally-followed indexes and reports. However, the yardsticks applied by most such agencies are based on Western needs and approaches.

While one can't deny the importance of greater consumption in market economies, justice is not done to those who adhere to the principles of sustainable consumption. People in the eastern world believe in *aparigraha*, or non-possession, which is diametrically opposite to the most influential thoughts in the western world. Hence, those shaping the ground rules of global governance have to take into account the difference in human values adhered to not just by one part of the world.

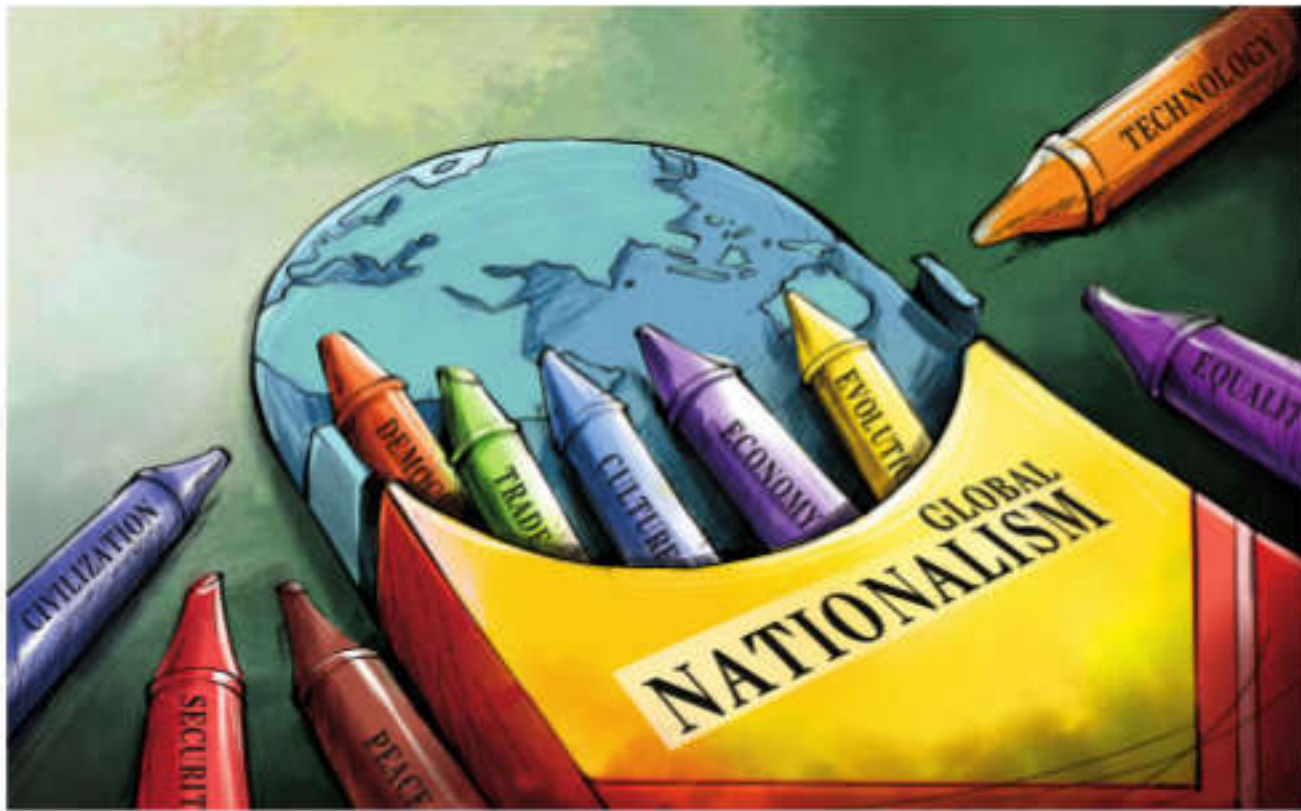
Here comes into the play what could perhaps be rightly described as globalised nationalism. Such a framework

As global governance faces another existential crisis, we must learn from past mistakes and shun uniform prescriptions for all. Celebration of diversity could make us a closer-knit global family

LIVING IN AN ERA OF GLOBALISED NATIONALISM

VINAY SAHASRABUDDHE

Senior BJP leader



Export Diversity is Key to a Big Push

Raise investment in domestic manufacturing

India's goods exports slid for the third consecutive month. Blame it on lower petro prices. But non-oil exports are up a decent 14.5% to \$32.9 bn. Export diversification is one reason for good tidings. High value-added electronic exports are pushing the frontier outwards, while traditional leaders such as engineering goods and pharmaceuticals are displaying good momentum. Soft prices of oil cuts both ways by reducing export as well as import value, although the impact is higher on the former. The energy market has turned nervous over threats of US tariffs affecting merchandise trade overall. Rise of the dollar is mirroring this sentiment. India's energy imports are sensitive to the rupee's slide, which may not provide adequate protection to exports if the US were to impose reciprocal tariffs.

Further diversification would be required to sustain the recent momentum of India's manufacturing exports. Trade fragmentation would disadvantage



exports by creating oversupply in India's export markets and could also spill over into dumping at home. Scope to reduce import tariffs is limited in this scenario. New Delhi will need a strategic response to Washington's efforts to balance bilateral trade. Committing to tariff cuts on, say, autos would ease entry of Chinese cars along with those made in the US. Energy and arms imports provide an opportunity to address US concerns, while retaining a degree of protection India is comfortable with.

Another area of focus is to raise investment in domestic manufacturing through export incentives. This is not as controversial in a global trading order obsessed with import duties. This aids the secular diversification of product categories and export markets. PLIs across a broader portfolio of industries must be fine-tuned to replicate the success of electronic exports. All of this must be accomplished while global merchandise trade finds a new equilibrium. India must be both strategic and swift with its policy intervention over manufacturing exports. It has some leeway, but not much, due to slower de-globalisation of trade in services.

Look Ahead for Viksit, Not Behind & Below

Reaching consensus on contentious issues can be exhausting in a pluralistic country like India. On Monday, the Supreme Court deferred the hearing on a batch of pleas relating to the Places of Worship (Special Provisions) Act 1991, to April. It expressed displeasure over multiple fresh petitions challenging the law's validity. The court's response is reassuring.

The Act mandates that the religious character of a place be maintained as it existed on August 15, 1947. In 2022, the court observed that investigating the religious character of a place of worship was not barred under the law. This sent a wrong signal to lower courts, society and the political establishment, opening the floodgates for more litigation. A year later, it allowed



ASI to conduct a scientific survey at the Gyanvapi mosque to ascertain whether it was built on a temple. But, in 2024, the top court stalled proceedings in about 18 law-suits seeking surveys to determine the original religious character of 10 mosques. Compounding the issue is GoI's reluctance to file a counter-affidavit in response to challenges against the law. While the incentive for taking a clear stance is low for obvious political reasons, the institutional damage from allowing courts and governance mechanisms to be choked by regressive, divisive litigation in circa 2025 India is significant. Such a competitive spree of pleas stifles real progress, making the 'radicalised' citizenry miss viksit for mandirs. Political machinations, coupled with under-employment, can make for a flammable combination that's not just digressive from all that talk of 'Viksit Bharat', but downright regressive. Choking courts with yearnings is a sign of a democracy sputtering on its path to a prosperous future.



JUST IN JEST

American interest in us is sweet – as is its inability to influence us

Uncle Sam Wanted Us To Come Out & Vote?

Chartered accountants are the rage in Washington DC ever since the DOGE brigade took to doing some super-jugaad of their own. Led by cutlass-wielding Elon 'Jack Sparrow' Musk and boss-follower Donald 'Hector Barbossa' Trump, the two have slashed the overgrown, overblown jungle that's been USAID. Critics of the slash'n'burn, which have made the likes of McKinsey cry in awe and envy, are horrified. The same folks who once identified the 'United States Agency for International Development' as a euphemism to spread 'Yankee propaganda' are now decrying US unwillingness to spread its soft power. The latest ping to land on the India table is the US Department of Government Efficiency claim that (1) \$21 mn was to be spent for 'voter turnout in India', and (2) the current administration has nixed that funding. America's 'interest' in increasing voter turnout in India is cute. Even if we doubt that the funding was to go to what it was supposed to be spent on — phone messages from well-wishing NGOs asking us to go out and vote? Banners and bulletins saying, "Swipe right on Democracy — Cast Your Vote!" or "Vote Like Your Wi-Fi Password Depends on It?" — the fact that aliens were investing in our voting patterns and won't be any more should make us doubly chuffed. It turns out we're interesting to them. But that interest can't be translated into influence.

CURSOR Welcome to the truly multipolar world – and we can thank marauding Trump for it

MEFA, Make Earth Flat Again



T K Arun

The prospect of being hanged, it has been observed, concentrates the mind wonderfully. But when the edifice within which you have been sheltering yourself since the end of World War 2 collapses on your head, you are left dazed, not clear-headed. That has been the experience of Europe, after Donald Trump started negotiating Ukraine peace with his Russian counterpart directly, over the heads of Ukraine and of the US' erstwhile European allies.

Resentment at such disdain towards their concerns turned to apologetic appreciation of the magnitude of the shift in the US' stance, when J D Vance told the Munich Security Conference, which concluded this Sunday, that Europe's main enemy is 'within', not in Russia or China, and that the main enemy is immigration, coupled with wilful sidelining of voices critical of the mainstream consensus.

To make things absolutely clear, Vance left the conference venue to meet Alice Weidel, leader of Germany's far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), considered by most Germans to be modern-day Nazis.

Weidel might have many sterling qualities to be AfD leader, but her name certainly helps. When her supporters chant 'Alice für Deutschland', it brings back to them the atavistic thrill of hearing Hitler's paramilitary storm troopers, the Sturmabteilung (SA), chant their motto, 'Alles für Deutschland' (All/everything for Deutschland).

This is an integral and significant part of the world view Trump seeks to legitimise, the notion that 'shitty African countries' should keep their people to themselves, and let competent White



Practising the theory of unintended consequences

men run the world, free from the obligation to dole out aid and free to clear desirable patches of land, like the Gaza Strip, of undesirable inhabitants.

When, at his inauguration, Trump



When Trump said the US would once again become a nation that expands its territories, he declared American secession from any rules-based global order

said the US would once again become a nation that expands its territories, plants its flag on new lands, praised annexationist American president William McKinley and, later, stood by his threat to use military force against Panama and Greenland, he declared American secession from any rules-based global order.

When he embraced a regime of reciprocal tariffs, he renounced the world trade order and the 'most favoured nation' concept dating back to WTO's predecessor, General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (Gatt), superseding rules and establishing might in its place, in the re-

alm of economic ties as well.

This might give the impression that he has inaugurated a regime in which every country is free to make its way in the world, based on its capacity to use force. That China and Russia would also be free to bully their neighbours. This is simplistic.

The clock cannot be turned back to the 19th c. Today's world is intricately interdependent. A trillion dollars' worth of US debt is owed to China, its so-called systemic rival. American tech giants depend on sales around the world, including in China, Europe and the rest of Asia, for their prosperity.

