Mistrust in Ladakh

Legitimate aspirations of a people need to be taken into account

The festering unrest in the Union Territory of Ladakh turned violent on September 24, which resulted in the deaths of four persons and several others being injured. In the eyes of the Centre, the protest leaders had acted in bad faith even as efforts were underway to address their long-standing demands. These are Statehood for Ladakh, inclusion under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution (which grants autonomy to tribal areas), reservation in jobs for locals, and greater political representation. The leaders and organisations at the forefront of the agitation have, however, said that the arson and violence were carried out by those outside their control. The protesters and the Centre have appealed to the youth of Ladakh to remain calm. The Ladakh protests have been championed by two major civil society coalitions – the Leh Apex Body (LAB), representing Buddhist-majority Leh, and the Kargil Democratic Alliance (KDA), representing Muslim-majority Kargil. While these groups do have many disagreements, they are united in a four-point agenda for constitutional safeguards and greater political autonomy for the region. On Wednesday, a shutdown called by the youth wing of LAB turned violent in Leh, which included the burning of the office of the Bharatiya Janata Party and the vandalising of the headquarters of the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council (LAHDC).

The Centre and these outfits had reached an agreement in May 2025, which seemingly addressed core concerns through measures such as 95% reservation in jobs for locals (including STs and EWS), 33% reservation for women in the Hill Development Council, strict domicile criteria, and recognition of local languages such as Bhoti, Purgi, Balti and Shina. However, on September 23, the hospitalisation of two elderly protesters, who were on a hunger strike with climate activist Sonam Wangchuk, triggered a fresh round of public protest mostly led by youth. The Centre now alleges that Mr. Wangchuk is instigating violence while a resolution to all demands has been in the works. The Centre has also hinted at the involvement of foreign elements. There is evidently a gap between the perceptions of the protesters and the Centre on both the issues at hand and the way forward. Ladakh is a sensitive security spot for the country. This makes it all the more important that the people of the region are taken into confidence even while troublemakers are brought under control. The legitimate aspirations of the people can be addressed without compromising India's security requirements.

Hot air

Donald Trump's rant against climate change science is helping no one

President Donald Trump delivered to the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) an address that was allergic to facts. Describing climate change as the "greatest con job perpetrated on the world", he said that Europe's decades-long trimming of its carbon footprint had come at the expense of shuttered factories and job losses. In his Luddite conception of the workings of climate change, scientists in the early half of the 20th century had said that global cooling "would kill the world" and when that did not happen they said global warming would. And because the world did not end, he reckons, dishonest scientists now refer to it as 'climate change' to sound correct irrespective of the outcome. Never mind the fact that the average global temperature dip of 0.1°C (from 1945-70) was attributed to an increase in sulphur emissions from burning coal. Never mind that there is an Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change that has, since the 1990s, provided a forum for thousands of scientists to tease apart the effects of natural variations in climate from that due to human-caused ones. Never mind that climate change – the term – means precisely that global warming does not mean hotter weather everywhere but a larger disruption in the circulation of ocean currents and, therefore, increasingly erratic weather.

Mr. Trump's chagrin is less about the subtleties of climate than it is about what it means to the fossil fuel industry. To him, the increasing adoption of solar and wind energy was evidence of countries being on the "brink of destruction" because of pursuing a "green agenda". That the President of a country, which once led the science of parsing the subtleties of anthropogenic warming, would, one day, stand on one of the world's most prestigious podiums to undermine it, shows that deference to scientific wisdom is a thing of the past. There are legitimate criticisms of the multilateral process in place to guide climate action, determining justice and equity in remedial action and whether the impact of the climate crisis is undermined, even by its adherents, by making it subservient to the zero-sum chicanery of trade protectionism. The perspective of the leader of the world's largest economy on these would have been valuable. The complexity of weather changes means that it is reasonable to be perplexed about the mechanics of climate change. Painting it as a harbinger of a Mayan apocalypse has not helped either. Yet, it is clear that due to a slow accretion of hard evidence, falsifiable conjecture and measured prognosis, the scientific process is working the way it should. Despite its inefficiencies, the climate confabulation process has positioned the world towards a post-fossil-fuel future. No rant can change that.

Eight States with international borders, 0.13% of exports

Sangmuan Hangsing
is a researcher and alumnus of the Kautilya School of Public Policy

When U.S. President Donald Trump signed off on an additional 25% tariffs on imports from India in August 2025, citing trade deficits, the buying of Russian crude, and retaliatory precedent, New Delhi responded with its usual posture – of measured language, closed-door diplomacy and no public retaliation. The choreography was familiar. Washington struck, India absorbed. Official narratives framed it as another episode in bilateral turbulence. But these tariffs cut along fault lines that run inside the country, not just between two capitals. What they expose is not just a trade imbalance but also a deeper spatial imbalance that New Delhi has long refused to reckon with.

India's export economy is heavily centralised. The four States of Gujarat, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, and Karnataka account for more than 70% of all merchandise exports. For Gujarat alone, it is over 33%. This concentration is no accident. There has been an alignment of infrastructure, incentives, and political continuity in these zones for decades. Meanwhile, India's most populous States, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Madhya Pradesh, remain on the margins, with barely 5% of the country's outbound trade between them.

A marginalisation of the northeast

Then there is the northeast, whose place in India's export economy is marginal by design. Eight States, with over 5,400 kilometres of international borders, account for just 0.13% of national exports. There is no operational trade corridor linking them to foreign markets. And, no logistical infrastructure to support volume or role in shaping policy. Instead, what exists is a security apparatus calibrated for counterinsurgency and surveillance. Trade has never been part of the mandate.

The northeast remains structurally unrepresented in the institutions that shape India's economic future. Not a single member of the Prime Minister's Economic Advisory Council hails from the region. The Board of Trade, tasked with steering India's export strategy, has no substantive voice from Mizoram, Tripura, or Arunachal Pradesh. Schemes such as Remission of Duties and Taxes on Exported Products (RoDTEP) and the Production-Linked Incentive (PLI) are rolled out with fanfare in industrial belts stretching from Gujarat to Tamil Nadu. But the hills and the valleys of the northeast are left to navigate global markets without infrastructure, without logistics, and without institutional leverage. This is not mere bureaucratic oversight. It is a cold calculation that the region can be symbolically embraced, yet economically orphaned. As recently as 2024, the Directorate General of Foreign Trade's strategic export plan had 87 pages without a single section on the northeast's corridors. The omission was not protested. It was simply assumed.

In Assam, the tea economy is fraying. Prices stagnate, labour shortages persist, and estates are stretched thin. A 25% tariff hike in key western markets threatens to push margins below viability. "We're holding on with fingertips," said a Dibrugarh planter who oversees over 500 workers. "If the US [United States] and EU [European Union] buyers cut orders, we'll have to start scaling back operations immediately."

The region accounts for more than half of India's total tea output, but almost none of the high-value packaging or branding. The bulk is still CTC-grade, sold in auctions, exposed to every market swing. Buyers are in reassessment mode and cost-cutting has begun in the Upper Assam belt and the Dooars. Wages are flatlining. Inputs are thinning. The next to go will be jobs.

At Numaligarh, the refinery runs like a nervous artery through Assam's energy spine. Most of its crude still comes from Oil India and Oil and Natural Gas Corporation Limited fields nearby, but that is changing. The expansion to nine million metric tonnes per annum means that it must look outward toward Paradip, and, increasingly, toward discounted Russian cargoes.

That is where the risk brews. Washington's tariff play, framed partly as a response to India's Russian alignment, casts a long shadow here. If the next round of sanctions hardens or shipping lanes tighten, it will not show up in Mumbai's balance sheets. It will be Golaghat that will shudder.

A silent border with Myanmar, ASEAN

Since the 2021 coup in Naypyidaw, trade across the India-Myanmar frontier has thinned. Highways once envisioned as arteries of regional integration now vanish into checkpoints, chokepoints, and bureaucratic fog. Once porous and alive with exchange, the border now speaks in silence.

India's two principal gateways to Myanmar, Zokhawthar in Mizoram and Moreh in Manipur, have withered into skeletal outposts. Once central to Act East dreams, they now function more as securitised bottlenecks than trade hubs. Infrastructure remains performative – roads exist on paper, customs offices are understaffed, and cold-chain facilities are nowhere to be found. The scrapping of the Free Movement Regime in 2024 was the final blow, severing not just trade but also kinship, daily life and the interwoven economies of the hills.

Surveillance replaced commerce. These are no longer corridors of trade but containment grids, structured by counterinsurgency logic rather than market demand. Where goods do not move, troops do. And as infrastructure decays, these towns slide from economic relevance into strategic emptiness, mapped not for connectivity but for control. The border is open only to the idea of closure.

The northeast was once mapped as India's strategic region, a bridge to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. The bridge never left the drawing board. In policy circles, trade resilience now means shifting from one product category to another, electronics to semiconductors, textiles to pharma. Geography is not a part of the equation. The assumption is fixed – trade flows through the same corridors that served colonial ports and post-Independence industrial clusters. The northeast remains outside that frame, not by oversight, but by design.

Asia's moves, India's inertia

As China consolidates its grip over northern Myanmar through infrastructure investments, militia alliances and a growing intelligence footprint, India continues to squander its own flanks. The India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, which begins at Moreh, now vanishes into the jungle. Surveillance, not commerce, defines India's frontier stance. Where goods do not cross, border forces do. And when movement is reduced to patrols, borderlands do not stay still; they drift toward disorder.

What is required is not reinvention but basic state function. Trade runs on roads, not rhetoric. It moves through warehouses, not white papers. In the northeast, those arteries are missing. Infrastructure is sporadic, and policy presence is thinner still. New Delhi may ink a free trade agreement with London and issue joint statements in Washington, but the substance of those agreements rarely crosses the Siliguri Corridor. The northeast remains unintegrated in both design and delivery. India effectively negotiates global trade while ignoring the geographies that could anchor it.

By treating Mr. Trump's tariffs as a passing irritant, India sidesteps the deeper structural fault – its trade economy is spatially lopsided. A flood in Gujarat or a labour strike in Tamil Nadu is enough to choke the national pipeline. That is not dispersion, it is dependence. The global chessboard has shifted. Supply chains are in motion. China is repositioning capital. Southeast Asia is building alternative corridors. India claims a role in the Indo-Pacific equation, but its export architecture still rests on a few coastal enclaves. Strategic talk rings hollow when the eastern frontier remains disconnected from the commerce map.

A state cannot claim regional heft while its eastern flank remains economically brittle. The northeast has never asked for slogans. It requires the minimum grammar of statecraft: roads that reach markets, policies that recognise geography, and governance that sees beyond electoral math. For decades, the region has been told to wait through insurgencies, ceasefires, and empty policy acronyms. But the world is moving. Trade disruptions are more frequent. Corridors are shifting. And delay now resembles design.

No single tariff will break India, but repeated regional omissions erode the idea of a cohesive economy. This is not a call for retaliation. It is a demand to reframe resilience, not as a concentration of strength, but as the ability to absorb shocks from every part of the map. Until then, the blind spot stays intact.

> India is negotiating global trade while ignoring key geographies such as the northeast that could anchor a cohesive economy

The Saudi-Pakistan deal upends India's strategic thought

Kabir Taneja
is Deputy Director and Fellow, Strategic Studies Programme, Observer Research Foundation

The announcement by Pakistan and Saudi Arabia of the conclusion of a Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement has, expectedly, rankled nerves in New Delhi. In the statement's text, the part which says "any aggression against either country shall be considered an aggression against both" has raised concerns and questions alike, specifically over the trajectory of the India-Saudi dynamic.

India has mobilised a global diplomatic effort to isolate Pakistan following the April 2025 terror attack in Pahalgam, Jammu and Kashmir, which led to the largest military exchange between the two countries since 1971. However, an aim to internationally quarantine Pakistan has fallen short. The Saudi-Pakistan deal is another feather in Islamabad's cap since then.

In May, as Operation Sindoor was launched to militarily target terrorist camps inside Pakistan, diplomats from Saudi Arabia and Iran were in New Delhi as missiles began to fly across the border. Prime Minister Narendra Modi was in Riyadh on an official visit during this period and had rushed back to India due to the terror strike. Saudi Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Adel al-Jubeir arrived soon after to meet External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar. But Mr. Adel al-Jubeir's meeting at the Prime Minister's Office turned heads, and while both sides remained tight-lipped, Riyadh, in all likelihood, tried to diffuse an escalating situation.

Linked to geopolitical changes

Beyond South Asia, the events above are also a window into the geopolitical fracas unravelling on multiple fronts in West Asia ever since the terror attack by Hamas against Israel, in October 2023, which has pushed a reorienting of strategic calculation across the wider region. Fast forward to September, and the Riyadh-Islamabad agreement is being downplayed but has wider geopolitical reverberations.

Indian interests are peripheral for Riyadh, but for Pakistan, this deal kill two birds with one stone. It rekindles lost sheen with the Kingdom and challenges New Delhi's security concerns simultaneously.

The pact is also a return to normal for what was a strained time between the Kingdom and Pakistan, the Islamic world's only nuclear weapons power. In 2015, the then Nawaz Sharif government had refused to send troops to join Saudi's campaign against the Iran-backed Houthi militia in Yemen. For decades, the Saudis have seen the Pakistani military, with its extensive real-world experience in warfare – most of which has come against India – as the best force to strengthen its own domestic and regional security. Moreover, with the United States increasingly being viewed as an unreliable military partner in West Asia, Riyadh is back shopping in its traditional stomping grounds. For Islamabad, the nuclear file is once again delivering dividends, albeit more as a matter of chance than design. Nonetheless, its effectiveness has been on display from Washington to Riyadh.

Reports in the western press have suggested that this deal had been in the making for around three years. In a statement, India's Ministry of External Affairs said that it had been aware that such an agreement was under consideration between the two countries. For long, Pakistan, the only Islamic country in the world with nuclear weapons, has been touted as a supermarket for Riyadh's potential nuclear requirements. The "12-day war" between Israel and Iran, and both taking turns to launch weapons at Qatar, has further raised the stakes.