Musk's Tesla cars run on cobalt from the Democratic Republic of Congo's mines. Americans wake up to smell Colombian coffee. American corporate offices run on systems implemented and maintained by Indian software service companies. Combating climate change calls for deploying Chinese solar energy modules and Chinese EVs wherever these are welcome. A significant buyer of US grain exports is USAID, the American aid agency being gutted in the name of government efficiency.

American nuclear plants import

India would find it easier to preserve its strategic autonomy and grow into a major power, than in a world dominated by just the US and China



'Patient-Centric Care', An Oxymoron?



Tushar Gore

'Patients first' and 'We care for our patients' are often touted as slogans in hospitals. Is 'patient-centredness' becoming a sarcastic oxymoron, much like 'business ethics'?

There are two facets to patient care in a hospital. The most important is the clinical outcome. The other, often overlooked, is the stress induced by brushes with bureaucracy. A patient might be shielded from most of these. But his or her attendants are put through the wringer and have to withstand this challenge on top of the emotional burden of the family member's procedure. Any stress on the patient's support system impacts the patient as well.

Clinical outcomes data by procedure type are not available. So, patients can't compare success rates to select a hospital for an elective procedure. Choice is often based on a referral from friends and family. Accreditations such as recognition by the National Accreditation

Board for Hospitals and Healthcare Providers (NABH) can provide an additional check. However, it's unclear what that mark of quality means. Remember the ISI mark from the 1960s?

NABH can increase awareness regarding what to expect from a certified hospital regarding quality of care. Clinical outcomes depend on many aspects — from the design of the building and infrastructure (including air-purification and water-handling systems, oxygen-generation plants) to operating room (OR) procedures, lab practices, drug dispensing and routine procedures like use of gloves. It will help the public understand how a NABH-certified hospital is better. Even in renowned hospitals, simple practices such as use of gloves are not always scientific. Such gaps show a lack of understanding about infection control.

The second criterion — interactions with the hospital administration — has multiple dimensions:

► **Insurance** The interface with insurance can be the most painful experience. The hospital can't do much about practices controlled by the insurance company. But it can ease the burden by appointing a dedicated person in charge of the patient file whom the patient's relatives can reach

out to for updates on insurance. The insurance desk is often a sea of stressed-out relatives clamouring for attention. It need not be so.

► **Patient records** Another point of pain is the constant request for patients' records from myriad individuals before — and, shockingly, sometimes during — the procedure. The system must recognise that very few patients (and their support groups) are knowledgeable about the entire history and diagnosis, and their relevance to the planned procedure.

Incessant requests only add to the emotional toll of the family burdened by being in the hospital. Crucially, dependence on the patient's recall of history can lead to incorrect clinical decisions because of erroneous memory recall. A best practice would be to have one medically trained person take the detailed history at admission and use that



Too isolating our wards

file as the primary record. This file can also be used to satisfy any information requests from insurance.

► **Access to information** Other aspects that can ease mental stress include providing advance knowledge about the plan for different tests and visits while the patient is in the ward post-procedure. Something as simple as a board displaying the physician's visit times will help substantially.

There is massive asymmetry in information — and, therefore, in power — between the patient and the healthcare system (especially physicians). This asymmetry leads to enormous anxiety. Doctors are a privileged and respected class. An appropriate reciprocal gesture from the community, then, would be proportional empathy and actions to reduce this asymmetry.

The in-patient hospital setting is one in which patients and their support system have zero control. Hospitals will do well to understand this basic unmet psychological need and, consequently, reduce the number of events that remind patients (and the supporting team) of their evicseration. This will be a big step towards delivering on the patient-centric vision more fully.

The writer is MD, Resonance Laboratories, Bengaluru

Deregulate to Ease Biz Breathing



Ashish Dhawan & Swagato Ganguly

Budget 2025 delivered earlier this month brought tax relief for the middle class, and succeeded in advancing a cohesive vision of 'what it might take to move towards 'Viksit Bharat' by 2047. More disposable income will step up demand. So will the growth of quality jobs that pay high wages.

But because global demand is many multiples greater than local demand, the biggest bang of all will come if India ramps up its exports. Which isn't sitting pretty, with goods exports shrinking for the third straight month to \$36.43 bn in January from \$38.01 bn in December 2024, and down 2.38% y-o-y.

Keeping this reality check in mind, GoI is on the right track with its plan to establish an Export Promotion Mission with an outlay of ₹2,250 cr. Export promotion is what delivered the goods for China, South Korea and other 'tiger' economies of East Asia. For 'Make in India' to succeed, that is what India needs to emulate.

The other big idea embedded in the budget is the proposal to set up a

high-level committee for regulatory reforms. Together, these two big ideas can provide both demand and supply levers for lifting growth.

There is a range of supporting ideas as well, which, if integrated with these ideas, could achieve the goal of large-scale job generation.

► **Labour focus** Focus on labour-intensive sectors such as footwear and leather, toys, food processing and electronics makes sense. GoI should put in place a scheme of well-calibrated employment-linked incentives to support these sectors and make them globally competitive.

► **Tariffs and duty structures** Tariffs often act as an extra tax burden on domestic manufacturers, who use imported inputs, making Indian industry less competitive. BharatTradeNet (BTN), a trade network portal to provide documentation and financing solutions for

international trade, should help. There should be further momentum on tariff rationalisation, and GST rationalisation as well.

But, as evident, challenges remain. Land and labour are two notorious factors awaiting liberalisation if barriers to industrialisation and job creation are to be overcome. What is less well known, though, is that even in the case of limited stock of land available for industrial use, building regulations across states stunts industrial capacity by locking up productive factory land and raising cost of doing business.

Prosperiti's 2023 report, 'State of Regulation: Building standards reforms for jobs and growth', documents how building and land-use regulations ramp up the cost and difficulty of doing business. On average, factories across states are only allowed to create floor space up to 1.3x the plot size.



Controller still doesn't inspire confidence

Indian building standards often exceed those of developed nations with per-capita incomes many times higher than India's. If Indian Inc is to be competitive, this is not practical. Unfortunately, the opportunity cost of such stringent regulation is loss of factories that never come up and high-wage industrial jobs suitable for India's labour profile that do not get created.

A comparison among states in terms of restrictiveness of their building regulations has also yielded paradoxical results. For example, while Harya-

na, Tamil Nadu and Telangana are the least restrictive states for constructing a factory Bihar, Odisha and Delhi are the most restrictive. While Delhi's case is understandable, given that it's a densely populated and service sector-oriented city, Bihar and Odisha should be doing more to encourage industrialisation.

The regulatory reforms committee should benchmark regulation against that of East and Southeast Asian economies, which happen to be India's industrial competitors. In the Philippines, for example, rear and side setbacks required for factories are minimal. Factories in Singapore don't need side setbacks if the adjoining plots also house factories. This difference means that a mega factory in Maharashtra loses twice as much land to setbacks as one in the Philippines, and five times more than in Singapore.

Not only does India abound in regulations but inspectors, too, often interpret them whimsically. This makes doing business difficult on the ground, no matter what official parameters say, and hinders job creation. Once the regulatory reforms committee is established, it should see its mission as delivering a boost to GDP growth that lasts a generation by bringing clarity and simplicity to regulation and dismantling the inspector raj.

Dhawan is founder-CEO, and Ganguly is senior fellow, The Convergence Foundation



THE SPEAKING TREE

Independent And Evolved

NARAYANI GANESH

You are never dedicated to something you have complete confidence in. No one is fanatically shouting that the sun is going to rise tomorrow. They know it's going to rise tomorrow. When people are fanatically dedicated to political or religious faiths or any other kinds of dogmas or goals, it's always because these dogmas or goals are in doubt. So says Robert Pirsig, author and philosopher, confirming the truth that the truly evolved individual needs no validation from others and/or their beliefs and dogmas or even from institutions and governments.

An individual who is aligning himself with his true self, his own consciousness, and whose vision is above and beyond the mundane — that reeks of politicking and ulterior selfish motives — is well on his way to realising the ultimate and experiencing universal love and peace. He detaches himself from worldly entanglements but not by neglecting his responsibilities — he does so by staying both in and out of the world.

Krishn speaks of just this kind of person when he advises Arjun to become a person of equanimity, a sthita-prajna, a man of steady wisdom, who remains unperturbed both in the face of joy and sorrow, navigating all dualities with an even mind, staying focused on the ultimate. Such a person is free of desires, and he has his mind focused on Atman, universal consciousness, Brahman. He does his work conscientiously, but without obsessing about the results.



PEAS IN A PODCAST

Up Above the World So High

All good things must come to an end. After nearly three decades of groundbreaking science and exploration, International Space Station (ISS) is set to retire by the end of 2030.

Curious about what happens next? Tune into Are We There Yet? hosted by space journalist Brendan Byrne. This podcast delves into the future of space exploration, from human



missions to deep space to probes in our solar system. In the episode **After the International Space Station Retires, What Comes Next?** Byrne interviews ISS space operations director Robyn Gatens. They discuss ISS' decades-rich history, its current contributions, and the exciting future of space exploration. Gatens emphasises that we are in the 'golden era' of ISS, with many breakthroughs still emerging. She highlights the ongoing efforts to maximise the space station's potential through 2030 and beyond.

Gatens shares insights on the transition to commercial-owned and -operated space stations, and expresses optimism about multiple commercial platforms in low-Earth orbit. Aerospace companies, such as Axiom Space, are working to develop commercial space stations to replace ISS.

For anyone passionate about space, this episode is a must-listen. Watch... well, listen to this space.

Chat Room

Stakes on A Plane

Apropos "Third US Flight with Illegal Migrants Lands in Amritsar" by Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury (Feb 17), the deportation of illegal migrants back to India has opened a can of worms. Evidently, there is a well-oiled machinery in this business. GoI should start shutting down these body shops, and punish go employees who were on the take to turn their eyes away. At ₹30 lakh per individual and 1,000 illegal immigrants, we are looking at a business of more than ₹300 cr annually. This business is like the illegal buildings that are 'traced' 20 years after being built by which time the officials have retired. And sitting on the top of this pyramid are politicians. Then, the migrants were handcuffed because the US didn't want any trouble or violence on the plane. Will India at least now send its planes and bring back illegal migrants? T R Ramaswami Mumbai

CONTRAPUNTO

Prejudice is a great time saver. You can form opinions without having to get the facts

- EB WHITE

India, Teach Thyself

What Odisha tragedy says to foreign students here

Nepalese student Prakriti Lamsal's death by suicide at Kalinga Institute of Industrial Technology in Bhubaneswar is tragic; and a wake-up call for GOI, which wants India to become an education hub for developing countries. KIIT seemingly disregarded Prakriti's complaints of harassment against an Indian student. Later, without investigation, it labelled her suicide a result of heart-break. When hundreds of other Nepalese students protested, they were bundled out to Cuttack railway station and told to stay away. In one viral video, two KIIT staff are heard shouting at them that the institute's expenditure on tuition and board exceeds Nepal's budget. Such arrogance! By this logic, Indians in US should shop at Walmart with a sense of gratitude because the retail giant's revenue exceeds GOI's budget.

The case snowballed into a diplomatic issue. Nepal's PM Oli raised it, Indian embassy in Nepal gave an assurance, Odisha govt pulled levers, the institute apologised, urging evicted students to return. It also "removed from service" the two loudmouth officers. In 2013, many had scoffed when a global survey claimed India was among the most racist countries.

But ask students from Africa who have suffered racial abuse here. The Jan night in 2014 when a Delhi minister led a 'raid' against Nigerians is a stain that won't wash. Our record on people from our own Northeast isn't great either. Surveys showed how they were stigmatised as 'Chinese' during the pandemic. Now, this case has blown up in Nepal, biggest source of foreign students to India – 13,126 of 46,878 in 2021-22. Oli anyway has been showing off his China tilt. India wants 500,000 foreign students a year by 2047, but is stuck at the 50,000 mark. Accepting what's wrong might be a good place to start.

Geopoliticking

Trump-Putin chats aren't bad news for India

Yesterday's meeting between high-level American and Russian delegates in Saudi Arabia certainly churned the geopolitical pot. First, it's sent European nations into a huddle, worried that the Trans-Atlantic Alliance's fraying and a deal on Ukraine would be reached without them at the table. This many of them interpret as being thrown to the Russian wolf.

Second, it's put US aid for Ukraine under a big cloud. Zelenskyy, unsurprisingly, has said that he won't accept any deals between Washington and Moscow about Ukraine made without Kyiv. But he's still hanging around in the region, travelling to UAE and Türkiye before going to Saudi Arabia himself. In that sense, Trump has moved the needle on the Ukraine war. Everyone is at least discussing new ideas. Russia reportedly has now said it's fine with Ukraine joining EU but not Nato.

US clearly wants to reset ties with Russia and wean it away from the China-North Korea-Iran camp. That in itself may not be a bad strategy. The Beijing-Moscow compact is a big headache for India too. But will it work? China and North Korea have invested too much in Russia over the course of the war. However, Moscow may be open to hedging. Note that it has not blocked sale of Indian BrahMos cruise missiles to Philippines and now potentially to Vietnam, two countries locked in maritime disputes with China. There are no acceptable solutions yet. But parts are moving to find some.

'Most welcome recast'

Wipro founder chairman writes on GOI's new tax code

Azim Premji

I have had the rare opportunity to have studied and experienced the workings and impact of the Income Tax Act, 1922, and its 1961 successor. When the proposed New Income Tax Bill, 2025 becomes law this year and later comes into force, I'll have had the distinct, possibly a unique, privilege of having lived through all three income tax acts being in operation – a tax trifecta – in independent India.

India's tax regimes have had everything – 98% tax rates, but also smart tax incentives for information and digital technologies, tax refunds withheld for years, but also instant grants of largest number of refunds upon filing tax returns.

Over the last 10 years, govt must be credited with bringing about a paradigm shift, both in terms of tax structure and administrative efficiency – pre-filled returns, mandatory e-filing, quicker refunds, faceless assessments. Yet dispute resolution isn't always speedy.

Having lived through two previous iterations of I-T legislation, I can relate to the troublesome questions of most common taxpayers – why can't the tax code be simple, why is tax practitioner required for the most basic tax implications, why does a tax return form require the taxpayer to check out so many irrelevant boxes, why should tax litigations remain unresolved for long?

So, a recast of the tax code was most welcome. The new Bill signals a clear intent to modernise and simplify the tax code, reducing the sense of intimidation often associated with tax matters. Several key provisions demonstrate a drive towards simplification. Replacing terms like "Previous Year" and "Assessment Year" with the more intuitive "tax year" and using easier-to-absorb formats like tables, formulae, and schedules give a lucid presentation to the code. This focus on plain language and comprehensible legal expressions aims to demystify tax jargons and empower taxpayers. The "trust first, scrutinise



later" doctrine is embedded in the Bill.

While the Bill addresses concerns over interpretation-based litigations, the role of robust administrative provisions is crucial. Exploring and institutionalising alternatives to ensure speedier dispute resolution will reduce tax disputes, contributing significantly to ease of doing business.

The Bill also provides an opportunity to align Indian taxation system with evolving international taxation concepts, including the increasingly key area of profit allocation among participating countries in cross-border transactions. This will mean greater simplicity, transparency, and fairness.

Given my close association with philanthropy, the simplification of provisions relating to non-profit organisations (NPOs) has not missed my attention. The Bill provides much-needed clarity on permissible commercial activities of registered NPOs, a critical area previously lacking a precise definition. This clarity will help NPOs operate with greater certainty and avoid legal challenges. The inclusion of permitted investment modes in the schedule is a helpful step, but a mechanism for adding new entries without requiring constant parliamentary amendment may also be considered. This will allow for greater flexibility and responsiveness to evolving financial instruments and market conditions.

The meticulous efforts invested in preparation of the Bill are commendable, and govt deserves recognition for its commitment to reforming this vital area of public policy. The intended implementation date of the Bill is April 1, 2026, which provides ample time for public consultations, expert deliberations, and stakeholder feedback.

While govt has already engaged meaningfully with stakeholders during the drafting process, continued engagement is vital. This will help identify and address any remaining ambiguities, inconsistencies, or unintended consequences. Such an inclusive approach will ensure a smoother transition and maximise the effectiveness of the Bill. I wish GOI all success in the smooth passage of the Bill.

Yalta To Riyadh: Might's Again Right

Post-WWII, US & USSR divvied up Europe without consulting it. That's the approach Trump's US & Putin's Russia are taking in their Saudi bilateral. China's ok with that. India should be wary

Andreas Umland

Washington-Moscow negotiations that started yesterday in Saudi Arabia are odd, to say the least. These offline discussions in Riyadh are high-level – foreign ministers and presidential advisers of US and Russia are involved. These talks focus on Ukraine's fate, and the future of European security. Yet, neither Ukraine nor EU or any of its member states are present at, or in any other way are part of these so far purely bilateral face-to-face meetings.

There are other oddities. A Ukrainian delegation led by First Deputy PM Yulia Svyrydenko met with Saudi officials in Riyadh on Feb 16 to prepare for a visit. Zelenskyy's on a planned visit to UAE, Türkiye and Saudi Arabia. Ukraine's president and govt officials are thus close-by to American and Russian negotiators in Riyadh – but not in Riyadh.

The absurdity of this situation illustrates the depth of change the international order is going through. Putin's and Trump's approach to Ukraine aren't manifestations of a new 'multipolar world'. They do not display the pluralism required by a multipolar approach to international security. Instead, they signal a return to principles of the Yalta System established in WWII's last months. The Yalta talks were held exactly 80 years ago in Feb 1945.

The idea of 'might is right' that stood strong in 1945 seems to be back again – driving a division of continental Europe by outside powers. During WWII, in talks at Tehran, Yalta and Potsdam, Washington handed Moscow far more European territory than Russia had received before WWII from Germany.

In the 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact between USSR and Nazi Germany, Stalin had secured from Hitler Soviet control over some east-central European nations including Poland and Baltic states. Yet, in 1945, US left all of eastern Europe to Soviet imperialism, enforced Russianification, state terrorism, and colonial exploitation.

Stalin made his disrespect for principles of 1945's new international system evident when he made Soviet 'republics' of Ukraine and Belarus founding members of UN.

Is 'immoral' at all illegal? Do we know our young? Who decides what's acceptable? Why They Talk Dirty

Rajat Mitra

YouTuber Beer Biceps' comments on the India's Got Latent show have touched a raw nerve. They're being discussed in university classrooms, dinner parties, and gatherings across India. While the Supreme Court yesterday gave him interim protection from arrest for the offence of obscenity, the question remains, what is freedom of speech? And who should set its boundaries?

Irvyng Wallace once remarked that in a free society, no one should come between an idea and its audience. If that happens, society is no longer free. It is the audience who is the ultimate judge, who must decide what to do with an idea or behaviour, and thus decide the boundary for what is acceptable and what must be rejected in society. A large number of people, including young people, have said that Ranveer Allahbadia's language does not represent them, which tells us that they have rejected it.

The next question is, why does such explicitly sexual talk even happen in the first place? The answer perhaps lies in the fact that psychologically, we are further shifting into an age of moral relativism, which has crept in silently.

In therapy sessions with Gen Z clients, psychologists often notice a rejection of the absolutism of their elders and an acceptance of moral relativism found in the statement, "If it feels okay, if it feels good, it must be okay!" This is a common refrain. The earlier era in which things were seen in black and white has now been swept away. In the current view, even the most private thoughts and fantasies can be discussed threadbare in the open.

It was a generation ago that psychologists began to notice this trend. Revealing secrets became fashionable, something to boast about. Holding secrets became passé, seen as causing psychological disorders. Bringing innermost thoughts, fantastical lives, out in the open became the sign of liberation.

In this view, discussing even the most obscene and bizarre idea in public, and laughing about it, is a sign of freedom

from the elder generations. Allowed to continue, the trend has led to deep scars and psychological trauma for many, but this has not stopped the ones who consider the new freedom of expression exciting.

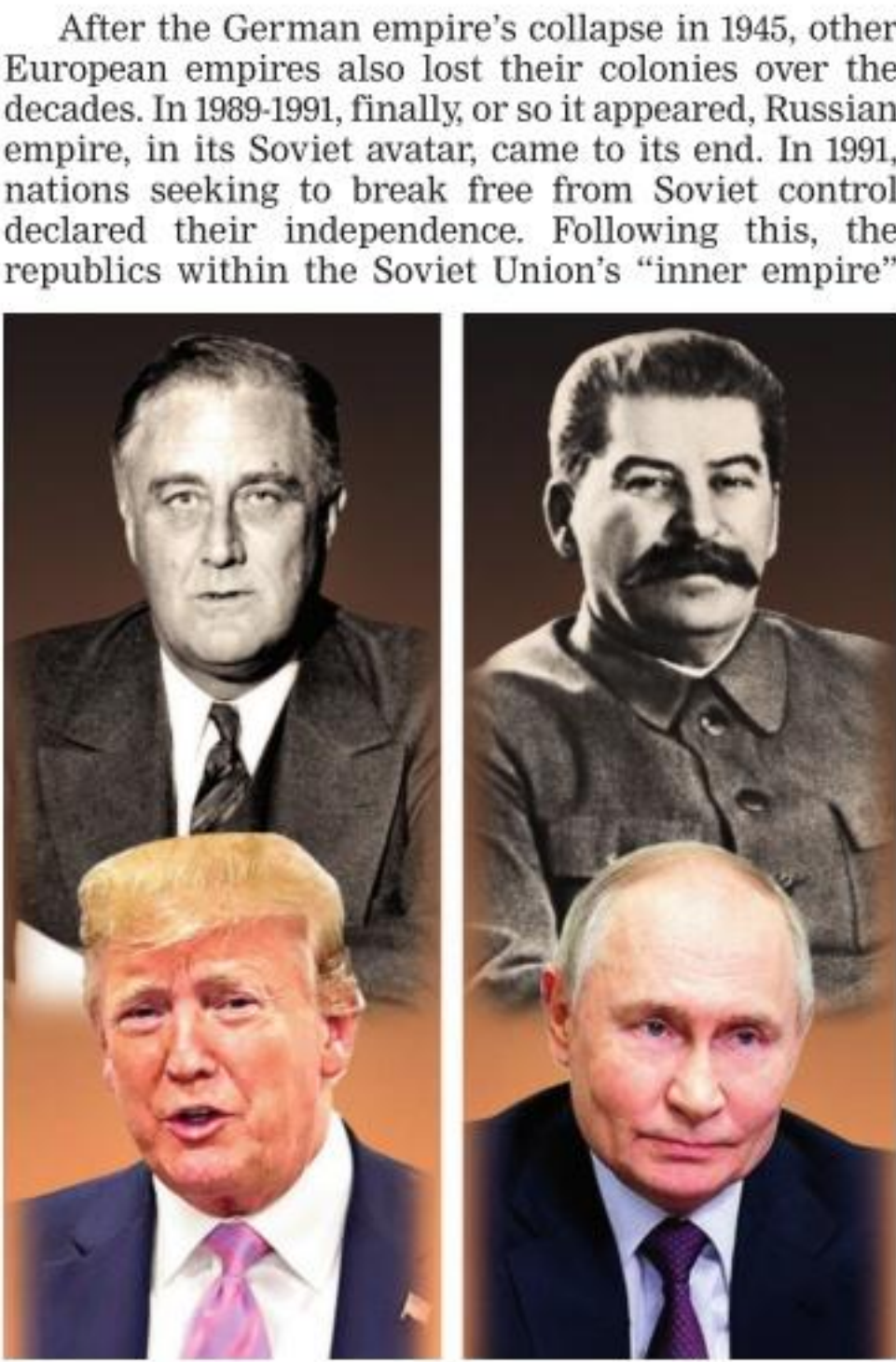
Indian society today stands at an inflection point where its intellectuals, families, and institutions need to actively debate such issues without hunting, shaming, mocking, or casting blame on anybody. It is a national issue and only a national conversation will make us a rule-of-law society capable of withstanding a crisis of values.