The fundamentals are solid

Beyond the surface, however, the Saudi-Pakistan pact is representative of multiple changes taking place in the international order. First and foremost, there is a false understanding of India's bulging outreach to West Asia that an institutional wedge can be installed between Islamabad and the Arab states. These bilaterals are based on Islam, ideology, and theological principles. In Saudi and Pakistan's case, it is a further strengthening around Sunnism. The fundamentals of this relationship are unbreakable. Second, Riyadh is now chasing strategic autonomy, multipolarity, and multialignment, all stated foreign policy aims and theories India wishes to implement as its core tenets to become a major power. This blueprint is aspirational to many others, and often, will put major partner states on the opposite end of Indian strategic interests.

The message for India

The challenge raised by the Saudi-Pakistan formalisation for the centrality of the 'Islamic bomb', a term coined by the Pakistani press in the early 1980s, may not be immense, but is a trailer of how the geopolitical chessboard is being stacked. It also represents a core challenge for India, that its culturally risk-averse strategic thought and the slow pace at which this is changing, are increasingly detached from prevailing realities. The Indian leadership needs to onboard risks that come with both the embrace and mobilisation of power. Else, India risks losing traction if fence-sitting remains the chosen path and there is an adoption of an idealistic view of playing the role of 'chief pacifist' chokeholds strategic choices.

The world is being re-shaped and will not wait for what India believes is going to be "its time". The Saudi-Pakistan pact is Islamabad – and more specifically the Pakistan Army – using disruptions and crevasses in the global and Western order, to its merit. Another opportunity to reshape how the world functions may not return this century. It is now when Indian calculations need to be right and it needs to act with resolve.

> The Riyadh-Islamabad agreement is being downplayed but is one that has wider geopolitical reverberations

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Ladakh violence

The common feature between the violence in Manipur and Ladakh is the government's delayed response. Had the Centre held talks as soon as issues arose, the violence could have been nipped in the bud. A sincere political gesture and the presence of the political leaders who matter could have helped settle the unrest. It seems that there is no mechanism to hear the stories of those who are affected. It is only when issues go out of control that the government wakes up.

A.V. Narayanan,
Chennai

Equities under pressure

Indian equity markets extended their losses for a fifth consecutive session on September 25, with the Sensex tumbling 556 points to 81,159 and the Nifty slipping below 24,900. Persistent foreign outflows and U.S. visa curbs seem to have weighed heavily on financial and IT counters, while stocks such as Trent and Power Grid deepened the decline. Metals alone offered respite, aided by global copper price gains. Such prolonged weakness underscores the need for policy support to restore investor confidence.

Vivek M. Jain,
Chennai

Corrections & Clarifications

The heading and the text of a report, "PhonePe files for confidential IPO" ('Business' page, September 25, 2025), should have read: PhonePe has filed confidential papers for IPO.

A map of Telangana that accompanied a report, "Once again, anger over Almatti" (Opinion page – 'State of Play', September 24, 2025), showed a part of Andhra Pradesh as well.

E-mail:readerseditor@thehindu.co.in

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

Is the American Dream dead for Indians?

PARLEY

Arjun Appadurai
Socio-cultural anthropologist and Professor Emeritus for Media, Culture and Communication, New York University

Ajay Srivastava
Founder, India-based Global Trade Research Initiative

On September 19, U.S. President Donald Trump signed an executive order, raising the H-1B visa fee to $1,00,000. Many fear that this will disproportionately impact Indian workers, especially those with lower median salaries. Although the White House has clarified that the fee applies only to new applicants and not those up for renewal or already in the country, there are concerns, especially against the backdrop of immigration control and protectionism. Is the American Dream dead for Indians? Arjun Appadurai and Ajay Srivastava discuss this question in a conversation moderated by **Saptaparno Ghosh**. Edited excerpts:

The hike in the H-1B visa fees has led to some panic in India. Would you say the American Dream is now dead?

Arjun Appadurai: Dreams do not die in the same way as realities change. I would say the American Dream remains alive for a very large number of people from all classes from both within the U.S. and outside. The U.S. still remains the place where, in some way, the dream or the myth that anything is possible [remains]. I do not think that is dead. In the present circumstances, the doorway may have narrowed, but the dream seems to be highly operative for the large majority of people.

Ajay Srivastava: About 3.4 lakh Indian students are in the U.S., enrolled in either STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) or management courses. They pay upward of $2,00,000, having taken loans from banks or relatives, for one and half to two years of education. If they do not get jobs, the dream comes down in scope gradually over the years. The hike in visa fee makes it almost impossible for anyone to be hired, except top STEM graduates. No U.S. company is going to take a risk given the vitiated political environment. The curtailing of the dream would mean that both come out as losers. The U.S. earns $15 billion as tuition fee from Indian students and more than $10 billion in living expenses.

Some say that the H1-B regime is being exploited to gain residency. How would you respond to that?

AS: I do not agree with the narrative. There may have been some cases of misuse. But overall, the system has been great for both [the U.S. and the immigrants]. It is an emotional issue for the U.S. Many MAGA (Make America Great Again) supporters are either jobless or have low-paying jobs. It is natural for them to blame outsiders for this. The White House, too, is fuelling this narrative, exploiting the discontent among American workers. Again, there may be some cases of misuse. But largely, most of the people who have gone there are top STEM talent or are pursuing top-class research. They have either built companies or have expanded them, creating thousands of jobs. This includes Indians and non-Indians – Sergey Brin who is Russian and built Google, Elon Musk who is of South African and Canadian descent and built Tesla, Satya Nadella from India who heads Microsoft, and Sundar Pichai from India who heads Google... the list is endless.

A U.S. flag and H-1B visa application forms are seen in this illustration. REUTERS

AA: The U.S. is unique. It is a society built on immigration. So, to suddenly say that we must control all immigration is not realistic, not just in today's world but at any point of time. More importantly, it is a global pattern that when things are not right internally or when somebody wants to make a claim to power, the easiest way for them appears to be to blame new arrivals. The tougher question to ask is this: why has a society that is producing extraordinary amounts of wealth been unable to provide a simple social canopy, social security, health, or jobs? That is the big scandal that nobody wants to talk about excluding a minority in the U.S., including Bernie Sanders. That is what is wrong with the [anti-immigration] assertion. You see, whatever H1-B visa-holders do, whether from India or other parts of the world, by and large is nothing illegal or criminal. So, even if they come to the U.S. and stay for six years and then obtain a green card, it is through law and established procedures. Additionally, what must be noted is that the beneficiaries are in a legitimate way pursuing and strengthening research in American universities, making these institutions a global force. Thereafter, some enter the global economy. It is a win-win situation. What is the point of this sudden restriction in a land built on the idea of immigration?

> Why has a society that is producing extraordinary amounts of wealth been unable to provide social security, health, or jobs? That is the big scandal that nobody wants to talk about excluding a minority in the U.S. That is what is wrong with the [anti-immigration] assertion.
>
> ARJUN APPADURAI

The U.S. has invested heavily in AI recently. Indian workers are preferred for their skills, knowledge, and sustainable wages. In that light, would the U.S. be able to sustain itself?

AS: The U.S. has plans to spend $600 billion- $1 trillion in AI in the next five years. OpenAI, Microsoft, Google, Amazon and others will be contributing billions of dollars. There are about 3,00,000 Indian H-1B visa holders, constituting about 70% of the overall share, and these people, most of whom work at major technology firms, are also working in fields connected to AI. So, of course, their renewal process will be difficult, except at the higher levels. The middle and entry-level hirings will not be remunerative. And that is where they would need to be replaced by American workers. There would be some glitches [in the U.S.] but these will not be noticed because of the capital drive. If someone is deemed important, companies will pay the visa fees to retain them. However, in most cases, these roles will need to be filled by American workers. Again, while some glitches will occur, they will largely go unnoticed because much of the work being done is redundant – many people are developing similar AI applications.

AA: AI is an extremely new space. It is my belief that the large amount of the investment in the realm would go to the higher end. Several studies have also indicated that winning the AI race would depend on a small number of extremely high paid people. Some studies have also pointed out that there are 100 people in the world who can make a breakthrough in AI, and the tech giants would be chasing them. If there were hundreds of H-1B visa-holders who could come and revolutionise AI for you, then it will be a cheaper market.

The more poignant question is not just about AI but about larger digital technology. How can the U.S. substitute for quantity, reliability, and quality? There will be a lag because once you start squeezing supply from places such as India, your educational system must start pumping up people from below. That is not impossible for the U.S.. They will have to change policy, but that won't happen overnight.

Is the H-1B visa issue an isolated matter, or does it form part of a broader geopolitical strategy involving pressure tactics?

AS: My understanding is that President Trump is a bully, and he had to look big in the eyes of his MAGA voters. With China, he could not and therefore he had to invent a fall guy. India unwittingly became that fall guy. This has happened despite U.S. Presidents cultivating India as an alternative to China. How did this happen? Mr. Trump first said he was the one who stopped the India-Pakistan war; India denied that claim. I think he thought India came between him and the Nobel Peace Prize and had to punish India for it. The immediate reason for punishing India, he said, was that the country buys Russian oil. But China is the largest buyer, not India. Europe also buys oil from Russia. So, the U.S. isn't concerned with facts. Also, before the H1-B directive, the Trump administration lost a case in the U.S. Appeals Court, which said that the legal basis of using tariffs to punish countries is not sound. Now, to defend its actions, the administration has named India.

AA: The H1-B is not that important – either in India or the U.S. So who made it important? It is obviously a mixture of politics, politicians, some over-reaction, and the reactions of certain sectors that are worried.

So, what should we expect from here?

AA: First, assess your plan for investment and the return on investment because it is not like you can land in the U.S. and start earning money. You will have to invest for years in training and skilling. Second, go to the U.S., but keep your bags packed. Third, President Trump is not going to be there forever, so this program won't last forever either.

AS: There is a little-known clause in the directive which says the fee would be waived if the U.S. Commerce Secretary is satisfied that the prospect entrants are being allowed for a project of national importance. I would suggest Indian professionals make their name in their respective fields. They will then be noticed and be allowed to enter the U.S. without the visa fee.

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NOTEBOOK

Keeping the press out

The media has functioned for a long time mindful of parliamentary rules, so why have barriers been imposed now?

Sobhana K. Nair

On February 3, 1916, the Canadian Parliament in Ottawa burned down. The fire started in the reading room packed with newspapers and records going back to a century. It spread quickly, consuming the structure. Seven people died. The next day, at 3:00 p.m., Parliament reconvened. Overnight, the country's administration had found space for it at the Victoria Memorial Museum. A press gallery was installed on a bridge between staircases.

I recently read this account. What struck me was that a press gallery was established even in a makeshift Parliament.

The media is not an inconvenience. It is an elementary part of a parliamentary democracy, especially in a country such as India. The first Secretary-General of the Lok Sabha, M.N. Kaul, said, "Under the British system [which India mimics] the desire is to ventilate grievances, and not so much to secure decisions as decisions generally follow party lines irrespective of the weight of the debate on either side. The debates are intended more for the public outside in order to enable them to form their opinion about the party of people who are working in their best interest." Without press corps reporting on debates for the public, can this end be achieved?

The first edition of Practice and Procedure of Parliament (1979), written by Kaul and his former deputy, S.L. Shakdher, says, "Press is often considered an extension of Parliament." Kaul and Shakdher's book is still the primary reference work on parliamentary rules.

There is a jarring difference between what one reads in the book and the daily reality. This column has often detailed the various restrictions imposed on the press in Parliament. It has to be said again and again. Inside the Parliament building, there are red lines drawn for the press – and not just figuratively. Even outside Parliament, in the courtyard, between the new building and the old, there are retractable barriers put up, to keep the press out.

In the last Parliament session, I happened to cross this barrier. I was immediately surrounded by three male security personnel, who asked me to go back behind the barrier. I protested, arguing that I had no camera. I explained that I was there only to chat with the MPs who were leaving Parliament after it had been adjourned for the day, just as I had been doing for as long as I have covered Parliament. I posed no threat whatsoever. My identity card, issued after verification by the Parliament Secretariat, was hanging from my neck.

I strolled further into the courtyard, refusing to cede ground. The men left and were replaced by two women. They blocked my way and nudged me towards the barrier. I continued to argue. Needless to say, my words had little impact.

By then, the MPs had started streaming out. Many of them, both from the ruling party and the Opposition, recognised me, but not one of them intervened or asked what the argument was about.

It was a futile attempt on my part. The security personnel are bound by the directions of the administration and I was rallying against people who did not decide the rules. Perhaps I was airing my frustration. After all, these were the same grounds that several of my colleagues and I had strolled around, without restrictions, until the new Parliament was constructed.

During the British Raj, reporters were given leeway in the Central Legislative Assembly to self-regulate. This was the case in Parliament in newly independent India as well. The media has functioned for a long time mindful of parliamentary rules. So why do we need concrete red lines now? Why do journalists need to be herded around by security personnel?

I retreated that day, angry with myself for causing a minor scene. But looking back, I feel angrier. We have been retreating behind those lines. We have been conceding ground. And every time we leave without protest, we are pushed back further.

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PICTURE OF THE WEEK

Struck by the fury of nature

Incessant rains in Kolkata have flooded several Durga Puja pandals, leaving organisers and artists scrambling to repair the damages. DEBASISH BHADURI

FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Hindu.

FIFTY YEARS AGO SEPTEMBER 26, 1975

6670 M. bank notes at the end of March

Bombay, September 25:

The total number of pieces of bank notes of all denominations, representing the liability of the Issue Department of the Reserve Bank of India as at the end of March 1975, was 3766 millions.

To this has to be added about 2964 million pieces of one rupee notes as on that date, issued by the Government of India under the Currency Ordinance of 1940, as the Reserve Bank has been entrusted with the responsibility for the issue and management of one rupee notes also.

The latest issue of the Reserve Bank of India Bulletin discloses that the total number of pieces of bank notes and currency notes at more than 6670 million pieces is very large by ordinary international standards, being considerably larger than the circulation of paper currency in the United States.

In view of the variations in climate and the conditions in which notes are generally handled, it has been necessary to replace them at frequent intervals.