Freedom plus internet means our private space, innermost and sacrosanct, will continue to get invaded. Instead of going into denial and becoming defensive as to how this could be happening to us, we need to understand that with the digital era rewiring physical space and relationships, this may not be easy to prevent, and we must be ready for dialogue so that we do not get polarised into taking extreme positions.

Another question is, do we truly know the younger generation? Our shocks, our denials, our advocacy of extreme responses today, suggest we do not. We need to understand what drives them, what they value. It is digital space that's their most intimate companion, a secondary family, which in many cases even replaces the first. That is, the power of digital space to shape their psyche has begun to exceed that of biological parents and teachers.

A student, a young woman, told me that she has grown up holding her parents as next to gods, and Allahbadia's words hurt her at the very core of her being. For all like her, a healing touch is the need of the hour. Understanding that we have the power to transcend such language and speech is what will help us overcome the turmoil and societal division we are currently facing.

Professor of psychology



also gained formal independence.

But Moscow's post-1945 mockery of international law and multipolarity continued on a smaller scale. Without due process of application and accession to UN – as Serbia did after Yugoslavia broke up – Russia became a permanent member of UNSC, whose statute still mentions only USSR.

After 1991, both US and western Europe adopted a Russia First policy, in which interests of Russia's

former colonies stood secondary to those of Moscow. This odd policy – that even included a temporary enlargement of G7 to make a G8 group with Russia – confirmed, in Kremlin's interpretation, Moscow's continued status as a world and imperial power.

The most scandalous expression of the West's self-defeating approach was the (eventually abortive) Russo-German Nord Stream-2 gas pipeline project launched after, and despite, Russia's annexation of Crimea and covert military intervention in eastern Ukraine in 2014.

Germany and other west European countries finally reversed their earlier Russia First approach in 2022. Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia – although all suffer from illegal partial occupation by Russia – became candidates for EU membership.

US is reversing both its earlier liberationist approach to eastern Europe and its active help for Russia's former colonies who desire to exit Moscow's neo-imperial orbit.

At least rhetorically, the Trump administration seems to be returning to a Yalta type of approach, in which voices of smaller states are given less attention. An approach in which Ukraine's participation in negotiations about its fate is not necessary.

Global South countries, like India, need to be wary of this trend in US foreign policy. Trump may be signalling how he'll treat countries he deems less important or those that don't directly serve US interests. This is not multipolarity – Trump has already shown his disdain for Brics. It is about the powerful doing what they please. China, therefore, holds greater leverage in this scheme.

Further, the bilateral over Ukraine is happening in contradiction to Washington's assurances to Kyiv in 1994, in the now infamous Budapest Memorandum in which Ukraine gave up its nuclear weapons. Trump's approach to Ukraine is also in conflict with the 2008 Bucharest Nato declaration in which President Bush scoped out the possibility of Nato membership for Ukraine and Georgia. Time will show how far this American reversal of course will go.

The writer is an analyst at the Swedish Institute of International Affairs

Ashwin Sanghi

First, a few disclaimers. Your correspondent was a guest on a Ranveer Allahbadia podcast. He's never watched Samay Raina's India's Got Latent. And, yes, Ranveer's so-called joke was disgusting and so funny. But did his words incite hate or call for violence? No.

Were they in poor taste? Absolutely. So are movies like *Grand Masti*, OTT content like *Gandii Baat*, TV shows like *Bigg Boss*, some Bhojpuri songs and Bollywood numbers. Banning all these in the internet age would be to impose a Chinese-style firewall.

Your correspondent has often spoken of Bharat's civilisation and Sanatan Dharma as means to pluralism that doesn't comprehend the concept of blasphemy. It thrives on intellectual freedom, debate and reinterpretation. It embraces multiple philosophies – dvait, advait, nastik. Gods can be mocked. Sage Bhrgu kicked Vishnu on his chest in Srimal Bhagavatam with no adverse consequences. The Charvak philosophical tradition rejects existence of gods and scorns Vedic rituals. Rigved's nasadiya sukt questions the universe's origins, the creator's role, whether gods know the 'ultimate truth'. Debate, doubt, irreverence are never criminalised.

Gods are questioned, cursed, yet they embrace discourse, not punishment. Temples in Khajuraho, Konark or Modhera depict erotic imagery including what may appear as bestiality and group intimacy. Our ancestors were broad-minded enough to interpret these depictions within the philosophical context of kama (desire) and moksha (transcendence). Tantra that influenced many such depictions believed in understanding all aspects of life, including sexuality as part of evolution. Today, many of these would be viewed as bordering on pornography. Should we criminalise them?

Vatsyayan's Kamasutra is a sophis-

ticated discourse rooted in a cultural ethos that embraced desire as essential to life, viewing kama as one of four goals of existence, alongside dharma (duty), artha (wealth), and liberation (moksha). Kamasutra reflects a time when society engaged with openness and intellect, not repression or shame. But modern India gets swept up by moral indignation, and increasingly favours outrage over understanding, censorship over dialogue, and penalty over rebuke.

Far from moral condemnation, Chanakya's Arthashastra takes a pragmatic approach to prostitution, treating courtesans as integral to economy. Prostitution was state regulated, provided with protection and taxes levied on earnings. Present-day India stigmatises prostitution. A civilisation that once approached matters with realism has become a society obsessed with appearances.

Should there be an age limit for consuming explicit content online? Absolutely. Should there be a certification system for content? Probably, by an industry body. Should platforms be penalised for violations? Sure. Does one need to watch Samay Raina's show? Not at all. But does a YouTube sensation deserve arrest for a non-joke? A resounding no. There is a fundamental difference between immoral and illegal. Immorality can be handled by rebuke – social media outrage, withdrawal of sponsorships and subscribers. Illegality demands state intervention.

When we start criminalising bad jokes, crude lyrics, or tasteless cinema, we allow the loudest mob to dictate what's an offence. Today, it's a comedian's ill-conceived punchline. Tomorrow it could be a historian's analysis, a journalist's turn of phrase. In a democracy, right to take offence exists but so does the right to ignore, critique, or counter, just like Hindu traditions of debate. If our ancestors could thrive on tarka (reasoning), swatantra (intellectual freedom), and samvad (debate), why turn every instance of poor taste into a criminal offence?

Do we want to go down the road that trivialises the law and empowers state to police thought, speech and artistic expression? If history has shown us anything, it is this – once such powers are normalised, they're rarely rolled back.

Author of mythological fictions

Calvin & Hobbes



Mentally Repeating Calming Word Stills The Mind

Sant Rajinder Singh

We can only excel at something we are motivated to do in life. It is the same in the spiritual arena. If we are motivated, with an internal passion and zeal to meditate, then we will be successful in devoting regular time to it. How can we become motivated? We need to know the importance of meditation, experience its benefits, and understand the goal before us.

One of the key impediments to meditation is our mind. The mind is always trying to derail us. If we can convince the mind of the benefits it can

reap from meditation, it will become a helpful ally in our goal. The benefits of meditation are manifold. From mental clarity and astuteness to enhanced focus, concentration, and efficiency, meditation can help us excel in all spheres of life. It can also help us physically by enhancing the body's ability to rest, rejuvenate, and fight infection and disease. Above all, meditation brings us spiritual benefits, helping us achieve life's most important goal – oneness with God.

Second, we need to ensure we are

meditating accurately in order to get the right results when we meditate. Meditation does not require any difficult postures. The technique involves sitting in a pose most comfortable, one in which you can sit the longest without moving, and that is not conducive to falling asleep. Any movement keeps the attention on the body. No part of the body should be touching anyone since if one moves, it will disturb the other. Mentally repeat a calming word, Simran, to still the mind.

Next, after learning the accurate meditation technique, we need to



Sacredspace

The thing, when you're down two sets to love, is to stay calm, even though it's hard, because people are freaking out, people are worried for you.

Rafael Nadal

practise daily to excel. When we devote time every day to a task, we can excel in it. When we keep our eye on the prize, which is experiencing the divine Power within, all distractions fade, and we remain focused on our destination, navigating around the distractions that present themselves. This comes with practice and direct experience.

The most important factor on the path towards the Divine is faith. If we meditate daily with full faith, knowing that it is not us but God who is in control, and if we surrender to His will each time, the Almighty will give us what is best for us, and step by step, He will lead us Home.

The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Judicial overload

SC draws the line on Places of Worship Act

THE Supreme Court's recent rebuke for the flood of petitions concerning the Places of Worship (Special Provisions) Act, 1991, highlights the growing politicisation of religious disputes. The Act, introduced during the PV Narasimha Rao government, was meant to prevent further communal discord by freezing the religious character of places of worship as of August 15, 1947, with the sole exception of the Ram Janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid dispute. However, it now finds itself at the centre of legal and political manoeuvring. The SC's frustration is understandable. The surge of intervention applications, many filed by political leaders and organisations, reflects an unsettling trend — using the judiciary as a battleground for religious and electoral gains. On December 12, 2024, the SC had already issued an interim order restraining lower courts from entertaining fresh suits or ordering surveys concerning religious sites. Yet, fresh petitions continue to pour in, prompting Chief Justice Sanjiv Khanna to declare, "Enough is enough." The court has rightly refused to entertain new pleas unless they raised entirely fresh legal questions.

At stake is not just the integrity of the judicial process but also India's secular fabric. The law was designed to ensure communal harmony, yet its very existence is now being challenged by certain groups who argue that it unjustly legitimises historical wrongs. Meanwhile, political parties like the Congress, Samajwadi Party and the AIMIM have intervened in favour of the Act, alleging that legal challenges to it are aimed at targeting Muslim religious sites.

The judiciary must tread carefully, balancing legal scrutiny with the need to prevent communal tensions from escalating. With the hearing deferred to April, the legal battle over the Places of Worship Act is far from over. But one thing is clear — the courts must remain a space for justice, not a stage for political theatrics.

Targeting a war hero

Row over martyr's school reeks of intolerance

AN abominable attempt has been made to erase the memory of a martyr — and that too a Param Vir Chakra awardee. Six decades after Company Quarter Master Havildar Abdul Hamid took on the might of Patton tanks and made the supreme sacrifice in the 1965 India-Pakistan war, his family had to fight a battle of its own to get his name reinstated at the main gate of its school in Ghazipur district of Uttar Pradesh. 'Shaheed Hamid Vidyalaya' was not good enough for the authorities; they not only renamed it 'PM Shri Composite School' but also promptly effected the change at the entrance to the institution. The outraged kin complained to the headmaster, who asked them to approach the local education officer. The glaring omission has finally been rectified, but the whole controversy reeks of religious intolerance and insensitivity.

Havildar Hamid's award citation mentions in glowing terms that his bravery "in the face of constant enemy fire was in the highest traditions of the Army". *Naam, namak, nishan* — these words sum up the code of honour of the Indian defence forces. The Indian Army, Air Force and Navy are secular organisations — their officers and soldiers serve the nation with pride irrespective of their religion, caste, creed or gender. The entire country owes gratitude to bravehearts like Hamid, not just the community to which they belonged.

Degrading a war hero simply because he professed a certain religion shows how deep the communal rot runs. Exemplary action should be taken against overzealous officials who stooped so low. They were apparently trying to please their political bosses and chose a soft target. Thankfully, the widespread uproar has exposed their nefarious designs. The incident should serve as a warning to the political leadership and the bureaucracy to desist from chipping away at the military's apolitical ethos.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 19, 1925

Reforms committee's report

EVER since it was semi-officially announced that the Reforms Enquiry Committee had submitted its report, speculation has been rife in all interested quarters as to what that report contains. And the long and almost unconscionable delay which the Government of India has made in publishing the report was, if anything, bound to make it still more so. The matter was one of the utmost importance and urgency. The whole country had demanded an enquiry into the reforms, not, indeed, an enquiry such as the government actually ordered, but a real enquiry by a representative commission or conference with a virtually unlimited scope of reference. It might have been expected that having disappointed the public on the main issue, the government would at least have had the sense to make the best of a bad case and taken steps both to expedite the labours of the committee and publish the results of those labours along with its own conclusions without any avoidable delay. This is precisely what it did not do. Had the committee been appointed in time and directed to complete its work without unnecessary delay, it might have finished its labours in time for the Labour Government to take its report into consideration. But it did not seriously begin its work until that government had very nearly come to the end of its short term, and its report has not seen the light of day even three months after the Conservative Government was firmly seated in power. And yet while the delay, in the first case, served some useful bureaucratic purpose, the delay in the second can serve no purpose.

OPINION

A tightrope walk for the judiciary

The Allahbadia case is a reminder of the precarious balance courts must maintain



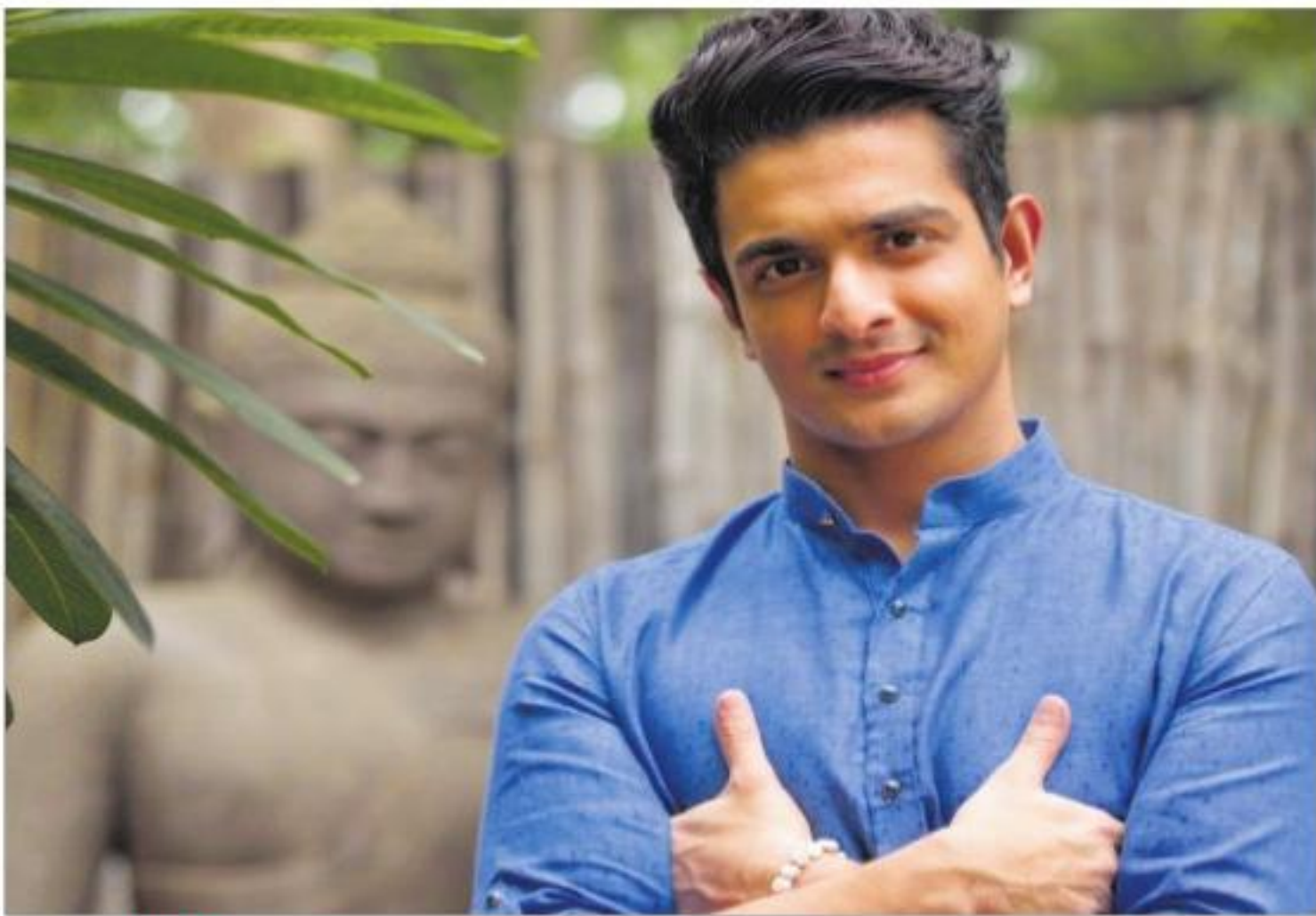
SANJAY HEGDE
SENIOR ADVOCATE, SUPREME COURT

THE Supreme Court's handling of the Ranveer Allahbadia case has offered a glimpse of the tightrope the judiciary walks — between moral indignation and constitutional propriety. The interim relief granted to the influencer came after a tough hearing, where moral outrage took centre stage. The court's decision to protect Allahbadia's personal liberty was correct. Yet, the manner in which the case proceeded will lead to a chilling effect on free speech.

Allahbadia, a prominent social media figure, is facing multiple FIRs for his remarks on the show *India's Got Latent*. The remarks, though intended to be funny, have led to a nationwide furore. An outcry from media houses and politicians has only added fuel to the fire. But as his counsel, Abhinav Chandrachud, rightly argued, the legal question was not whether Allahbadia's language was distasteful — everyone, including his own lawyer, admitted that — it was whether it amounted to a criminal offence under Indian law.

The court, however, seemed in no mood to consider such fine distinctions. Throughout the hearing, it expressed visible disgust, calling the language 'dirty', 'perverted' and a 'vomit' from Allahbadia's mind. At one point, the judge asked Chandrachud, "Are you defending this kind of language?" The question, though rhetorical, pointed to a fundamental misunderstanding of a defence lawyer's role: Not to endorse, but to ensure that even the most reviled person receives fair treatment under the law.

The Supreme Court is not a custodian of morality. Its pri-



RELIEF: The court's decision to protect Allahbadia's personal liberty was correct. X@BeerBloopGuy

mary duty is to uphold constitutional rights, including free speech and personal liberty. Protection of free speech is not necessary for popular speech. Constitutional protection is invoked only by unpleasant, unpopular speech that gets prosecuted.

Chandrachud, in an effort to bring the focus back to legal principles, cited the Apoorva Arora judgment, which held that profanity alone does not amount to obscenity. The test, the court had ruled, was whether the speech appealed to prurient interests and crossed the line to become criminal obscenity.

But the court appeared unmoved: "If this is not obscenity, then what is obscenity?" it asked. Courts do not operate in a moral vacuum, but neither should they allow their moral disgust to cloud legal reasoning. By asking if the Arora case provided a "licence to say whatever you want," the court betrayed an unwillingness to separate protection of free speech from its personal sense of decency.

This exchange reminds me of what Justice Potter Stewart of the US Supreme Court wrote in his

The Supreme Court is not a custodian of morality. Its primary duty is to uphold constitutional rights, including free speech and personal liberty.

threshold test for obscenity in *Jacobellis vs Ohio* (1964). Explaining why the material at issue in the case was not obscene, Stewart wrote: "I shall not today attempt further to define the kinds of material I understand to be embraced within that shorthand description ['hard-core pornography'], and perhaps I could never succeed in intelligibly doing so. But I know it when I see it, and the motion picture involved in this case is not that." Taking a cue from this reasoning, stand-up comedians went on to joke that obscenity was whatever aroused a judge. Indian comedians would be well advised not to say that obscenity is whatever angers a judge.

The most disturbing aspect of the hearing was the court's near-dismissal of the death threats against Allahbadia. When Chandrachud mentioned that his client was receiving threats, Justice Surya Kant remarked, "If you can try to attain cheap publicity by saying these kind of things, there might be others also who might want to get cheap publicity by making threats."

Regardless of how offensive Allahbadia's words were, death threats are not, and should never be, viewed as a predictable consequence — let alone a deserved one. The court's repeated references to the shame Allahbadia had brought upon his parents bordered on moralistic grandstanding. "What embarrassment he has caused to [his] parents!" the judge exclaimed, as though the court's role was to act as a collective moral guardian.

This paternalistic narrative, while perhaps reflective of Indian cultural norms, has no place in constitutional adjudication. Courts are not moral rehabilitation centres. Whether Allahbadia had embarrassed his family was irrelevant to the question of whether he

had committed a crime. The conflation of social disapproval with legal culpability is a dangerous line for any court to cross.

Ultimately, the Bench issued a notice and sought a reply from the respondents, granting Allahbadia interim relief. This was, in the end, the right decision. The court recognised, however begrudgingly, that despite the offensive nature of the speech, the law demands a higher threshold to criminalise it.