With the increase in the cost of bank note paper and printing costs, this replacement is becoming progressively more costly.

The cost of production of bank notes and the Government of India one rupee notes together was of the order of Rs. 10 crores in the year ended March 1975.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO FROM SEPT. 25, 1925 EDITION AS THERE WAS NO SEPT. 26 EDITION

Burma and India

Rangoon, Sept. 24: The Burma Legislative Council disposed of four non-official resolutions to-day, of which one was carried; one lost and two withdrawn. The resolution that was carried was moved by Dr. Thien Maung, recommending that two suitable Burmans be sent to the Co-operative College, Manchester, for training. After some discussion the resolution was put to vote and carried. Of the two resolutions that were withdrawn, one recommended to the Government to appoint an expert committee to enquire into and report on the financial relations between Burma and India.

Text&Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

India's smartphone exports hit new high in August 2025

1.53 in $ billion. India's smartphone exports have surged 39% in August 2025 compared to a year ago, India Cellular and Electronics Association (ICEA) has said. Smartphone exports to the U.S. in the first five months of FY26 reached $8.43 billion, from $2.88 billion during the same period in FY25, nearly a three-fold increase, ICEA said in a release. PTI

India signs deal for domestically built and made Tejas fighter jets

7 in $ billion. India on Thursday signed a $7 billion order for 97 domestically designed and built Tejas fighter jets as its air force retires its outgoing Russian MiG-21 jets after decades of use. India's Ministry of Defence said it had "signed a contract with Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) for procurement of 97 Light Combat Aircraft (LCA) Mk1A, including 68 fighters and 29 twin seaters". AFP

Total number of investor accounts registered with NSE

23.5 in crore. This includes all client registrations done to date. Notably, clients can register with more than one trading member. The unique investors' base on the National Stock Exchange of India (NSE) crossed the 12-crore mark on September 23, with the latest one crore addition taking place in just eight months, the bourse said on Thursday. PTI

Execution numbers rise in Singapore amid renewed abolition calls

11 A Malaysian man was hanged in Singapore on Thursday for drug trafficking, raising the number of executions in the city-state this year despite renewed calls to abolish the death penalty. The execution of Datchinamurthy Kataiah, 39, occurred on Thursday afternoon. He was the third Malaysian and 11th person to be executed so far this year in Singapore. PTI

Percentage decrease in Indian refiners' crude processing in August

4.4 % Indian refiners' crude throughput declined month-on-month in August to 5.27 million barrels per day (22.29 million metric tons), according to provisional government data released on Thursday. Refinery throughput in July was at 5.51 million barrels per day (23.31 million metric tons). REUTERS

COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

Cooling rights in a sweltering South

Access to air conditioning is currently severely limited in developing countries, including in India. Enhancing this access is urgently required as a public health safeguard and a necessity for adaptation to climate change. Cooling is no longer a matter of comfort for the global South, but a frontline adaptation need

EXPLAINER

Ankita Ranjan

In June 2025, the Government of India (GoI) proposed that all new air conditioning systems (ACs) in homes, commercial spaces and vehicles must operate within the temperature range of 20 C to 28 C, with 24 C as the default setting. The Bureau of Energy Efficiency (BEE) estimates that this proposal could save 20 billion units of energy annually, amounting to ₹10,000 crores and emissions reduction of 16 million tonnes. While such energy-saving measures are important there are more fundamental issues that need to be addressed. Access to air conditioning is currently severely limited in developing countries, including India. Enhancing this access is urgently required as a public health safeguard and a necessity for adaptation to climate change. By treating cooling primarily as an energy and emissions concern, the need to universalise access to cooling and provision of public facilities that can protect vulnerable populations from heat stress often gets sidelined.

In India, access to air conditioning remains severely inadequate, and the main challenge is insufficiency. Cooling is no longer a matter of comfort for the global South, but a frontline adaptation need. In 2021, only 13% of urban and 1% of rural households in India owned an AC. While efficiency and behavioural measures can reduce the emissions footprint of existing users, without simultaneously prioritising access to the most vulnerable, such policies risk becoming symbolic gestures that are ineffective in confronting deeper inequities at the heart of climate justice.

While the national average of AC ownership in India is approximately 5%, it is overwhelmingly concentrated amongst the urban rich. In 2021, the richest 10% in India, mostly residing in urban areas, owned 72% of the total ACs.

This disparity is also reflected in interstate and regional differences.

The per capita electricity consumption for space cooling is 7 GJ in the U.S., which is over 28 times higher than in India, 19 times higher than in Indonesia and 13 times higher than in Brazil. FILE PHOTO

The inter-country cooling divide is even more stark and inequitable. Developed countries have long enjoyed near universal access to thermal comfort, primarily through widespread heating systems, but more recently through the increased adoption of air conditioning. In 2020, nearly 90% households in the U.S. and Japan owned an AC, as compared to 22% in Central and South America and only 6% in Sub-Saharan Africa. The per capita electricity consumption for space cooling is 7 GJ in the U.S., which is over 28 times higher than in India, 19 times higher than in Indonesia and 13 times higher than in Brazil.

During the European heatwave, which peaked around 42 C in cities like London and Paris, urgent public investments were made in cooling infrastructure, with the current AC ownership doubling in Europe since 1990, and the International Energy Agency (IEA) projecting a four-fold increase by 2050. While several major cities in the global South routinely record temperatures above 40 C, the international discourse around their rising cooling demand is widely framed as a mitigation problem, while it is justified as a necessary adaptation measure for the North, indicating a troubling hypocrisy.

The Imperative of cooling

The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that between 2000 and 2019, heat exposure contributed to approximately 489,000 global deaths, with India alone recording more than 20,000 heat-related deaths in this period. While extreme heat is increasingly recognised as one of the prominent health threats in the global South, the resulting mortality or morbidity rate is not solely a function of rising temperatures. It in fact reflects the acute shortage of protective infrastructure such as thermally secured housing, reliable electricity supply and adequately equipped public health systems. In 2022, the majority of the health care facilities in high-income countries had a reliable power supply, whereas nearly one billion people in the lower-middle and low-income countries were served by facilities with unreliable or no power supply.

In South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), 12% and 15% health centres, respectively, had no electricity, while only 50% hospitals in SSA reported having a reliable power supply.

Without adequate energy infrastructure, providing essential services such as neonatal care, climate-controlled emergency rooms, and vaccine refrigeration becomes precarious as they rely on stable cooling systems. During periods of extreme heat, countries like Kenya, Ghana and Burkina Faso have recorded sharp spikes in cardiovascular, respiratory and renal conditions that cannot be treated safely in overheated and underpowered facilities. Beyond hospitals, the lack of cooling access also undermines workspace safety and labour productivity.

In India, almost 80% of the labour force is engaged in sectors such as agriculture, construction and street vending; jobs that require strenuous outdoor activities. Recognising this vulnerability, several Indian States and cities have developed Heat Action Plans (HAPs) that include early warning systems, information sharing, heat shelters and public awareness campaigns. However, their implementation is often constrained due to underfunding, limited institutional coordination and weak legal foundations. Addressing these intersecting challenges in the global South requires an urgent need to integrate heat resilience as a core development priority through policies that focus on stronger labour protection, targeted social safety nets and comprehensive heat action plans.

As low-income nations already face staggering challenges due to economic and energy poverty, without large-scale investments in public infrastructure and access to finance from the North, cooling will remain unaffordable for billions in the South. Closing this gap is important to prevent avoidable deaths, protect livelihoods and build climate-resilient public systems. Therefore, cooling must not be treated as a climate liability to be rationed, but as a non-negotiable development right that is crucial for strengthening equity and enabling adaptation.

THE GIST

- In 2020, nearly 90% of households in the U.S. and Japan owned an AC, compared to 22% in Central and South America and only 6% in Sub-Saharan Africa
- In India, the national average of AC ownership is around 5%, concentrated mostly among the urban rich
- The World Health Organization estimates that between 2000 and 2019, heat exposure caused approximately 489,000 deaths globally

Why India's urban definition is failing its growing towns

In the 2011 Census, an urban unit was defined as either a statutory town or a census town

Niranjana K.P.

The story so far:

Registrar General of India (RGI) and Census Commissioner Mrityunjay Kumar Narayan in a letter dated August 14 to the States' Directorates of Census Operations (DCO) said, "It is proposed to retain the same definition for urban areas for Census 2027 as this will ensure comparability with the previous Census and provide the basis for analysis of urbanisation trends in the country."

In the 2011 Census, an urban unit was defined as either a statutory town or a census town. Statutory towns are areas that are formally notified as urban by the State government. They have urban local bodies like municipal corporations, municipal councils and nagar panchayats. All other places that satisfied the following criteria – a minimum population of 5,000, at least 75% of the male main working population engaged in non-agricultural activities, and a population density of at least 400 persons per sq. km – are classified as census towns. The census towns remain administratively rural, but they function like urban areas.

What are the limitations?

In India, urban local bodies are more autonomous and have more freedom and control over their finances, while Panchayati Raj institutions are limited to implementing centrally designed welfare schemes. Hence, urban status, if granted to a settlement, would imply development of the area.

The current definition of urban and rural areas is a binary that ignores the complex and evolving nature of the settlements in India. It fails to take into account the settlements that fall in the spectrum between rural and urban. Rapid urbanisation is transforming many villages into towns both in function and form, yet these areas often lack formal recognition and remain under rural governance.

As a result, settlements such as census towns and peri-urban regions – despite having dense populations, non-agricultural livelihoods, and urban lifestyles – remain excluded from urban governance structures and infrastructure provision, leading to gaps in planning, services, and resource allocation.

Census data from 2001 and 2011 show that 251 census towns identified in 2001 remained under rural governance by 2011, despite meeting urban criteria.

West Bengal illustrates this gap. Data from the 2001 and 2011 Censuses show that a significant number of settlements classified as census towns in 2001 continued to be governed by rural local bodies even a decade later. West Bengal experienced the highest increase in the number of census towns, with 526 new census towns identified in 2011. However, 251 settlements that had already been classified as census towns in 2001 saw no change in governance status by 2011. This delay highlights how many urbanised settlements are not 'municipalised' – that is, not being converted into statutory towns with elected urban local bodies – leaving infrastructure and planning inadequate.

What are the implications?

As India prepares for its next Census, it is crucial to revisit and revise the definition of what qualifies as "urban." A 2019 research paper published in the journal *Population and Environment*, stresses the importance of population size and density in defining what is 'urban.' The study shows that relying solely on a narrow framework – such as a population size above 5,000 and the percentage of non-agricultural workers – can result in a substantial undercount of urban populations. Depending on the density threshold used, India's urban population in 2011 could be 35-57%, higher than the official 31%.

Many settlements that appear rural on paper actually form part of larger, informal urban clusters that lack any recognition under current Census methods, simply because they fall outside municipal limits or are divided across administrative units.

The 75% male workforce rule is outdated; small towns may not meet this threshold, yet show clear urban traits. Industries, service jobs, and gig economy work are spreading into villages and semi-urban areas, blurring rural-urban distinctions.

The rule also fails to take into account those who engage in both agricultural and non-agricultural work, often seasonally or concurrently. Many people in semi-rural and transitional areas commute daily or seasonally to nearby towns or cities for work, while still maintaining ties to agriculture, either through land ownership or seasonal farming. The expansion of app-based and gig economy jobs into smaller towns and semi-urban or rural areas highlights how urban-type employment is no longer confined to traditionally urban centres. The 'male workforce' criterion is also problematic, as it ignores the women's informal or unpaid work.

Hence, retaining the outdated definition of 'urban' in the 2027 Census risks misclassifying millions, undercounting urbanised areas, and excluding rapidly growing settlements from appropriate governance and services. A rigid, binary framework no longer reflects India's evolving settlement patterns.

ABSTRACT

AP

Citizens, domicile, migrants: Why should we worry about Provincial Citizenship?

Provincial citizenship emerges from nativist politics rooted in an emotional belonging to a State, which gains immediate leverage in regional electoral politics. It challenges the idea of singular Indian citizenship, sparking debates over definitions of 'native', 'indigenous', 'Adivasi', 'local', or 'son of the soil'

Swatahsiddha Sarkar

Ranjan, A. (2025). Provincial Citizenship: Jharkhand Domicile, Migration and Politics of Scale. *Studies in Indian Politics*, forthcoming (published online, September 2025)

Mobility in its many forms has long been considered core to the notion of progress and the formation of civilisation. Conversely, sedentarism – the practice of living in one place – emerges from the need to link property, descent, and lineage to the control of resources. World history is replete with the caravan trails of tribes, pastoralists, traders, and soldiers. This historical context of mobility is reinforced by today's global networks, which facilitate a new world defined by the flow of not only goods, services, and capital but also labour. This, of course, alludes to globalisation – a force that has affected our social, cultural, political, and economic standpoints, as well as our very perspectives and identities.

A matter of concern

Given this backdrop, it's curious that while the idea of mobility has expanded, our physical mobility often remains restricted, particularly when it comes to seeking livelihoods outside one's home State. Despite the precarity of migrant workers becoming painfully evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, Indian metropolises remain the most coveted destinations for destitute rural workers from different States.

More recently, in the wake of the National Register of Citizens (NRC) updation and the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of Electoral Rolls, the mistreatment of migrant labour in various cities has become a matter of national debate and anxiety. While there has been an upsurge of a media-fed 'public mood', the 'public mind' needs to be nudged toward a deeper engagement with complex issues like inter-state migration.

In this regard, it's worth reflecting on provocative discussions in academic forums where fresh insights, such as "provincial citizenship" (a term pitched by Alok Ranjan, a PhD candidate at JNU), are sparking deep reflection. Following Ranjan's lead, it is meaningful to explore the idea of inter-state migration for a broader audience, especially for those who might think this issue only concerns the directly affected or the policymakers tasked with providing relief.

Ranjan's work reflects on inter-State migration and how it has drafted a new chapter in the "politics of domicile" within India's democratic body politic, though this operates only at the provincial level. "Provincial citizenship" emerges from nativist politics rooted in an emotional belonging to a State, which gains immediate leverage in regional electoral politics. In the process, the entanglement of spatial identity, freedom of movement, and citizenship allows domicile to surface as a new category for political mobilisation. Crucially, these tendencies accentuate the significance of States as sites of citizenship, even at a time when a more inclusive, national-level citizenship is being emphasised as the fulcrum of *Akhanda Bharat* (Undivided India).