The controversy surrounding *India's Got Latent* and the nature of the show — offering restricted access to paid adult subscribers — raised an important point about context. The court seemed to be aware that the clip that caused the outrage was leaked out of context, but this awareness played little role in the hearing. It should have. Context matters deeply in free speech cases, and courts must guard against mob-driven moral panic.

The Allahbadia case is a reminder of the precarious balance courts must maintain. Judges are human. They feel disgust, anger and moral revulsion like anyone else. But their job is not to act on those feelings — it is to uphold the law dispassionately, especially when public opinion demands otherwise.

In granting interim relief, the apex court ultimately did what it was constitutionally bound to do — protect personal liberty. But the manner in which it did so sends a mixed signal: The judiciary will protect you, but only after shaming you, only after making it clear that your rights are being respected begrudgingly, and only after establishing its moral superiority over you.

This is not how constitutional courts should function. The Supreme Court exists to defend the unpopular, the offensive and even the perverted — because that is the essence of free speech in a democracy. One hopes that as this case proceeds, the court will remember that its role is not to cleanse society of vulgarity but to ensure that the law, not morality, remains its guiding principle.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Vulgarity begins when imagination succumbs to the explicit. —Doris Day

Undying spirit of sportsmanship

TEJPARTAP SINGH PHOOLKA

IN the 1970s, the 7.5-km race for seniors was a major attraction at Bishop Cotton School (BCS), Shimla. There was a fierce rivalry between VK Roach (captain of Curzon House) and S Chauhan (captain of Lefroy House) in 1975. On D-Day, Chauhan surged ahead and maintained his lead. He was running with all his might and energy. However, his strides became erratic as exhaustion took over. Though he reached the finish line with his hand outstretched, he lacked the strength to raise it and bring down the ribbon that was hanging between two poles. Ultimately, he collapsed from sheer fatigue.

Roach followed him into the last stretch, about half a minute later. Boys had lined up beside the finish line, eagerly awaiting the winner. As Roach sprinted forward, everyone expected him to break through the ribbon. But to everyone's astonishment, he ducked under it. Roach saw Chauhan lying on the ground, his hand just past the finish line. A deep silence swept over the boys as they witnessed this act of true sportsmanship. As juniors, we were all profoundly moved by this gesture.

It was a powerful lesson in determination, grit and the will to fight to the finish. Chauhan was declared the winner, but Roach's selfless act will forever remain etched in our minds.

In 2008, when I was serving as Joint Commissioner in the Municipal Corporation, Chandigarh, an athletics event for the staffers and officers was organised. I entered the 800-metre race, knowing that young peons from Punjab and Haryana (and also from Nepal) were also competing. I had little chance of winning, but to everyone's surprise, I managed to clinch the first place, overtaking the others in the final 10 metres. It was unexpected for everyone to see an officer winning the race.

As the Deputy Commissioner of Barnala in 2019, I participated in a race to promote fitness in the district. The event included a 10-km run for those under 40 and a 5-km run for participants over 40. Since I was over 50, I entered the fray in the 5-km race. With only 15 days to go, I went to the gym regularly to prepare myself. On the day of the race, I saw my security officer panting and struggling to keep up. I told him to take rest and not worry about my security. Much to everyone's surprise, I managed to finish second.

The spirit of sportsmanship and perseverance that we learned in school has stayed with me all these years. Long live that spirit!

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Explore opportunities at home

Apropos of 'Rebuilding Punjab from the new low of deportation flights'; the solution does not lie in government policies but in our mindset. Our youth easily get influenced by social media and other factors, like popular Punjabi songs, which project a luxurious lifestyle. Deportees spent a huge amount of money and undertook hazardous travel, but they are back to square one. The sum they spent on immigration could have easily helped them start their own business, provided they had chosen a simple lifestyle. There are many opportunities to be tapped in the agriculture sector itself, like the farming of mushrooms, exotic fruits and pulses, but first they will have to shun this craze for making money abroad.

SUMAN KUPLIISH, LUDHIANA

Desperate to move out

Refer to 'Beyond deportation'; desperation for a decent living and a good quality of life drives youth to foreign lands. Neglect and poor governance act as catalysts that make them look for jobs outside the country. States like Punjab have long suffered from economic instability, lack of opportunities and social unrest, prompting many to seek refuge abroad. Rather than passing the buck, the Central and state governments must collaborate to create sustainable opportunities for jobs and self-employment. The suffering of the deportees should not be viewed in isolation. A comprehensive, united effort involving government bodies, civil society and the public is necessary to ensure that vulnerable individuals do not fall into the trap of traffickers.

SANJAY CHOPRA, MOHALI

Deportations must rouse govts

The deportation of hundreds of our youth from the US should serve as an eye-opener for governments. Due to overpopulation, job opportunities never seem to be enough. There is stiff competition in various professional colleges for a limited number of seats. Reservation is another impediment for general-category aspirants aiming to get admissions or jobs in government institutes. Not all parents are able to fund the studies of their children from private universities, which demand hefty fees. Having no option, the youth try to migrate to for-

eign countries, legally or otherwise, in search of jobs and a better life.

SUNIL CHOPRA, LUDHIANA

More industries needed

Apropos of 'Beyond deportation'; the Centre must come forward to open industrial units in Punjab to curb unemployment. Other state governments also need to foster an industry-friendly environment. It is unfortunate that many industrial units from Ludhiana, Mandi Gobindgarh and Batala have shifted to Himachal Pradesh and Haryana. The onus of providing jobs to the deportees now lies with the respective governments. Interestingly, no government is talking about that. A suitable ecosystem will have to be created so that they do not fall prey to any menace, such as drugs, or again embark on a misadventure.

BALWINDER SINGH, JALANDHAR

Corruption erodes public trust

Refer to 'Muktsar DC suspended over graft; Vigilance gets new chief'; corruption not only erodes public trust but also hampers development and welfare schemes meant for the people. However, mere suspensions are not enough. A thorough investigation must be conducted, and if any official is found guilty, strict legal action should be taken. Systemic reforms, such as digital governance, stricter audits and a public grievance redressal mechanism, should be implemented to prevent corrupt practices. Corruption in our bureaucracy remains a major challenge, and a strong political will is required to uproot it.

SAURAV SUMAN, PATIALA

Promotional tactics

Apropos of 'Failure of planning'; instead of the Railway Minister taking the blame for the stampede, compensation was paid in cash immediately to family members of the deceased and the injured passengers. The government has been promoting Maha Kumbh to the hilt, exhorting devotees to be part of this occasion that comes only once in 144 years. The aim is to find a place in the Guinness Book of Records for various activities conducted at the mega festival.

RAMESH GUPTA, NARWANA

How the Akal Takht became a political tool



KIRANJOT KAUR
SGPC MEMBER

THE doctrine of *miri-piri* (co-existence of the spiritual and the temporal) is central to the Sikh philosophy. It envisages an ideal society. It means living in divine consciousness while attending to the mundane, everyday life. It makes a person see divinity in each being and consider reaching out to the needy as his divine duty. It holds the ruler responsible for doing his temporal duty in line with the spiritual and moral ethics. It definitely does not mean using religious institutions for individual political benefits.

Looking back at the history of Sikhs, the Akal Takht was the rallying point for the bickering Sikhs when confronted with a common enemy, the place where they became one, as the "Guru Khalsa Panth". In the 18th century, when the Sikhs were divided into small groups, they would fight with each other. Maharaja Ranjit Singh also fought smaller Sardars to consolidate his kingdom.

But no one went to the Akal Takht, seeking its intervention to resolve their differences.

Rather, when they met for the Sarbat Khalsa on issues impacting the whole community, they would sort out their personal grudges before gathering at the Akal Takht.

The phenomenon of seeking the Akal Takht's intervention to sort out differences among parties with differing views and play a peace-broker started in the late 1970s.

Jathedar Jagdev Singh Talwandi, president of the Akali Dal, and jathedar Gurcharan Singh Tohra, president of the SGPC, called for separate meetings on October 10, 1979 to elect the Akali Dal president. They sent in their resignations to the Akal Takht jathedar, seeking its intervention to unite them.

At that time, their resignations were sent back. The MLAs who had contested on the Panthic ticket were asked to support CM Parkash Singh Badal and a seven-member committee headed by Sant Longowal was formed in view of the upcoming Lok Sabha elections. The committee was to "make adjustments" with other political parties and choose party candidates.

But before the seven-member committee could meet, Jivan Singh Umranangal announced an alliance with the Janata Party in Ajnala. He was declared 'tankhaiya' and had to seek his forgiveness at the Akal Takht in November, 1979.

Thereafter, complaints about politically influential people began to come to the Akal



SAGA: Taking moral responsibility, Harjinder Singh Dhami resigned as SGPC president. FILE PHOTO

Takht. However, the turning point was the period after Operation Bluestar in 1984.

Many Akali leaders were in jail. Sikhs' passions against the Indian government in general and Indira Gandhi in particular were high. At that juncture, the 'Panj Piar' at the Akal Takht stepped in to provide leadership. Gradually, the Akal Takht institution transformed into a tool in the power struggle for supremacy. Personal enmities and one-upmanship became the unwritten code for most of the complaints coming to the Takht. The court-style hearings gave the Takht the new name of 'sarb-uch kache' (supreme court) of the Sikhs.

This practice degenerated into interference in local issues and Punjab-based

December 2, 2024 was the historic day when Sukhbir admitted to his mistakes. It was generally believed that it had set the tone for SAD's revival. However, he messed up the chance.

political statements. The 'jathedar' and the institution of the 'Akal Takht' became synonymous. As the political and religious ground began to slip from under the SGPC's feet, the Akal Takht was used to empower it. Religious issues that were handled by the Dharam Parchar Committee of the SGPC were referred to the Akal Takht jathedar.

On the issue of the Sirsa Dera Sacha Sauda's blasphemy, the SAD discarded any pretence of being a representative party of the Sikhs and went all out to use the Akal Takht for votes in the upcoming Punjab Assembly election. The *panthak* tradition was disregarded and a person who had not sought an apology was pardoned.

When the Sikhs stood up in defiance, the jathedars had to take back the 'hukamnama', thereby eroding its sanctity. The SAD kept losing ground among the Sikhs in various successive elections, till it became a 'deposit-lost' party.

The Akalis knew that the mistake they had committed was backfiring. So, in a damage-control bid, they went to Gurdwara Baba Gurbaksh Singh, which is situated behind the Akal Takht, and sought forgiveness for the sins committed 'knowingly and unknowingly.' It did not work.

Sukhbir Singh Badal, SAD chief, had to appear before the Akal Takht when a splinter group of the party went to the Akal Takht and admitted to being silent supporters of the SAD's non-*panthak* decisions and sought its forgiveness. December 2, 2024 was the historic day when the unlikely happened. Sukhbir admitted to his mistakes.

It was generally believed that it had set the tone for SAD's revival. Most of Sukhbir's detractors were willing to give him a chance. However, he messed up the chance by first undergoing 'tankhai' selectively and then trying to negotiate the *hukamnama*.

When that failed, it was time to target the jathedars personally. Giani Harpreet Singh became the first target because he is believed to have been the mastermind, though all five jathedars had taken the decision unanimously.