Following Ranjan, we see that a close scrutiny of States like Jharkhand, Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), and Assam can help us understand how domicile becomes a potent political instrument. In J&K, domicile policies were implemented after the 2019 abrogation of its special status as a measure of inclusive politics to safeguard minorities (like the Valmikis, Gorkhas, and West Pakistan refugees). Jharkhand, however, represents a case where domicile was used to articulate majoritarian grievances against the perceived influence of a minority elite in a State formed in 2000. Backed by its unique history, the politics of domicile in Jharkhand departs from the norms seen in Sixth Schedule regions. It tends to encompass the whole State, superseding the nation's federal structure and questioning the national citizenship rights guaranteed by Article 16(2) of the Indian Constitution.

Attaining statehood did not resolve sub-nationalist politics in Jharkhand. Instead, these sentiments were channelled into a democratic politics of domicile after 2000. This transition challenges the "one nation, one citizenship" ideal. Here, the notion of a single national citizenship is undermined by the efficacy of the unofficially constructed idea of provincial citizenship, whose political importance can render the national framework inadequate.

Jharkhand's experience also suggests that conflicts between the interests of internal migrants and the concerns of provincial citizenship cannot be democratically adjudicated within the existing political structure, often requiring the Supreme Court's intervention.

The newness of an old idea

This "unofficial" provincial citizenship problematises the official idea of a singular Indian citizenship. It creates a contest over definitions of 'native', 'indigenous', 'Adivasi', 'local', or 'son of the soil' that exist alongside the identity of an Indian citizen.

The problem of internal migrants in provincial contexts is not new. Myron Weiner, in his book *Sons of the Soil: Migration and Ethnic Conflict in India* (1978), was perhaps the first to assess the social and political consequences of internal migration in States like Maharashtra, Bihar, and Assam. More recent coinages like "citizen-outsiders" (Roy 2010), "differentiated citizenship" (Jayal 2013), and "paused citizens" (Sharma 2024) "hyphenated nationality" (Sarkar 2025) have enriched our vocabulary for analysing this issue.

It is also relevant to consider the recommendations of the States Reorganisation Commission (SRC) of 1955. The members of the SRC anticipated the problems of discrimination and exclusion arising from domicile policies. They were greatly concerned about these rules, finding them inconsistent with Articles 15, 16, and 19 of the Constitution and contrary to the very concept of Indian citizenship. The members stated: "We do not feel called upon to pronounce on the purely legal aspects of these restrictions, but we have no doubt whatsoever that their total effect is the exact opposite of what was intended by the Constitution" (SRC Report 1955, p. 230).

The SRC Report recommended that domicile rules should be replaced by appropriate Parliamentary legislation, warning that "Otherwise, the concept of a common Indian citizenship would have no meaning" (pp. 230-231). In many respects, the concept of provincial citizenship echoes these decades-old warnings. Its newness lies in how this concept has transcended the passivity of a written report to become an active and grave reality.

(Swatahsiddha Sarkar teaches at the Centre for Himalayan Studies, University of North Bengal, Darjeeling, West Bengal)

THE DAILY QUIZ

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

The 13th Women's World Cup begins September 30, being co-hosted by India and Sri Lanka. A quiz on Women's World Cup

Soorya Prakash N.

QUESTION 1
Which is the only country to have scored more than 400 runs in a single match?

QUESTION 2
Who holds the record for having scored the most runs in Women's World Cup history?

QUESTION 3
Who is the only player to have scored a double hundred in a single match?

QUESTION 4
Who holds the record for having scored the most runs in a single World Cup?

QUESTION 5
Who holds the record for having taken the most wickets in Women's World Cup history?

QUESTION 6
Which player holds the ignominious record of having conceded most runs in a single match?

QUESTION 7
Who holds the record for having taken the most wickets in a single World Cup?

QUESTION 8
Who holds the record for having led her side for the most number of matches in World Cup history?

QUESTION 9
Which Indian player from the Men's World Cup winning team has officiated in Women's World Cup matches?

Identify the players and the record they hold in Women's World Cup history?

Questions and Answers to the September 24th daily quiz: 1. While called 'tabloid journalism' in the U.K., it is known as ______ journalism in the U.S. **Ans: Yellow**
2. X is the term used to describe the excessively abbreviated language common in journalism, such as "inked a pact". Name X. **Ans: Journalese**
3. Y journalism is a reporting style in democracies that questions the powerful and exposes wrongdoing. What is Y? **Ans: Adversarial**
4. ____ journalism describes partisan or corporate-funded outlets that produce low-quality, misleading content disguised as community reporting. **Ans: Pink-slime**
5. Hunter S. Thompson popularised ___ journalism, where reporters blend fact with personal experience in first-person narratives. **Ans: Gonzo**
Visual: Identify this man, who is closely related to the theme of today's quiz Ans: Joseph Pulitzer
Early Birds: K.N. Viswanathan| Tamal Biswas| Sunil Madhavan| Arun Kumar Singh| Arjun Debnath

FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know your English

Upendran

Guess what? My father has got a promotion!"

"Congratulations. Has his salt allowance increased substantially?"

"Salt allowance? What are you talking about? My father gets a salary, not an allowance?"

"That's true. But the word 'salary' comes from the Latin 'salarium', meaning 'salt allowance'."

"Really? But what is the connection between 'salary' and 'salt'?"

"You see in the old days. Roman soldiers used to receive part of their wages in salt."

"But why salt?"

"Because salt was a rare and precious commodity at that time "That's why they gave salt to the soldiers as part of their wages. Later, they gave the soldiers a special allowance with which they could buy salt."

"And this special allowance was called 'salarium'. right?" "Exactly! 'Sal', by the way. means 'salt'." "The Romans certainly attached a lot of importance to salt." "They most certainly did. Every man must be worth his salt, you know."

"What does that mean?"

"If someone is worth his/her salt, it means he/she deserves what he/she earns. For example, my new boss is definitely worth his salt."

"The expression 'worth one's salt' also means 'to do one's job competently'. Any doctor worth his salt should be able to diagnose the problem."

"Can I say. any spinner worth his salt should be able to take five wickets on a turning track?"

"You can. Here's another example. No coach worth his salt would ever recommend that you grip the bat like that."

"Like what?"

"That was Just an example, silly! So, has your father's salary increased?"

"His boss apparently told him that he would try and increase it to three times what it was. But my father..."

"... your father is taking it with a pinch of salt, is he?"

"What?"

"When you take something with a 'pinch of salt', it means that you do not believe everything that a person tells you. It's an informal expression. For example, when the salesman told me that his hair tonic was the best in the world. I took it with a pinch of salt."

"We must take whatever politicians tell us with a pinch of salt."

"Is your father planning to salt away some money for his retirement?"

"Salt away? What does it mean?"

"If someone 'salts away' money, they save it for the future. This is often done illegally. Some people have salted away thousands of dollars in foreign accounts."

"Some of our politicians have been accused of salting away millions in banks abroad. Maybe I should salt away my money too."

"Your money? You don't even get an allowance! Am I rubbing salt into your wounds?"

"Yes, you are. And before you ask me, let me tell you that I know what 'rubbing salt into someone's wounds means. It means you make an unpleasant situation that someone is in even more unpleasant. Our neighbour rubbed salt into my wounds when she informed my mother that I was the only student to have failed the Physics test."

Published in The Hindu on April 7, 1998

Word of the day

Frolic:
Light-hearted recreational activity for diversion or amusement

Synonyms: Play, romp, run around

Usage: *The children frolic in the park every afternoon*

Pronunciation:
https://newsth.live/Frolicpro

International Phonetic Alphabet: /frɑːlɪk/

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

Muscle matters: rethinking obesity with resistance training

Obesity and muscle loss are two sides of the same coin, and when they overlap as sarcopenic obesity, the risks multiply; India cannot afford to view health only through the lens of weight reduction; strength training plus a calorie-smart diet trims waistlines and powers up metabolic and mental health

Vid Karmarkar
Jitendra Chouksey

Obesity is a major global health challenge, affecting more than two billion adults, 35 million children under five, and 390 million children and adolescents worldwide. Central obesity – excess fat around the waist – fuels inflammation and raises the risk of diabetes, heart disease, and cancers, making waist circumference a better risk marker than BMI.

In India, the National Family Health Survey -5 (2019-2021) measured abdominal obesity for the first time, and revealed worrying trends. While only 23% of women qualified as obese by BMI, more than half in their 30s and 40s carried excess abdominal fat. In fact, 40% of women were abdominally obese compared to just 12% of men – showing how "normal" BMI often conceals hidden metabolic risk.

Body composition is more than just fat. It includes fat-free mass (bones, organs, water, and skeletal muscle), lean body mass, and fat mass. Of these, skeletal muscle is the engine of health – vital for mobility, metabolism, and strength.

Sarcopenia – the progressive loss of skeletal muscle mass, strength, and function – was once thought to be inevitable with age. Today, it is recognised as a clinical syndrome with profound consequences: frailty, falls, disability, and reduced quality of life. It may also result from chronic disease, malnutrition, or inactivity. Prevalence estimates range from 8-36% in those under 60 to 10-27% in older adults, with men generally more affected.

Sarcopenic obesity

When obesity and sarcopenia coexist, the result is sarcopenic obesity (SO) – a dangerous mix that worsens outcomes far more than either condition alone. Because fat masks muscle loss, SO is often missed, yet it is strongly linked with frailty, disability, cardiometabolic disease, and early death.

Muscle mass and strength peak between ages 30-50 before steadily declining. With over 1.4 billion people globally now above the age of 60, this age-related muscle loss is a growing public health issue. Muscle weakness reflects not just shrinking mass, but also declining quality, as fat infiltrates muscle and undermines its functional capacity.

Why muscle matters

Muscle is far more than mechanical tissue – it drives metabolism, regulates glucose, maintains energy balance, supports thermoregulation, and stores glycogen, protein, and fat. In obesity, fat accumulation inside muscles reduces both strength and quality, a process accelerated by ageing. Sarcopenia compounds these effects, worsening bone health, metabolic balance, and cardiovascular risk.

Keeping fit: Resistance training combined with adequate protein intake can help in preserving and building muscle mass, sustaining metabolism and improving insulin sensitivity. FILE PHOTO

Protecting muscle during weight loss is therefore critical. Without it, people risk slipping into sarcopenic obesity – losing strength while retaining fat. Tools such as bioimpedance, DEXA, CT, MRI, and simple grip-strength or gait-speed tests can help detect risk early.

Obesity management

Obesity management includes pharmacological, surgical, and lifestyle-based approaches, often backed by behaviour change and public health policy. Yet across many treatments, one common side effect is overlooked – muscle loss.

Take pharmacological agents such as GLP-1 receptor agonists. In India, sales crossed ₹600 crore in just four months. While effective at reducing weight, they are linked with side effects including thyroid cancer, pancreatitis, gallbladder disease, depression, and suicidal behaviour – and importantly, with lean muscle loss. Research shows that one year after stopping therapy, participants regained two-thirds of their lost weight, alongside worsening metabolic health, implying much of the "weight loss" possibly came from muscle.

Bariatric surgery, though highly effective for fat loss, also strips away lean tissue – about 8 kg of fat-free mass and 3 kg of skeletal muscle in the first year. This decline not only weakens metabolism, but may also heighten appetite, increasing the risk of weight regain.

In contrast, lifestyle interventions – structured exercise and balanced nutrition – are safer, free from drug-related side effects, and sustainable in the long term.

Training and balance

At its core, obesity arises when calorie intake consistently exceeds energy expenditure. Effective management requires creating a calorie deficit, either by reducing intake, increasing activity, or both. Designing a diet modestly below daily energy needs supports sustainable fat loss without sacrificing lean tissue.

This is where resistance training plays a pivotal role. Combined with adequate protein intake (1- 2 gm/kg body weight/day), it preserves and builds muscle mass, sustains metabolism, and improves insulin sensitivity. Aerobic exercise complements it by boosting calorie burn and cardiovascular fitness. Together, they form the foundation for long-term obesity and metabolic risk management.

Resistance training does not require a gym or intimidating equipment. Bodyweight moves such as squats, lunges, push-ups, and planks can yield significant benefits. Strength training helps older adults maintain independence, supports women through pregnancy and menopause, benefits people with obesity, and improves outcomes in cancer recovery, diabetes, and heart disease.

Experts recommend the FITT principle (Frequency, Intensity, Time and Type): train 3-5 times a week for 30-60 minutes, with 6-8 key exercises performed in 10-15 repetitions, while allowing rest days for recovery. Even modest levels pay off: 30-60 minutes of muscle-strengthening activity per week is linked with 10-17% lower risk of cardiovascular disease, diabetes, certain cancers, and all-cause mortality. Resistance training also boosts mental health, improving memory, mood, and reducing anxiety and depression.

Building strength

Obesity and muscle loss are two sides of the same coin, and when they overlap as sarcopenic obesity, the risks multiply. India cannot afford to view health only through the lens of weight reduction. Protecting muscle through resistance training, smart nutrition, and recovery is the true shield against obesity, diabetes, heart disease, cancer, other non-communicable diseases, and frailty in old age. The message is clear: don't just lose fat – build strength.