The Sikh tradition was again

flouted. Not only was a shameful allegation made against him, no consideration was shown for the Sikh woman who is married to another man after divorce with the complainant for the last 18 years. Another young Sikh woman was targeted, alleging impropriety of attending a programme with Giani Harpreet Singh. Disgusting character assassination! Not long ago, strangers trusted Sikh men for the safety of their daughters.

The next on the agenda is to get Giani Harpreet Singh excommunicated from the Sikh Panth. For this, the tainted Giani Ranjit Singh, jathedar of the Patna Takht, is the front to lodge a complaint at the Akal Takht. An Akal Takht jathedar, Giani Ragbir Singh, has shown his disapproval with the SGPC regarding the dismissal of Giani Harpreet Singh.

Taking moral responsibility, SGPC president Harjinder Singh Dhami has chosen to resign. However, his offer to resign from the Akal Takht-constituted seven-member committee raises a question. Is he being pressured to choose between obeying the *hukamnama* and Sukhbir's diktat?

It is a classic case of the Akal Takht being used selectively for political reasons and "teaching a lesson" to those who do not conform to the Sukhbir group.

It is time for the Sikhs to raise a voice against the misuse of the Akal Takht institution and ask the Akalis to fight their battles on their own.

Why Modi-Trump statement has raised Pakistan's hackles



VAPPALA BALACHANDRAN
FORMER SPECIAL SECRETARY, CABINET SECRETARIAT

THE joint statement of PM Modi and President Donald Trump on February 14, 2025, is the strongest Indo-US declaration against terrorism in recent years. It mentions strengthening Indo-US cooperation on terrorism "against threats from groups, including Al-Qaeda, ISIS, Jaish-e-Mohammad and Lashkar-e-Tayyiba, to prevent heinous acts like the attacks in Mumbai on 26/11 and the Abbey Gate bombing in Afghanistan on August 26, 2021."

It highlights the US government's approval of Tahawwur Rana's extradition to India as an example of the commitment of both governments to bring the perpetrators to justice. It then puts Pakistan squarely on the mat with this key sentence: "The leaders further called on Pakistan to expeditiously bring to justice the perpetrators of the 26/11 Mumbai and Pathankot attacks and ensure that its territory is not used to carry out cross-border terrorist attacks."

In the past, the only joint

statement between US President Joe Biden and Prime Minister Narendra Modi which mentioned terrorism emanating from Pakistan was on June 22, 2023. Their meetings on September 8, 2023, and September 22, 2024, did not refer to terrorism at all.

On June 22, 2023, both leaders "strongly condemned cross-border terrorism, the use of terrorist proxies and called on Pakistan to take immediate action to ensure that no territory under its control is used for launching terrorist attacks". They "reiterated the call for concerted action against all UN-listed terrorist groups including Al-Qaeda, ISIS/Daesh, LeT, JeM and Hizb-ul-Mujahideen."

Pakistan reacted sharply to the Modi-Trump declaration and called it "one-sided, misleading and contrary to diplomatic norms" since it ignored "Pakistan's counterterrorism cooperation with the US." It added that this statement cannot "cover up India's sponsorship of terrorism, subversion and extra-judicial assassinations in the region and beyond." It gave a further punch in labelling "India as a safe haven of the perpetrators of hate crimes against Muslims and other minorities."

Why did Pakistan react so aggressively? My assessment is that Islamabad might have feared that a global impression might arise that the Trump administration is now blaming Pakistan for alleged-



TOUGH TALKING: The Indo-US joint declaration was the strongest on terrorism in recent years. REUTERS

ly enabling the 2021 Kabul airport bombing too, which had killed 13 US service members and 170 Afghan civilians.

The reason for this unprecedented vitriol against India and anger against the US for "violating diplomatic norms" by ignoring Pakistan's cooperation with the US on terrorism might have been the reason for challenging the Trump-Modi statement.

This, in turn, leads to a question: Why the 2021 Abbey Gate bombing (Afghan airport), which was in no way related to India, was included in this bilateral joint statement?

Two explanations are possible: one, the White House also wanted to convey its deep anguish, like how India had felt at the 26/11 attack. Second,

Islamabad might have feared that the Trump administration is now blaming Pakistan for allegedly enabling the 2021 Kabul airport bombing.

more possible, was to blame the Biden administration for not taking adequate care of US troops during the hurried evacuation on August 28, 2021.

The second impression arises as Trump himself answered a loaded question, originally put to our PM at the White House press meet, on the so-called "inefficient" Biden administration.

Also, the 118th US Congress (previous) was very agitated at the Abbey Gate bombing, which was the largest single loss of lives of US military personnel since 2011. They were particularly upset that this had occurred despite advance intelligence warnings on August 16 on the strong possibility of an ISIS suicide bombing. Despite this, Abdul Rahman Al-Logari, an ISIS-K

member who was known to the CIA and kept in coalition custody, could become the suicide bomber wearing a 25-pound suicide vest.

The *New York Times* (January 1, 2022) said that the CIA had located Al-Logari in India in 2017, planning suicide attacks, and had taken him into custody at the Bagram base near Kabul after secretly liaising with the Indian agencies. However, he, along with thousands, was released by the Taliban when it took over Kabul on August 15, 2021. This was originally reported by the ISIS mouthpiece, *Amaq*, on September 19, 2021.

The reason why the Modi-Trump statement included the 2021 Abbey Gate bombing might have been on the initiative of Mike Waltz, US National Security Adviser, as he had challenged the Pentagon conclusions on August 5, 2024, on the attack, while he was a member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee in the previous Congress.

In a letter to the then US Secretary of Defence, Lloyd Austin, the committee had pointed out the apparent discrepancies between the newly reported footage of the Abbey Gate attack, as shown on CNN, and the conclusions of two US Central Command (CENTCOM) investigations into the bombing, which the latter had presented to the committee in April 2024. However, the US Army Central Command defended their stand, saying that a review investigation

since September 2023 had found that "the attack could not have been preventable at the tactical level."

In this scenario, the Trump administration's permission on Tahawwur Rana's extradition after the US Supreme Court verdict assumes only symbolic importance when compared to the general spectre of terrorism facing us.

As regards Rana, we faced initial judicial setback in our pursuit since 2009 after his arrest in Chicago as the court did not accept our evidence on his involvement in the 26/11 case although he was convicted for aiding the Lashkar activities, specifically for plotting an attack in Denmark.

Since then, our agencies have been pursuing the case vigorously in US courts. The latest information is that this extradition might be delayed as Rana has appealed and filed a "mercy" petition.

At the same time, no US government could help us by putting pressure on Pakistan to extradite the other known 26/11 plotters and current perpetrators given sanctuary there.

We have other problems on the terrorism front which we alone must tackle. The change of government in Bangladesh and the reported visit of a Pakistani ISI delegation to Dhaka on January 21 adds a new dimension, with terrorism emanating from our east, which is already under strain due to the Manipur turbulence.

Views are personal

QUICK CROSSWORD

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ACROSS

1 To furnish (6)

4 More than anything else (5,3)

9 Isolated (3,3)

10 Machination (8)

12 Large amount (4)

13 Conveniently placed (5)

14 Large marine food fish (4)

17 Understand the procedure (4,3,5)

20 State of affairs (6,2,4)

23 Not at home (4)

24 Spoils (5)

25 Capital of Ukraine (4)

28 Clearly defined (8)

29 Pollute (6)

30 Plan of action (8)

31 Quick (6)

DOWN

1 Similar things (8)

2 Formal request to authority (8)

3 Elevate (4)

5 Wearied beyond endurance (5,2,5)

6 Empty space (4)

7 Ill feeling (6)

8 Allowable deviation (6)

11 Deserve the punishment due (4,2,6)

15 Additional (5)

16 Regard as a god (5)

18 Place of concealment (4-4)

19 Qualities of ideal knight (8)

21 Central US state (6)

22 Profession or occupation (6)

26 Breach in friendly relations (4)

27 To spring (4)

Yesterday's solution

Across: 1 Fagin, 4 Hopeful, 8 Roe, 9 Go berserk, 10 Ontario, 11 Drown, 13 Trauma, 15 Exceed, 18 On end, 19 Skipper, 21 Costa Rica, 23 Web, 24 Replete, 25 Terse.

Down: 1 Fork out, 2 Great Dane, 3 Niger, 4 Hobnob, 5 Paradox, 6 Fee, 7 Liken, 12 Overpower, 14 Mediate, 16 Durable, 17 Aspire, 18 Occur, 20 Inapt, 22 Sap.

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EASY

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

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CALENDAR

FEBRUARY 19, 2025, WEDNESDAY

Shaka Samvat 1946

Magh Shaka 30

Phalgun Parvashite 8

Hijari 1446

Krishna Paksha Tithi 6, up to 7.33 am

Vridha Yoga up to 10.48 am

Swati Nakshatra up to 10.40 am

Moon enters Scorpio sign 6.50 am

FORECAST

SUNSET: 06:58 HRS

SUNRISE: 06:58 HRS

WEDNESDAY

THURSDAY

18:14 HRS

CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	26	10
New Delhi	28	11
Amritsar	26	10
Bathinda	26	10
Jalandhar	25	09
Ludhiana	26	10
Bhiwani	26	10
Hisar	26	12
Sirsa	26	10
Dharamsala	21	04
Manali	15	01
Shimla	16	07
Srinagar	15	0
Jammu	25	11
Kargil	-01	-13
Leh	0	-14
Dehradun	—	—
Mussoorie	16	07

TEMPERATURE IN °C

FIRST COLUMN

THE SELECTIVE NARRATIVES THAT SHAPE OUR LEGACY

History is often told from the perspective of the victors, shaping collective memory in ways that serve those in power



It is a well-established fact that History, often, is written from the perspective of the victor, making it a one-dimensional testimony of what transpired. Thus, while for the British Imperial power, the tumultuous events of 1857 were an unsuccessful mutiny by sepoys from across the subcontinent, for us, it is the celebrated 1st War of Independence. Before being put down with unprecedented vengeance and ferocity, it ignited a spark of 'freedom' which continued to inspire generations to come, although, in the process, they sowed venomous seeds of communal discord, deftly using their devious policy of divide and rule, which continue to rile us to this day.

Not surprisingly, the events instilled such fear in the minds of our forefathers that it was several decades before any credible stirrings for a fight to overthrow the yoke of imperialism were felt. To take this forward, while Bhagat Singh & his young comrades might have been treated as terrorists/ militants/ extremists by the British, their cohorts and courts, we extoll them as valiant freedom fighters and martyrs, so much so, that more than a century after Bhagat Singh sacrificed his life for the liberation of the motherland, we are witnessing a massive surge in his following, especially in the youth.

It is not difficult to gauge this- there is a proliferation of his photographs - on the rear of cabs and auto-rickshaws, trucks and buses, emblazoned on T-shirts, and so on. Given all this, what startled me, and raised my hackles was Rajmohan Gandhi's book, Punjab: A History from Aurangzeb to Mountbatten. Otherwise, a well-researched and thoughtfully written book, his treat-



ment of the life and times of Bhagat Singh is rather disappointing- in a tome of more than 400 pages, there are just a few lines- a cursory mention of Bhagat Singh and his comrades. Sadly, even in these lines, they are not feted as freedom fighters, but rather disparagingly, as delinquent and misguided youth, militant in their approach, hellbent on derailing the course of the freedom struggle. Well, while all of us have the liberty or freedom to form our opinion, in a broader sense, it needs to be noted that sensitivities of a significant mass of our population don't get hurt. Because, if the Butcher of Amritsar became a celebrated hero among a section of his countrymen, hailed as "the man who saved India" and a beneficiary of a fund of over ₹26,000, then, we need serious introspection as to how we portray our martyrs for the generations to come, because, as I repeatedly quote the words of George Santayana- "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

The way history is written shapes how future generations perceive their past. The events of 1857 and Bhagat Singh's sacrifices remain crucial in our national consciousness, inspiring countless individuals. Yet, the selective representation of these figures in historical narratives raises concerns. When colonial figures like Dyer are glorified, while our martyrs are downplayed or misrepresented, it calls for reflection. As a society, we must ensure that our heroes are remembered with the respect they deserve. After all, history is not just about the past—it is a guide for the future, reminding us never to forget our hard-fought struggles.

(The author is a freelance writer; views are personal)

BJP sets its sights on West Bengal and Bihar after Delhi triumph

The Aam Aadmi Party's collapse in Delhi and the cracks within the INDIA bloc have emboldened the BJP to win Bengal and Bihar

Booyed by its sweeping success in Delhi, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has now turned its focus towards the crucial state elections in West Bengal in 2026, where it aims to dethrone Mamata Banerjee. What once seemed like an uphill battle is now a tangible possibility for the party. Emboldened by the Aam Aadmi Party's (AAP) debacle in Delhi, BJP leaders are proclaiming, "Delhi ki jeet hamari ho gayi, ab 2026 main Bengal ki baari hai" (We have won Delhi; now it's Bengal's turn in 2026).

Bihar, too, is set to witness an intense electoral showdown. With recent victories boosting the party's confidence, BJP and its allies plan to enter the battle with renewed aggression to retain power. The frag-



mented INDIA alliance, which was evident in Haryana and Delhi, provides the BJP with an additional advantage. The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), which has maintained a strong presence in West Bengal for decades, is expected to play a pivotal role in BJP's bid to oust Mamata in the upcoming assembly elections. **Modi's Appeal:** BJP's Trump

Balancing growth with fiscal discipline

Key measures, including tax reliefs and incentives for private sector, reflect a balanced approach to making India a developed economy by 2047



A theme that reverberates in the Union Budget for FY 2025-26 presented by Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman on February 1, 2025, is 'sustaining the momentum of high economic growth alongside sticking to fiscal consolidation'. During FY 2024-25, the GDP growth (gross domestic product) is estimated at 6.4 per cent which is more or less close to the 6.5 per cent - 7 per cent projected in the Economic Survey (ES) for 2023-24 presented by Sitharaman in the Parliament on February 1, 2024. For FY 2025-26, according to the Economic Survey presented by her on February 1, 2025, the 'GDP is projected to expand between 6.3 per cent - 6.8 per cent. On top of a growth of 8 per cent plus for three consecutive years beginning FY 2021-22 and 6.4 per cent during FY 2024-25, this is a fairly impressive number in sync with the overarching goal of making India a 'developed economy' by 2047. As for fiscal deficit or FD (excess of total expenditure over total receipts), in her interim budget presented on February 1, 2024, she had set a target of 5.1 per cent of the nominal GDP (NGDP). Subsequently, in the full budget for FY 2024-25 presented on July 23, 2024, she revised it downward to 4.9 per cent of the GDP taking into account the extra cushion of Rs 130,000 crore in the dividend transferred by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) to the Central Government from its operations during the FY 2023-24 (the actual dividend transfer was Rs 210,000 crore against a provision of Rs 80,000 crore made in the interim budget).

Going by the revised estimate (RE) presented by the FM on February 1, 2025, the FD for FY 2024-25 has turned out to be even lower at 4.8 per cent of the NGDP. Even as the total revenue expenditure at Rs 3698,000 crore is only marginally lower than the budget estimate (BE) of Rs 3709,401 crore, the RE for capital expenditure is about Rs 1018,000 crore - a significant Rs 93,000 crore less than the BE of Rs 1111,111 crore. Indeed, this is a major reason behind a reduction of one percentage point in the FD over the BE. In the budget for FY 2025-26, the FM has provided for a total expendi-



THE GOVERNMENT'S EFFORTS NEED TO BE COMPLEMENTED BY THE OWNERS OF BUSINESSES. THEY SHOULD GO FOR BETTER DISTRIBUTION OF INCOME THROUGH MEASURES SUCH AS KEEPING PRICES LOW, INCREASING SALARIES AT THE LOWER RUNGS, REINVESTING PROFITS FOR GROWTH ETC

ture of Rs 5065,000 crore which is a significant increase of 7.4 per cent over the RE for FY 2024-25 at Rs 4716,000 crore. This includes capital expenditure of Rs 1121,000 crore, the remaining Rs 3944,000 crore being the provision for revenue expenditure. Sitharaman has received flak for going slow on investment. This is unjustified and out of sync with the underlying facts. We need to compare the budget provision with RE for FY 2024-25. On this basis, the provision of Rs 1121,000 crore is 10.1 per cent higher than the actual capital expenditure during 2024-25.

That apart, the position about the government's capital spending has to be viewed in totality. In her Budget for FY 2019-20, Sitharaman had laid a roadmap for catapulting the Indian economy to US \$5 trillion by 2024-25. In sync with this target, she had projected an investment requirement of over Rs 100,00,000 crore to build the infrastructure over five years. Of this, 39 per cent or Rs 39,00,000 crore was to come from the Centre and states each and the balance was Rs 22,00,000 crore from the private sector. The Centre's actual capital expenditure was for 2020-21: Rs 439,000 crore; 2021-22: Rs 554,000 crore; 2022-23: Rs 750,000 crore; 2023-24: Rs 1000,961 crore and Rs 1018,000 crore for 2024-25.

Over five years, the total comes to Rs 3761,000 crore which is more or less close to the amount the Centre intended to contribute. Continuing with the above trend, a substantial allocation of Rs 1121,000 crore for 2025-26 shows the determination of the government to maintain the momentum of investment in building roads, highways, expressways, waterways, ports, airports, railways, irrigation projects, hospitals, schools, technical and research institutions and

so on in symphony with strengthening the foundations of the economy for a VIKSIT BHARAT by 2047. But, investment by the central government alone won't be enough to give the intended boost to the economy. The States and private sector also need to do their bit. The Centre has been helping the former to boost their capital spend. During 2022-23, it provided them with 50-year Rs 100,000 crore interest-free loans. During 2023-24, such transfers were Rs 130,000 crore. For FY 2024-25, the transfers were kept at Rs 150,000 crore though the states didn't fully utilize the amount.

For FY 2025-26 also, the budget allocation is kept at Rs 150,000 crore. To promote investment in the private sector, the Centre has given a host of incentives to industries and businesses. Amongst others, these included a reduction in the corporate tax rate to 15 per cent for new manufacturing enterprises. In 2024-25, the tax rate on foreign firms was reduced from 40 percent to 35 percent. But, the private sector has complained of 'demand constraint'. Team Modi has addressed this as well.

In the budget for FY 2024-25, Sitharaman altered tax slabs under the New Income Tax (IT) regime besides increasing the standard deduction by Rs 25,000. This resulted in a relief of around Rs 17,500 in personal income tax or PIT. In the budget for FY 2025-26, she has given a bonanza by announcing that a person earning Rs 1200,000 per annum need not pay any tax (taking into account the standard deduction of Rs 75,000/- now, the threshold comes to Rs 1275,000). Besides, she has altered the tax slabs to give relief even to persons earning more. Thus, a person earning Rs 2400,000 per annum will pay Rs

110,000 less. Consequent to these changes, the taxpayers will gain Rs 100,000 crore annually. These savings will be distributed amongst a total of 7 crore persons who won't have to pay any tax. This will give a big boost to demand. However, this by itself won't give the required fillip. The government's efforts need to be complemented by the owners of businesses. They should go for better distribution of income through measures such as keeping prices low, increasing salaries at the lower rungs, reinvesting profits for growth etc.

Coming to FD, apart from lower capital expenditure (than BE), the contribution of buoyant tax collections in containing it at 4.8 per cent of the NGDP during FY 2024-25, can't be brushed aside. The RE of gross tax revenue (GTR) during the year at Rs 3850,000 crore is higher than the BE of Rs 3840,000 crore which itself was 14.6 per cent higher than GTR of Rs 3350,000 crore during 2023-24. For 2025-26, FM has kept the FD target at 4.4 per cent. To achieve it, she has set the GTR collections at still higher Rs 4270,000 crore.

This despite lower tax rates shows that the government's efforts at broadening the tax base and ensuring tax compliance are working. In an interview, Sitharaman cited capital expenditure of 4.3 per cent as being more or less close to FD of 4.4 per cent. From a fiscal consolidation angle, this is a good sign as borrowings are used only for building assets. However, the government needs to go beyond by generating a 'revenue surplus' so that borrowings even for building capital assets can be cut. This is necessary as 'interest payments' alone account for over 25 per cent of total spending by the Centre.

(The writer is a policy analyst; views expressed are personal)



and Hindutva solidified BJP's core voter base. By framing the election as Modi vs. Kejriwal rather than a contest over local governance, BJP ensured that Modi's persona resonated strongly with voters. **PM's Welfare Schemes vs. AAP's Freebies** While AAP is known for its populist freebies, the Modi

government strategically countered this with large-scale welfare initiatives such as PM Awas Yojana (housing for the poor), Ujjwala Yojana (free LPG connections), and Ayushman Bharat (health insurance). By shifting the narrative from Kejriwal's localized welfare model to Modi's broader national schemes, the BJP successfully attracted lower-income and migrant voters.

A masterstroke was Modi's assurance that AAP's welfare schemes would not be discontinued but rather enhanced, promising to elevate Delhi into a world-class city. This neutralized Kejriwal's traditional advantage and reassured voters. BJP also aggressively targeted AAP over corruption allegations, particular-

ly the liquor scam, altering voter perception. Modi's leadership was positioned as a guarantee of cleaner governance, contrasting sharply with AAP's tainted image. **Impact of BJP's Victories in Other States:** BJP's recent wins in Haryana, Maharashtra, and other key states created a momentum effect, reinforcing voter confidence in Delhi. Haryana's proximity made its results particularly influential, given the shared demographics. The party's national winning streak also boosted cadre morale, creating a perception of electoral invincibility, which further weakened AAP's positioning as an alternative force. **Why AAP Lost:** AAP's defeat was not solely due to BJP's strategic campaign

but also its political miscalculations. Kejriwal underestimated Congress's relevance, assuming it was a non-factor. This resulted in AAP's defeat in 14 assembly segments where the victory margin was lower than the votes secured by Congress candidates. AAP had previously employed a similar strategy in Haryana, splitting Congress's votes and aiding BJP's gains. However, this tactic backfired in Delhi, as the ignored Congress vote share ended up damaging AAP more than BJP. One of the biggest takeaways from AAP's crushing defeat is the blow to Arvind Kejriwal's national ambitions.

(The writer is a senior political analyst and strategic affairs columnist; views are personal)