(Dr. Vid Karmarkar is chief scientific adviser with fitness company FITTR and Institute of Nutrition & Fitness Science. vid@fittr.com; Jitendra Chouksey is founder and CEO, FITTR jc@fittr.com)

THE GIST

Obesity is a major global health challenge, affecting more than two billion adults, 35 million children under five, and 390 million children and adolescents worldwide. Sarcopenia is the progressive loss of skeletal muscle mass, strength, and function

In obesity, fat accumulation inside muscles reduces both strength and quality, a process accelerated by ageing. Sarcopenia compounds these effects, worsening bone health, metabolic balance, and cardiovascular risk. Protecting muscle during weight loss is therefore critical

Lifestyle interventions — structured exercise and balanced nutrition — are safer, free from drug-related side effects, and sustainable in the long term. Protecting muscle through resistance training, smart nutrition, and recovery is the true shield against obesity, diabetes, heart disease, cancer, other non-communicable diseases, and frailty in old age

BIG SHOT

A health worker preparing to inject a girl with a dose of human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine in Karachi on Wednesday. A vaccination drive is being held to protect adolescent girls from cervical cancer. According to WHO, cervical cancer remains one of the leading causes of cancer death among women in many low-and middle-income settings despite being largely preventable. AFP

Nail infections and the need for care

Reshma T. Vishnani

Nails can be a mirror of internal disease. Nail problems can range from discolouration in the form of yellowish, greenish, or whitish nails along with discharge to pus formation, or the sudden onset of longitudinal dark bands.

Nails can be affected by many conditions, both infectious and non-infectious.

Infections are a common cause of nail problems. Bacterial nail infections, if not treated at the right time, can become chronic and recurrent. In individuals who are immune-suppressed or in cases where the infection is severe, it can even spread to the bone.

Fungal infections are also very common, especially since many of us work without gloves in the kitchen and our hands are in water frequently. Because of this, both fungal and bacterial nail infections are commonly seen. If fungal infections are not treated, they can spread, which makes timely treatment essential. Fungal infections are also frequently seen in the feet, particularly in people doing household work. This occurs because of moist environments, so it is important to clean between the toes, keep them dry, and use over-the-counter antifungal dusting powders if your hands or feet are often wet.

Hand hygiene: Wearing gloves can help prevent nail infections and contagious growths. ISTOCKPHOTO

Viral infections

Viral infections such as warts are also commonly seen around the nails. Warts are contagious growths that can occur in anyone and may increase in size and number if not treated. They can spread through contact, through the use of public spaces. To prevent this, you should always wear your own gloves, sanitise equipment before and after use, and maintain good hand hygiene.

Nails can also serve as an early marker for autoimmune conditions such as lichen planus, psoriasis, and eczema. In these cases, you may see nail pitting or longitudinal ridges, which can be early markers of skin disease. Sometimes nails may change shape, becoming spoon-shaped, inverted spoon-shaped, or may develop other deformities, which may be related to heart or lung conditions or even nutritional deficiencies. Sudden discolouration or the appearance of longitudinal bands can also be a marker of early melanoma, a type of skin cancer. Certain medications may cause nail changes as well, ranging from discolouration to painful nail beds or painful skin around the nail, all of which should be treated before they worsen.

Taking precautions

If your hands are frequently in water for work, it is advisable to wear kitchen gloves. When getting a manicure or pedicure, ensure that the salon maintains strict hygiene and sanitises instruments before and after every use.

Keep your nails short and trimmed regularly. Ingrown toenails are increasingly common due to narrow footwear styles, even though Indians typically have broader feet. Wearing broad shoes, avoiding tight footwear, and allowing your feet to breathe can help prevent this. Any sudden nail discoloration should be examined by a dermatologist.

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Blame the rules

How related party transactions escaped SEBI scrutiny

The recent orders of the Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI), ruling that companies in the Adani Group and its directors have not violated regulations on related party transactions and that they have not indulged in market manipulation, insider trading or in any unfair trading practices, is right according to legal principles or form. Since the expanded definition of related party was not in force when the transactions were carried out, the Adani group has not violated any law which existed then.

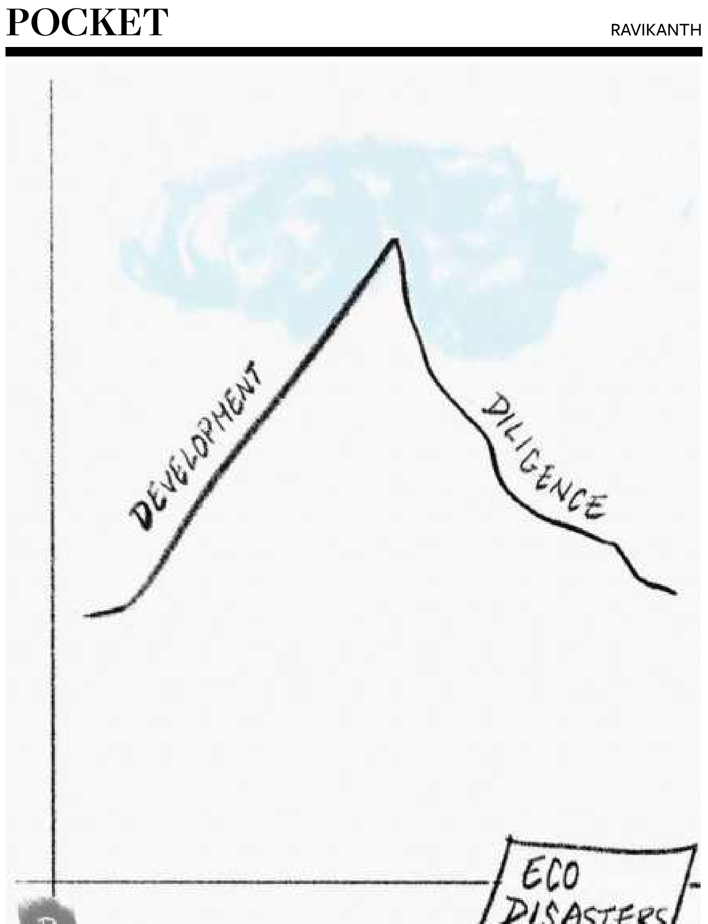
But doubts remain over the intent behind these transactions. Also, these orders do not bring SEBI investigations into Hindenburg allegations against the Adani group to a closure. Accusations regarding violation of minimum public shareholding norms by the group have not been cleared yet. The two orders delivered last week pertain to transactions between Adani group entities and three financing companies – Adicorp Enterprises, Milestone Tradelinks and Rehvar Infrastructure. SEBI's investigations into the issues flagged by the Hindenburg report had revealed that companies in the Adani group had given loans to these finance companies and these companies had lent the amount to other companies within the Adani group. Instead of directly lending the money to group companies, a third party had been used as a conduit. The investigation revealed that these financing companies are very small, with negligible networth and business operations. The loans were processed, and on-lending was done in the same business day. These loans were not disclosed in the annual reports or reported to the audit committees.

Though these transactions may seem to be designed to avoid disclosure to shareholders and audit committees, there is no violation of law through these transactions. This is because when these transactions took place, between FY13 and FY21, definition of related party included only entities directly linked to the listed entity. With accounting standards also not laying down that 'substance' needs to be considered while determining related party relationship, SEBI was unable to enforce 'substance over form' doctrine in this instance.

However, SEBI has now expanded the definition to include indirect transactions between the listed company and unrelated parties, if it can be established that the objective of the deal was to benefit a related party of the listed company. Deals such as those covered in the SEBI order will now come under the ambit of law. Other changes made in recent years such as reducing the threshold for determining a related party, to 10 per cent of shareholding, from 20 per cent earlier and including all persons and entities belonging to the promoter or promoter group as a related party, regardless of their shareholding, further strengthens these regulations. Therefore, while it cannot be said that the letter of the law, as it were, was violated in the Adani case, the fact remains that the spirit was indeed violated.

POCKET

RAVIKANTH



VIPIN SONDHI
SATHISH KUMAR

Tool & Die industry needs more attention

PRECISION FOCUS. T&D defines the accuracy, quality and repeatability of every product. It is basic to industrial atmanirbharta

GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

Walking through a toolroom, one is struck by the silence. Unlike an automotive plant with its hum and clang, here the work is quiet, meticulous, almost artistic. Yet these jigs, dies and fixtures create every car, washing machine, mobile phone and aircraft engine. Without them, there would be no modern manufacturing. However, in India's journey to become a global manufacturing atmanirbhar powerhouse, the Tool and Die (T&D) industry (the process of making custom metal parts) remains under-recognised and needs a huge impetus.

NITI Aayog's April 2025 report, Automotive Industry Powering India's Participation in Global Value Chains, underscores the centrality of the T&D ecosystem to India's automotive future.

India's National Manufacturing Mission (NMM) provides a perfect umbrella for a sub-mission: a National Tool and Die Mission. The NMM's focus on MSME competitiveness, skilling, technology adoption and quality standards directly resonates with T&D needs. Integrating T&D as a strategic sub-mission would ensure policy alignment, resource prioritisation and capacity-building. It would strengthen precision manufacturing, reduce import dependence and energise Make in India.

A couple of years ago, an auto OEM had to fly in dies from Taiwan at three times the cost because domestic suppliers failed quality standards at the finishing line. A defence manufacturer once delayed a critical delivery because a T&D vendor's heat-treatment facility broke down. Even in consumer electronics, a large assembler had to source bespoke fixtures from overseas, causing a month-long hold-up. These are not isolated disruptions. They happen often and illustrate why the sector must move from the margins to the mainstream.

THE FOUNDATION

If the Machine Tool Industry is the mother of manufacturing, then T&D is its backbone. Machine tools build machines, but tools and dies define the accuracy, quality and repeatability of every product.

Setting up a T&D factory requires ₹500-1000 crore. A single specialised precision tool can cost ₹10-25 crore; complex ones run into hundreds. Tier 1 suppliers often mention: 'A die may cost ₹20 crore, but a week's delay can cost many times more in lost production.'

For automobiles, defence, aerospace, electronics and consumer goods, the absence of indigenous T&D capability means dependence, delays and vulnerability. India still imports much of its high-end tools, particularly from China, leaving ambitions hostage to external supply chains.

Even fortnight-long delays in overseas deliveries have disrupted multi-crore model launches by OEMs, affecting finances, delaying market entry and shaking customer confidence.

In automobiles, dies enable millions of components at scale with uniform quality. In capital goods, they determine cost competitiveness. In electronics, from smartphone casings to TV frames, every product begins with a tool.

The 3C industry — Computers, Communications and Consumer Electronics — offers huge opportunities. Electronics tooling is still a small share of India's market but demands extreme precision. A leading phone assembler lamented: 'We can assemble millions of phones, but the casing tooling all come from China.'

India currently meets around 70 per cent of tooling demand domestically, with 30 per cent imported; mainly high-precision complex tools. Automotive drives nearly 60 per cent of demand, but electronics, aerospace, defence, medical equipment and 5G are rapidly expanding.

This is why global leaders — Japan, Korea, Germany and China — first built strong T&D ecosystems, which became the bedrock for scaling their industries.

LESSONS FROM GLOBAL LEADERS

* Japan: Post-war investments in toolmaking enabled Toyota's rise.

* South Korea: Hyundai and Kia grew through close integration with domestic toolmakers. Engineers emphasise that precision dies for flagship models were perfected in-house, ensuring quality consistency.

* Germany: The Mittelstand includes world-leading toolmakers. Small firms recount refining dies for Mercedes for decades. Continuity of trust and precision makes them formidable.

* China: Declared T&D strategic in the 2000s, subsidised it and became the world's largest producer within two decades.

The lesson is clear: those who control tools, control the industry. India must craft its own playbook, treating T&D as strategy, not support.

A WAY FORWARD

India has automotive hubs in Pune, Chennai, Gurugram, Sanand and Indore. Yet the absence of a strong domestic T&D base is a glaring weakness. Tooling is capital intensive, beyond the reach of MSMEs. Medium-sized toolrooms exist but lack scale. Imports remain vulnerable to shocks; a strategic risk.

India must act with urgency. A time-bound National Tool & Die Mission, treating the sector as strategic infrastructure, should rest on five pillars:

Mega Tooling Parks: At least five advanced parks co-located with auto and engineering hubs, equipped with 5-axis CNCs, EDM/WEDM, additive manufacturing, metrology labs, heat treatment and CAD/CAM FEA tools accessible to MSMEs.

Tooling Universities with Global Partners: Collaborate with Germany, Japan, Taiwan and Korea to train 5,000+ toolmakers annually.

National Demand Aggregation: Pool requirements across sectors to provide scale.

Strategic Procurement & Localisation: Incentivise 30-40 per cent complex tooling within five years, with government support for first-lot purchases.

Digital Leapfrog: Invest in AI-driven tool design, simulation and hybrid manufacturing.

> Lessons from Germany, Japan, China, Korea and Taiwan are clear: those who control tools, control the industry. India must craft its own playbook, treating T&D as strategy, not support

Toolmaking is as much about people as machines. Skilled designers, die engineers, and machinists are critical. Industry often struggles to find young toolmakers with CAD/CAM skills. Fresh engineers are retrained for months before handling high-precision dies. The hunger to learn exists, but formal training gaps remain.

Dedicated Tool Design & Development courses should be launched across engineering colleges and ITIs near clusters. CSR funds could support labs and scholarships, while the National Skill Mission must address toolmaking.

India's ambitions in automobiles, defence, capital goods and electronics cannot be realised without mastering T&D. History shows every industrial nation first built its T&D industry which enabled venturing into global markets. Germany, Japan, Korea all did it. China is the latest. India stands at the same crossroads. We have the markets, talent and ambition. What we need is recognition of this invisible backbone and the courage to invest in it. Having seen Indian industry leapfrog before — from world-class trucks to globally competitive construction equipment — we are convinced the T&D sector can script the next success story, if given the same urgency.

Because in the end, only with tools will come atmanirbharta. To truly become the factory of the world, we must make the tools that make the products for the world.

Sondhi is Independent Director and former MD & CEO of Ashok Leyland & JCB India; Kumar is former Director, CMTI. Views expressed are personal

GST 2.0 reflects the maturity of the tax architecture

The rate rationalisation will not only spur consumption but also soften prices and boost govt revenues

Dipti Deshpande

Given its footprint and impact, the government's latest move to rationalise the GST rates has drawn the usual spectrum of reactions: praise from those seeking relief, concern from those fearing revenue loss and scepticism from those seeing it as no more than tinkering.

But there is a significant nuance that the headlines miss: the GST architecture's steady march towards maturity, where rates can be significantly adjusted without risking economic stability.

GST. Consumption booster ISTOCKPHOTO

GROWING UP

Having got past the technical glitches of the early days and the constant wrangling over rates and States' revenue loss, today, the maturity of the GST architecture is visible in the increased stability of monthly collections, continuous broadening of the tax base, improved buoyancy and greater acceptance among taxpayers.

Many more households and enterprises are now under the levy's ambit than ever before. These factors reflect the confidence in the foundation of the indirect tax system.

One of the two major achievements of GST is the impetus it afforded to the formalisation of the economy. By embedding input tax credit, the system created an incentive for businesses to transact formally.

Here is the picture of how the footprint has grown: Total taxpayers (or active registrations) have risen to 1.5 crore from just over one crore in 2018, the year after the introduction of GST. The digital exhaust of invoices, e-way bills and return filings have ensured increasing compliance.

The resultant improvement in tax buoyancy, or the responsiveness of tax revenues to changes in economic growth, has been strengthening and stabilised to reasonable levels.

This is the second achievement. And this is what allows the government to pursue rationalisation without jeopardising fiscal stability.

The tax cuts and rationalisation seem designed to reduce the net incidence of GST on households by ensuring widely consumed essential goods and services become cheaper.

The choice of timing has a two-fold positive impact. One, it complements the festival demand by boosting consumer sentiment. Two, some of the consumption push could also mildly offset the dampening of economic growth from the expected weakness in exports.

Our estimates based on the Household Consumption Expenditure Survey show that the simple average GST rate based on these top 30 consumption items falls from 11 per cent to 9 per cent under the new regime. This has a direct impact on consumption sentiment.

The final impact on consumption, however, will depend on a variety of factors that determine the speed and extent of pass-through by producers.

At the same time, fast-growing categories with relatively inelastic demand — premium consumer goods, aspirational services, and discretionary lifestyle products — continue to attract higher GST rates.

The rationale is two-fold: one, these goods and services have greater demand from higher-income groups, making the tax structure progressive in incidence; two, their demand is less sensitive to price changes, ensuring stable revenue streams. The conventional fear when tax rates are cut is that the government will suffer revenue loss, straining the fiscal deficit, or, over time, will stoke inflation in items where demand reacts rapidly to price cuts.

The GST rationalisation, however, defies this deduction.

For households, the reduced incidence of GST on essentials frees up disposable income, should nudge up consumption over a period of time.

For businesses, the simpler slabs and easier compliance burdens should improve operational efficiency over time. As a result, for the government, revenue buoyancy should recover overtime through improved volumes of consumption but also through the higher-rate categories that continue to yield steady inflows.

The inflation outlook, too, benefits. By lowering taxes on items of mass consumption, GST rationalisation directly softens the retail price index.

The ability to materially alter the national indirect tax rates, without upsetting the economic applecart, is the reward of resilience the GST architecture has afforded.

The writer is Principal Economist at Crisil Ltd. Views expressed are personal

LETTERS TO EDITOR

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

5th-gen fighter jets

Apropos, 'L&T-BEL team bids to build India's 5th-gen fighter jet', (September 25). The growing interest of private companies such as the Larsen & Toubro-BEL consortium and others in manufacturing fifth-generation fighter jets and the Advanced Medium Combat Aircraft marks a positive shift in India's defense ecosystem. Traditionally dominated by state-owned enterprises, the sector is now opening to competitive innovation, cost efficiency, and faster timelines. Private participation not only enhances indigenous production but also reduces reliance on imports.

This competition drives technological advancement, strengthens the supply chain, and fosters self-reliance. Such developments position India to emerge as a credible global player in cutting-edge defense manufacturing.

N Sadhasiva Reddy
Bengaluru

NPS tweaks

Apropos the Editorial 'Pension perfect' (September 25) one must keep in mind that NPS is a pension providing instrument and not any other investment vehicle like a mutual fund. Therefore it is only right that as in the present format, NPS demands a minimum portion to be allocated towards annuities. This must not be diluted. Also frequent withdrawals must be discouraged so as to build a sizeable corpus.

NPS can become more popular by providing full tax breaks, i.e., making all annuities tax-free. Secondly subscribers have many doubts, for example, what happens on death of subscriber at various stages? Mutual funds have a large fleet of distributors and their agents who can answer such queries of subscribers, but none in NPS.

V Vijaykumar
Pune

Easing NPS rules

There are good aspects in the scheme. Though it is market driven investment, the very purpose is to get social security for the employees in latter part of life.

The government can consider withdrawal of 75 per cent lumpsum after 60 and 25 per cent to be reinvested in annuities. Part withdrawal should also be restricted to three times.

If we allow them more withdrawals and early closure before 60, there will not be much in the kitty after 60. The very purpose of pension gets defeated. The surplus over and above the compulsory deduction can be invested by the employee in various investment schemes according to risk taking ability of each individual.

VR Ganesan
Chennai

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The cognitive cost of AI

Mental agility, long-term learning often take a hit

Nidhi Singh
Samriddhi Prakash

OUTSOURCING THINKING. Not a healthy trend ISTOCK

From chatbots that draft emails to AI assistants that summarise reports in seconds, automation promises speed, efficiency, and convenience. On paper, that sounds like a productivity dream. But behind the glossy interface lies a troubling question: are we losing our ability to think deeply, focus, and solve problems on our own?

Emerging research suggests that over-reliance on AI comes at a mental price, what some researchers call "brain rot". Neural measurements reveal a striking pattern — participants who used AI writing assistants showed a brain engagement score of just 0.009, compared to 0.053 for those who wrote unaided, a more than fivefold reduction in connectivity linked to planning and critical thinking (Zhang *et al.*, 2025).

When machines take over tasks that once required analysis, memory, or strategy, our cognitive muscles grow weaker. And it doesn't stop there.

AI tools constantly nudge us — auto-suggestions, predictive prompts, instant outputs. The result is attention fragmentation. What looks like efficiency often comes at the cost of mental agility, focus, and long-term learning. Over time, dependency loops form: the more we outsource thinking, the less capable we become of tackling tasks independently.

THE FEAR FACTOR

Productivity is also shaped by emotion — and fear of replacement looms large. As AI grows more capable, many workers feel anxious about job security. That anxiety breeds stress, distraction, and reduced efficiency. Ironically, in worrying about losing jobs to AI, professionals may become less productive themselves.

AI is not just a job destroyer; it is also a job creator. Panigrahi, Ahirrao, and Patel (2024) estimate that 40 million new jobs will be created by 2030. McKinsey projects that AI could add $13 trillion to global GDP by 2030, raising growth by 1.2 per cent annually (European Parliament, 2019).

India's own experience shows that technological revolutions may displace certain roles but also spawn entirely new categories of work. Data annotators, AI trainers, prompt engineers, and digital ethicists, jobs unheard of a decade ago are now in demand. The difference between anxiety and opportunity lies in upskilling. Workers who embrace digital literacy and complementary skills can pivot into new opportunities, often boosting productivity rather than losing it.

Indeed, AI is already delivering 20-40 per cent efficiency gains in areas like supply chains and document processing (McKinsey, 2024; HBR, 2024).

So, how do we harness AI's promise without dulling our cognitive edge? Experts suggest five strategies: intentional use: let AI handle repetitive tasks, while reserving creative and complex problem-solving for humans; cognitive exercises: keep practising independent thinking, writing, and analysis without AI support; balanced workflow: alternate between AI-assisted and AI-free tasks to preserve focus; upskilling: treat lifelong learning as a safeguard against obsolescence; mindful attention: protect deep work by limiting distractions and auto-prompts.

AI is a double-edged sword. It can supercharge productivity — but only if we remain in control. True productivity is not about doing more tasks faster; it is about working smarter, thinking critically, and continuously learning.

The workers and students who thrive in the AI era will be those who use it as a tool for growth, not a crutch for shortcuts or a source of fear. If we strike the right balance — leveraging automation while sharpening human judgment, creativity, and adaptability — we can unlock both higher productivity and richer personal growth.

In the end, AI's promise is immense. But realising it responsibly requires awareness, balance, and above all, a commitment to human potential.

Nidhi is a Delhi-based researcher, and Samriddhi is a Research Associate at Pahle India Foundation

MADAN SABNAVIS

Liquidity trap poses policy challenge

FISCAL PUSH. Lower interest rates have not stimulated demand. The onus is on fiscal policy to keep growth going

VELANKANNI RAJ B

Are we in a liquidity trap? John Maynard Keynes came up with the concept of 'liquidity trap' to explain trends in the days of the Great Depression of the 1930s. Liquidity trap exemplified a situation where the demand for money remained fixed, no matter how much central banks increased money supply. This meant that even if interest rates were lowered to close to zero, there would be no demand for credit. This sort of trend was in evidence during Covid when central banks lowered rates to all-time lows, but failed to push up demand for credit.

Today in India, the liquidity trap seems to be very much in evidence. The RBI has lowered rates by 100 basis points (bps) since February and while the transmission to deposits is more than complete, that on the lending side is half done. Even so, growth in credit appears to be stable though low. At 10 per cent in the first five months of the year, there has been no big bang demand for credit. While there has been some diversion to markets — both bond and ECB, it still does not explain the full picture.

Theoretically, lowering interest rates should increase demand for funds. But borrowing is always for some purpose. If it is for running business through what is called working capital, it lowers cost of capital. But it does not make sense to borrow more for investment in a situation of surplus capacity and lower demand. This has been the case in times of global slowdown, and is also the situation in India today, where investment is not yet broad based.

The June credit policy observes that there are limits to which lower interest rates can lead to higher growth. Intuitively if lowering interest rates can lead to higher growth, all central banks should be doing it. The world should be prosperous, as commodity prices are at their lowest. Clearly this is not happening.

It is in this context that the capex push being given by the government has to be seen. FY26 will once again be the year for the government. The capex of around ₹11 lakh crore will be the major driver of investment which will probably be at best supported by some uptick in private investment. Private investment has been limited to the infra space where there is front-end spending by the government. In the consumer goods segment, there still appears to be surplus capacity which will mean it will take some more time before fresh investment takes place even if demand picks up. The changes in GST will be a challenge for these companies as they would have to deal with inventories, possibly for a period of 30-45 days, before embarking on fresh production.

TAX CONCESSIONS

The second step from the government has been on the taxation front. The Budget had given a sum of ₹1 lakh crore as income tax concessions over the year. This is a Keynesian push to demand where more money is given to taxpayers to enable spending. GST reforms have lowered the rates on several consumer goods both in the durable and non-durable categories. Savings for households have been estimated by the government at ₹48,000 crore at the first stage. This should help boost consumption and growth.

> **Relentless lowering of rates can lead to a situation where capital can be mispriced;** this will show up with a time lag when there is excess borrowing that can be inflationary.

The fiscal push could run into limits depending on the extent to which benefits of income tax or GST go to individuals in the higher income brackets. The marginal propensity to consume may not quite increase commensurately in this segment. This means that there could be some moderation in growth in consumption. However, money not spent will be saved which means that there would be a nudge to either savings in conventional modes like deposits or more likely higher investments in stocks.

Given the uncertainty in demand, it can be hard to get out of the liquidity trap. There has to be a recognition that lowering rates is not a panacea for growth. Relentless lowering of rates can lead to a situation where capital can be mispriced; this will show up more with a time lag when there is excess borrowing that can be inflationary — more so if demand for goods and services does not increase.

Therefore, monetary policy in a context of 'liquidity trap' (which renders rate cuts less effective) must be accompanied by parallel fiscal steps, and it is just as well that these have been initiated by the government. This combined with the other expenditures of the government such as PM Kisan, MGNREGS and capex will provide the Keynesian stimulus that will steady the boat.

In the current scene, there is good coordination between the government and central bank; and hence the adage of fiscal and monetary policies talking to each other holds. Under these circumstances, a status quo in October looks logical.

The writer is Chief Economist, Bank of Baroda. Views are personal

Fed's Miran calls for rapid rate cuts

Amara Omeokwe

Federal Reserve Governor Stephen Miran said the US central bank risks damage to the economy by not moving rapidly to lower interest rates. "I don't think the economy is about to crater. I don't think the labour market is about to fall off a cliff," Miran said Thursday on Bloomberg Surveillance.

But given the risks, "I would rather act proactively and lower rates as a result ahead of time, rather than wait for some giant catastrophe to occur," he said.

Miran, a new Fed board member who was appointed by President Donald Trump, is an outlier among the central bank's policymakers in calling for immediate, aggressive rate cuts.

He argued the Fed's current policy rate, which is in a range of 4-4.25 per cent, is highly restrictive because it's well above his estimate of the so-called "neutral" level — where policy neither boosts nor restrains the economy.

ECONOMIC RESILIENCE

"The neutral rate is drifting down, and as a result of that, it's incumbent upon policy to adjust in response," Miran said. "If policy stays excessively restrictive for too long, then you do get to a situation in which you have a meaningful increase in the unemployment rate."

Miran spoke just before data released Thursday morning showed second-quarter growth in GDP accelerated to the fastest pace in nearly two years, underscoring the US economy's resilience.

Separate data published simultaneously showed weekly initial filings for unemployment insurance fell to the lowest level since July.

Fed officials voted to lower interest rates at their meeting last week by a quarter percentage point, the first cut of 2025.

Miran dissented against the decision, instead favouring a half-point cut. Several policymakers, including Fed Chair Jerome Powell, have approached rate cuts cautiously, amid concerns Trump's tariff policies might persistently boost inflation. Powell has said that possibility, along with signs of a weakening labour market, poses a challenge for the Fed's decision-making in the months ahead.

Kansas City Fed President Jeff Schmid, in remarks prepared for an event Thursday in Dallas, said he supported the recent rate cut but hinted he may not back another reduction any time soon. BLOOMBERG

On businessline.in

Care economy: The missing pillar in India's ageing journey

A structured care-giving industry can not only meet a vital social need but also generate large-scale employment, spur health-tech innovation, and create new public-private models of welfare, say **Palash Baruah** and **DL Wankhar**

https://tinyurl.com/249n2nvy

How NPCI is fighting payment frauds

The NPCI's move to phase out the 'collect request' feature of UPI, a mechanism fraudsters exploit in a variety of ingenious ways, will make the financial system more secure, aver **Megha Jain** and **ER Vanyaa Gupta**

https://tinyurl.com/5y46vk4a

thehindubusinessline.

TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

September 26, 2005

Policy proposes tax breaks for renting out new properties

To give a fillip to the rental housing market, including service apartments, the draft National Housing and Habitat Policy, 2005, has proposed income-tax sops on renting out new properties to a flat 10 per cent during the first five years.

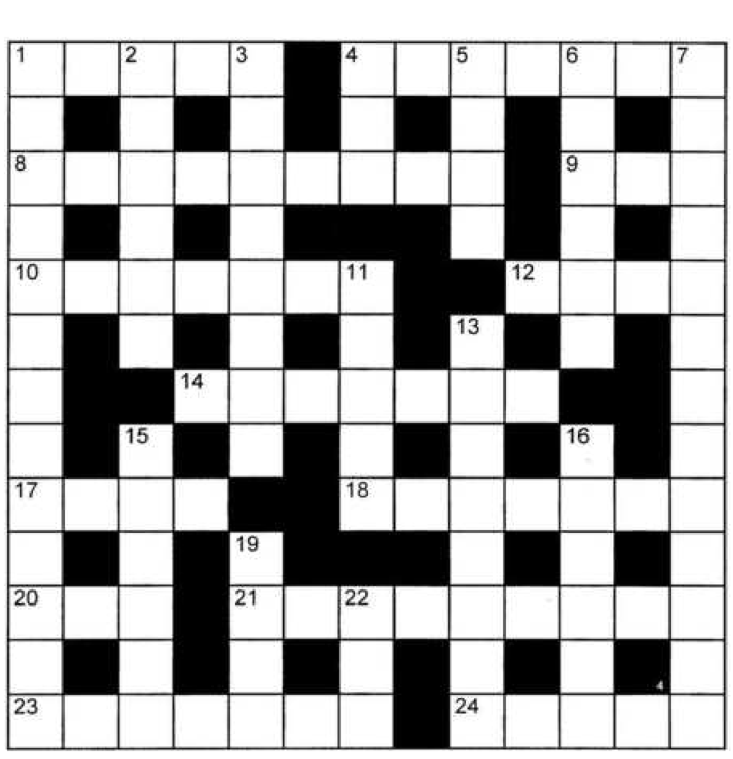
Transfer deal: No more Govt nominees on UTI MF board

The Government will soon step aside from guiding the fortunes of the country's largest mutual fund — the UTI Mutual Fund. The Ministry of Finance is understood to have agreed that after the deal to formalise the transfer of the mutual fund to its sponsors is completed, it would put an end to the practice of having a Government nominee on the board of directors of the asset management company.

'Join hands for climate change mitigation'

India has welcomed the initiative taken by the World Bank President, Mr Paul Wolfowitz, and the UK to create a new framework for clean energy and development arising out of the Gleneagles communiqué and said all countries should join hands in climate change mitigation.

BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2791



EASY

ACROSS
1. To drive one (5)
4. Small species of crow (7)
8. Brought to the door (9)
9. Prohibition (3)
10. Talkative (7)
12. Microphone (4)
14. Speech (7)
17. In a skilful manner (4)
18. Great anteater (7)
20. Very cold (3)
21. Banish from social group (9)
23. Measurement by three-foot unit (7)
24. Gets a wage (5)

DOWN
1. Separate, distinct existence (13)
2. In a whitish, washed-out way (6)
3. Small African parrot (8)
4. Make a discordant sound (3)
5. Rounding-off musical section (4)
6. A workhorse (6)
7. Name for concert hall, theatre (6,7)
11. Supernumerary (5)
13. Loan on property (8)
15. Performer (6)
16. Gauge of nylons etc (6)
19. Stupor, deep sleep (4)
22. A draw (3)

NOT SO EASY

ACROSS
1. Instigate redcap unfortunately to lie about it (5)
4. Tar put bundle of notes back as Rheims got the bird (7)
8. Organ is indeed brought home to one (9)
9. It forbids one to pinch it back (3)
10. Small book, blue edition, has plenty to say (7)
12. Small boy addressed by announcer (4)
14. Speech that after December might win a medal (7)
17. In a skilled way: not so remarkably (4)
18. An aardvark coming out of net Arab set for it (7)
20. Very chilly starts induce car's yattering (3)
21. Raise cost in order to exclude one from society (9)
23. Measure of the age: a dry version of it (7)
24. Deserves what one gets from answer abandoned by the West (5)

DOWN
1. Distinctive character at home will almost divide quality of toplessness (13)
2. In the wan way friend goes to cathedral in Cambs (6)
3. Nothing on court gives one time like a small parrot (8)
4. Thing Leyden produced to give one a jolt (3)
5. Flamenco dancers display tail end of piece (4)
6. A workhorse will bob around in a good deal of noise (6)
7. An entertaining place for them to grow Christmas roses? (6,7)
11. Crowd player perhaps gets by with an 'E' (5)
13. Loan on house, MG, or gate-crashing (8)
15. One at cards may be on the fiddle (6)
16. Measure of mesh used in backing up amid bucks and does (6)
19. Deep sleep roughly cradling the old man (4)
22. Old school draw? (3)

SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2790

ACROSS 2. Bravo 5. Hull 7. Heap 8. Presence 9. Replicas 11. Memo 12. Retrogression 15. Glad 17. Tunicate 19. Overhead 21. Blag 22. Idle 23. Spend

DOWN 1. Precede 2. Bap 3. Aspic 4. Oversee 5. Hue 6. Locum 10. Lurid 11. Music 13. Gathers 14. Outcast 16. Livid 18. Nudge 20. Roe 21. Bud

The Hindustan Times
ESTABLISHED IN 1924

{ OUR TAKE }

All's not well in Ladakh

Leh's demand for statehood needs patient engagement from the Union government

It is unfortunate that four young lives were lost in the violence and police action in Ladakh Wednesday, during a protest demanding statehood. The signs of unrest were already there, but the leadership of the Union Territory (UT) seemed to have failed to gauge its intensity. Ever since Ladakh became a UT in 2019, there have been protests — street action, even a *padyatra* from Leh to Delhi by local leader Sonam Wangchuk, alleged to be the mastermind behind Wednesday's violence — demanding statehood and inclusion in the Sixth Schedule (a constitutional provision that provides measures of autonomy and self-governance to the Scheduled Tribes in the hill regions of Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram). A restive Ladakh, with its long border with China and Pakistan, does not augur well for national security.

There are two takeaways from the protests. One, the statehood and Sixth Schedule demands in Leh have wide support. The idea of Ladakh as a state is based on the region's distinct geography, faith traditions and customs, and predates the events of 2019. The Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Councils (of Leh and Kargil), set up in 1995, were expected to be a platform for self-governance. This has failed to meet local political aspirations in the absence of administrative autonomy and financial agency. The Centre could explore the Fifth and Sixth Schedule options, which empower district and village councils and give them a say in the distribution and management of resources, particularly land, a sensitive issue in the UT. Two, mass mobilisations and protests are safety valves in a democracy. Arson and violence are unacceptable, but State power should be used judiciously against protesters. Authorities must address core issues rather than reduce agitations to the influence of any single individual/leader. Discrediting local leaders is unlikely to resolve what is essentially a political issue. Worse, they give protestors a personality to coalesce around.

Ladakh's concerns, unique in some ways, also mirror similar contexts in the northeastern (NE) states, where tribal groups have in the past protested seeking autonomy in governance. The Centre negotiated these with unique instruments — the Sixth Schedule, autonomous councils and other such — and subsumed local identity assertions within the larger rubric of federalism. A beginning was made in Ladakh in June, when the Centre notified a set of rules — allowing reservation up to 85%, a 15-year residency requirement for domicile status, setting aside a third of the seats in hill councils for women, and recognising five official languages, among them — to address fears of loss of identity and land alienation. It needs to now intensify its outreach, and also communicate its sincerity.

Flying pests that need to be kept under check

Civic bodies and government agencies passing the buck on pigeon population control is telling of the dysfunction within government that often drops the ball on public health. As *HT* has reported, the Municipal Corporation of Delhi and government departments such as veterinary and sanitation, have been passing the buck on whose responsibility it is to moderate the population of the birds. The letter of existing laws may not be explicit about who is in charge, but the need to reduce the pigeon population couldn't be clearer — the birds are often called "flying rats", not just because of their rodent-like tenacity and adaptability to surviving alongside humans but also because of their potential as vectors of deadly diseases.

To be sure, from Amsterdam to Zurich, cityscapes feature expansive squares, terraces and traffic islands with winged residents — always a pigeon monopoly — flocking in the hundreds. In the Indian context, faith complicates matters — certain communities view feeding animals and birds as a quasi-religious duty. But outweighing all this is the public health concern from pigeon down and droppings, which are reservoirs of dangerous pathogens that cause diseases such as salmonellosis, typhoid, and histoplasmosis. Thus, there is an urgent need to control the pigeon population in the national capital though humans have made it easier for the pest to thrive. Grains are sold at flocking points, making food easily available, which tampers with a key natural control on population. In parallel, expanding construction has shrunk tree cover, which is driving out other competing bird species. Delhi needs to take a cue from Mumbai, where a controversial court-ordered ban on feeding outside designated areas is in place.

SC's Waqf order: A delicate balancing

The order has provided relief to the petitioners and also upheld the law. But while it has calmed passions for now, it has not fully doused the possibilities of future fires

Several mosques and shrines, all deemed as waqf, have existed for centuries without any documents or registration. PTI

The interim order of the Supreme Court staying three key contentious provisions of the Waqf (Amendment) Act, 2025, has been welcomed by all. The bench of Chief Justice of India (CJI) BR Gavai and Justice Augustine G Masih declined to stay the Act itself stating that the constitutionality of a law passed by the legislature is presumed. The passage of the law in April raised a political storm inside and outside Parliament. It was opposed by Muslims and Opposition political parties as unconstitutional and violative of the right to religious freedom of minorities. The government insisted the Act introduced accountability, transparency, and protection from misuse to Waqf properties.

Waqf is a religious charity in Islam where a person donates their property for the use of the poor and vulnerable. By this act, they irrevocably forfeit ownership of the property, which now belongs to Allah. There are approximately 850,000 waqf properties across India housing mosques, *kabristans* (Muslim graveyards), schools, colleges, hospitals and other collective spaces.

Waqf is governed by the law of 1995, which was amended in 2013. However, several thousand properties are under dispute and litigation. Despite legal provisions and religious injunctions, there are instances of misuse and illegal encroachment. The waqf system is not uniformly managed and reform is required. But can it happen in a climate of religious polarisation and distrust? The Act was challenged by over a 100 petitioners comprising Muslim organisations, individuals and political parties. They claimed it interfered with the fundamental right granted by Article 26 of the Constitution to manage their own religious affairs.

Zakia Soman

The petitioners contended that the Act enables "creeping acquisition" of waqf properties by the government. Under Section 3C of the Act, district collectors have powers to inquire whether a waqf property is actually government property. The provision states that the property would cease to be waqf the moment such an enquiry begins. Not just that, it then becomes government property by default. The section also enables the designated officer to accordingly order corrections in revenue records. Without doubt, these powers are sweeping and open to abuse.

The court has stayed these provisions. It observed that entrusting revenue officials with determination of property titles was *prima facie* arbitrary. Besides, separation of powers is necessary to prevent conflict of interest where government functionaries are themselves judge and jury. It has further ruled that any dispute must be decided by the Waqf Tribunal followed by the high court. In what can be called a balancing act, it has also directed that no third party rights can be created pending the decision of the tribunal.

There was huge opposition to the induction of members from other faiths in the governance of waqf as provided by the Act. The court has taken a progressive stance and not outrightly overruled this. It has put a cap on the number of non-Muslims to be included. It ordered that out of 22 members of the Central Waqf Council, a maximum four can be non-Muslims. State Waqf boards with 11 members each can have three non-Muslim members. Can a similar framework be adopted for all religious institutions? Such a move can truly uphold the secularism enshrined in our Constitution. With this, the court may have initiated a step towards a Uniform Civil Code in future.

The Act provided that waqf can be created only by a "person showing or demonstrating that he is practicing Islam for at least five years". The petitioners challenged this as arbitrary and discriminatory. The court has stayed this provision with a caveat which is problematic. The stay will remain in effect till the government frames rules and mechanisms about determining how a person's religious practice can be ascertained. Now, the government will decide who is a Muslim; mere statements by citizens would not be enough! This can open a Pandora's Box of harassment for the community.

The court refused to stay the omission of "waqf by user" from the Act. This age-old principle reflects the ground reality of some genuine waqf properties. Waqf by user applies to land used for Muslim religious or charitable purposes for a long time even if it was not formally registered. Several mosques and shrines, all deemed as waqf, have existed for centuries without any documents or registration. The petitioners strongly argued that this would lead to take-over of such land by the State. The government on its part argued that this was enabling encroachment upon government land. However, this provision does not apply with retrospective effect and all new waqfs will have to be registered within the stipulated time limit.

The bench reiterated that this was an interim order and the parties are free to further pursue remedies. The order has provided relief to the petitioners and also upheld the law *per se*. It may have calmed passions for now, but has not fully doused the possibilities of future fires. Religious divisiveness has grown, with serious consequences for minority communities, which has fed distrust. Reform in waqf is necessary to enable the poor and needy to benefit as intended. Those fancying themselves as leaders of the community must understand the need for genuine reform. Perhaps they can learn from other communities, particularly Christians, who manage their community institutions brilliantly.

Let me end on a hopeful note. Hooghly College, established under Haji Mohsin Waqf in 1836, is a shining example of pursuit of education for the benefit of the community. It counts Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya and dozens of well-known others as its alumni. Affiliated to Burdwan University, it continues to educate thousands of students from all communities. There is a need for all communities to learn from such experiences.

Zakia Soman is co-founder of Bharatiya Muslim Mahila Andolan and a women's rights activist. The views expressed are personal

Why SPEED is critical for India's defence acquisitions

India's defence innovation ecosystem faces a hidden but critical internal threat — procurement delays. In an industry where timelines can determine technological edge and superiority, slow decision-making is not simply an inconvenience — it drains private capital investments, national capabilities, and strategic readiness.

The ministry of defence (MoD) has introduced promising initiatives such as Buy Indian - Indigenously Designed, Developed and Manufactured (IDDM), Make-II, and iDEX — all intended to foster robust private-sector participation. But the speed of execution remains the Achilles' heel. Without measurable improvements in how quickly approvals move from Acceptance of Necessity (AoN) to actual orders being placed and timely payments being realised, innovators, especially self-funded R&D businesses, risk being forced out of the market.

Why focus on self-funded R&D businesses? Because they have skin in the game. SpaceX rockets flew because all payments were milestone-linked until rockets actually flew, while NASA-funded projects by Lockheed Martin and Boeing languished. We need to encourage more companies to do self-funded R&D for successful development. That will happen only if the procurement cycle is compressed. This requires incentivising government officers to process the files faster — by assigning a value to every day of delay.

Ashok Atluri

We estimate each day of delay on a ₹100-crore defence project translates into an estimated ₹10 lakh in real lost value. For a ₹100-crore defence project, a cumulative 24-month delay — unfortunately not uncommon — translates into losses exceeding ₹72 crore, capital that could have funded multiple new R&D programmes. This cost is borne by the innovating company (₹2.4 lakh/day as interest on loans, payroll, operational overheads), the armed forces (₹1.8 lakh/day from delayed capability deployment, using outdated technology), the larger economy (₹4.2 lakh/day in missed GDP impact, tax revenues, export potential), and the innovation ecosystem (₹1.6 lakh/day with talent migration, company shutdowns).

Meanwhile, a TERI study revealed a startling statistic: A mere 15% penetration of the Crew Gunnery Simulator could result in conservatively estimated annual savings of ₹1,123 crore for India's armed forces. And the total capital investment required to generate such savings is just ₹61 crore.

A relatively easy solution lies in implementing SPEED (Savings and Penalties for Early or Delayed Decisions), a framework for tracking the financial and operational impact of procurement timelines. Savings will be quantified benefits of decisions made on or ahead of schedule, with clear metrics on funding freed up for R&D reinvestment. SPEED system will assign and publish daily costs of delays, with estimated losses apportioned to the company, Armed Forces, broader economy, and innovation ecosystem.

A SPEED score for every active procurement file — updated automatically in real-time — would give policymakers, industry, and the public clear visibility of performance across the procurement value chain. Currently, there are no costs to the government. By providing approximate delay costs, it alerts all decision makers to process files faster as there is quantified cost to holding them back. This SPEED score can also be criteria for assigning future projects to officers. Automatic approval after default periods may also be considered.

The ease of using SPEED lies in automation: A file moving forward means progress, minus penalties and probably savings. When files are sent back or additional questions raised, delay costs automatically accumulate at that decision point. This means no subjective interpretation, no gaming — just objective, transparent accountability for costs of inaction or unnecessary delays. For security reasons, if not made public, they should be internally tracked at least at defence ministry and armed forces levels.

Procurement speed is not only about efficiency; it's a growth engine for indigenous technology. Timely decisions release trapped capital back to innovators for R&D reinvestment without waiting for external funding. Accelerated R&D brings cutting-edge systems to market sooner, strengthening the Armed Forces. The resulting operational advantage boosts India's credibility in global defence markets, opening high-value export opportunities. This is the virtuous cycle that nations with agile procurement systems already leverage. While conceived for defence procurement, SPEED can transform many government projects where private companies invest substantial resources during approval processes, creating a time-conscious decision-making culture across India's economy.

For effectiveness, SPEED must be institutionalised through publicly accessible dashboards showing real-time SPEED scores for every procurement under IDDM, Make-II and iDEX projects; SPEED-linked KPIs for defence ministry officers and review boards tied directly to timelines; and escalation protocols when project clearance windows lapse. In business terms, this is like tracking project delivery metrics in the private sector. In strategic terms, it could mean deploying capability in 18 months versus losing edge to foreign suppliers due to avoidable delays, or worse.

India's self-funded defence innovators operate in high-risk, capital-intensive environments. They commit significant private funds without guaranteed buyers, often matching or outpacing global competitors in technology readiness. What they cannot afford is risk-averse inertia delaying orders by months or years.

The SPEED framework gives MoD a tool to make every day count. By turning time into a quantifiable resource — one that can be saved, reinvested, and multiplied — it aligns national security priorities with economic and industrial growth, motivating decision makers who are constantly fearful of taking timely action by institutionalising penalties for delayed decisions and savings for early decisions.

Critics may question the methodology for determining delay costs. But the fundamental truth remains undeniable: Delays cost money. Stakeholders should assign their own cost estimates and proceed with the framework using those numbers, as delay costs are all too real. The per-day loss calculation approach remains valid regardless. Every day that defence procurement stalls, we lose more than just money—we undermine our nation's confidence, put the lives of our soldiers at risk, stifle homegrown innovation, and deepen our dangerous reliance on foreign equipment. Can we truly afford to let this cost mount? The stakes could not be higher. If we fail to act now in this favourable environment, the opportunity for change may be lost forever.

Ashok Atluri is chairman and managing director, Zen Technologies. The views expressed are personal

{ XI JINPING } PRESIDENT, CHINA

Green and low-carbon transition is the trend of our time ... the international community should stay focused

Addressing the UN Climate Summit

Telling the India story through its manuscripts

Long before silicon chips and supercomputers, India had already designed its own architectures of intelligence. Etched on palm leaves, inscribed on birch bark, and expressed in countless scripts, these manuscripts carried algorithms of thought — governing not just sciences and mathematics, but philosophy, medicine, aesthetics, and astronomy. They were not passive texts; they were dynamic codes through which a civilisation organised knowledge, transmitted wisdom, and generated innovation. To open a manuscript is to access India's oldest operating system.

Civilisations are remembered not only for their monuments of stone and metal, but also for the words of wisdom they leave behind. A manuscript, whether on palm leaf, birch bark, copper plate or handmade paper, carries with it the spirit of its age — the anxieties, the hopes, and the wisdom of those who shaped it. In today's world, where nations are locked in a contest not just of arms but of ideas, India's manuscripts are our greatest arsenal of knowledge. They remind us that India is not simply an old civilisation; it is a continuing one, with the resilience to endure and the vision to guide.

Sachchidanand Joshi

The wars of the 21st century are often fought in symbols, stories, and narratives. Europe looks back to the Enlightenment, China to Confucius, the Islamic world to its juristic traditions. India, despite being the custodian of one of the world's richest archives of knowledge, has too often allowed its story to be told by others. This is where the thought of Gyan Bharatam steps in. Our manuscripts are not museum pieces; they are the very foundations on which our philosophy, science, art, and governance once stood. The Vedas, Upanishads, epics, treatises on mathematics, medicine, astronomy, and architecture — all survive because generations of scholars and scribes cherished them enough to copy, recite, and safeguard them. Yet nearly 10 million manuscripts or more still lie scattered, uncatalogued, and undeciphered. To preserve, decipher, and contextualise them is not merely an act of conservation — it is an act of reclaiming our voice in the global conversation.

Unlike many cultures, India's knowledge tradition was never bound to a single language or faith. It thrived in pluralism. Buddhist monasteries in Ladakh, Jain libraries in Gujarat, Shaiva mathas in Tamil Nadu, Persian archives in Delhi — all formed part of the same intellectual ecosystem.

Even where oral tradition dominated, manuscripts provided a guarantee of precision. The fact that the Vedas are recited today with the same phonetic accuracy from Kerala to Kashi is proof that this is a living culture. Words here do not sleep between covers; they move, sing, and breathe through chants, ballads, and proverbs.

This continuity came at great cost. From the 10th century onwards, waves of invasion and colonisation sought to erase libraries and institutions. Nalanda was set aflame. Countless manuscripts were lost. Yet the tradition endured — families hid collections, teachers committed texts to memory, scribes rewrote fragile palm leaves. That resilience is what makes India's manuscript heritage not just archival but civilisational.

The recent International Conference on Reclaiming India's Knowledge Legacy Through Manuscript Heritage was a civilisational mission, bringing together survey, conservation, digitisation, decipherment, and dissemination into one national effort. By engaging not only Indian but also global scholars, librarians, conservators, and technologists, Gyan Bharatam placed India at the forefront of heritage discourse.

Digitisation efforts are underway to preserve and study our priceless manuscripts, shedding light on India's rich intellectual heritage and offering new opportunities for historical and scientific research worldwide. At a time when the world searches for sustainability, plurality, and ethical frameworks for technology, India's manuscripts offer more than history — they offer guidance. They remind us that our knowledge system never divided science from spirituality, art from ethics, or language from logic.

Every nation must ask itself: What story will it tell the world? For too long, India's story has been told through colonial eyes — as mystical, exotic, or regressive. Reclaiming the manuscript tradition is, therefore, an act of intellectual sovereignty. It declares that India is not just a consumer of global knowledge, but also one of its oldest and richest sources.

The task is daunting. Ten million or more manuscripts are yet to be conserved and interpreted. But the reward is greater still: To illuminate India's civilisational wisdom not through assertion but through evidence. To let manuscripts themselves speak, as envoys of a culture that has always believed in dialogue. The Gyan Bharatam Mission is our pledge that this reservoir of wisdom will not be lost to silence.

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26 SEPTEMBER 2025

Lesson of Leh eruption: Don't ignore grievances

The violent protests in Leh on Wednesday, which claimed four civilian lives and injured many, including police, have shattered Ladakh's image as a peaceful haven. For a region that remained calm even during the peak of militancy in the Kashmir Valley, this unprecedented unrest is a stark warning — unaddressed grievances can destabilise even the most serene of regions.

The people of the region under the Leh Apex Body (LAB) and Kargil Democratic Alliance (KDA) have peacefully advocated for a four-point agenda since 2019 when Ladakh became a Union territory without a Legislative Assembly — statehood, Sixth Schedule protections, separate Lok Sabha seats for Leh and Kargil and a Public Service Commission (PSC) for local employment. This was an expression of their wish to step out of Kashmir's shadow and secure greater autonomy. However, the absence of statehood and constitutional safeguards, particularly inclusion under the Sixth Schedule, has turned hope into disillusionment. The Sixth Schedule, which ensures autonomous governance, judicial mechanisms and financial powers for tribal areas, is vital for preserving Ladakh's unique cultural identity and fragile ecology.

Stalled talks — most recently on May 27 — have not helped the situation; in fact they deepened public discontent. The Union home ministry, on its part, highlights measures such as increased tribal reservations (from 45 per cent to 84 per cent) in jobs, one-third women's representation in councils, and recognition of Bhoti and Purgi as official languages. These steps, while notable, fail to address the core demands. The BJP has chosen to deflect blame, accusing the Congress and activists like Sonam Wangchuk of inciting the unrest. Such blame-game, however, obscures the deeper issue — the Union government's inability to address Ladakh's legitimate grievances in time.

The protests in Leh signal a generational shift in expressing grievances, mirroring global youth-led movements. The unrest risks spreading beyond Leh. In Kargil, a Muslim-majority region that observed a shutdown in solidarity with Leh, demands for statehood and constitutional safeguards resonate equally strongly. Unlike Leh, Kargil has historically aligned more closely with Kashmir's sentiments; yet, it, too, has remained peaceful despite the region's volatile history.

The unrest in Leh could embolden similar expressions of discontent in Kargil. More alarmingly, the unrest in Ladakh risks reverberating in the Kashmir Valley, where sentiments over statehood restoration run high. A significant section of the population even in Jammu, a BJP stronghold, is dissatisfied with the Union government's delays in restoring statehood to Jammu and Kashmir.

Ladakh's protests reflect a broader challenge — ignoring legitimate aspirations threatens India's diverse regions. The Union government's stock responses — curfews, security deployments and vague assurances — may restore temporary calm but clearly do not address the root causes. And lieutenant governor Kavinder Gupta's call for peace rings hollow without a roadmap. The upcoming October 6 meeting between MHA officials and LAB-KDA leaders, including former MP Thupstan Chhewang, is a critical opportunity where the Union government can address the grievances of the protesters.

Community leaders also have a role in restoring peace. The LAB and KDA must emphasise non-violence to prevent escalation and maintain unity, especially given Ladakh's history of Buddhist-Muslim tensions over issues like interfaith marriages and economic boycotts.

Yet the violence in Leh is a wake-up call. Ladakh's unrest shows that even peaceful regions can reach a breaking point when aspirations are ignored. The government must act swiftly — not with blame or force, but with genuine engagement. The warning bells from Leh must not be ignored. And the time for action is now.

Can India help Ukraine find peace?

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy wants everyone's help, including India's, when he is in dire need of funds, tech-enabled intelligence and sophisticated arms like weaponised drones to keep an enraged Vladimir Putin at bay. His placatory tone in defence of India on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly can be attributed to the state his country is in as Putin has stepped up his assault to freely terrorise the population by triggering air raid alerts every day, including in Kyiv, after having stepped up the production of drones.

Ukraine may be reducing its diesel purchases from India from October and would very much like India to stop buying Russian oil. It is, however, clear that Zelenskyy is also a votary to the view that if anyone has the ear of Putin, it is China's Xi Jinping and India's Narendra Modi now because Donald Trump seems to have soured on his role as mediator and he is egging Ukraine on to fight Russia with European-funded American arms.

India has consistently played its strategic autonomy cards in such a way that it feels wanted in the east and south, besides the west where the US is still confident the current thaw in relations might lead to better ties soon though the trade deal is facing hazards in high tariffs and sanction. The best that India can do in the current state the world finds itself in is to keep speaking to Putin on the need to stop the war though Russia was called a "paper tiger" in another typical yo-yo display of the Trump temperament that flows from his capriciousness.

The incongruity of blaming Russian oil for Putin's war on Ukraine continuing may have impinged itself on Trump too as he spoke to Europe about cutting its purchase of Russian gas. Zelenskyy is, however, right in pointing out that if the US, Europe and Nato were not to assist him more in stopping Russia, Putin may not be satisfied just with taking parts of Ukraine.

Even more chilling is Zelenskyy's warning that all it takes in today's tech-driven madness is for someone to stick a nuke on a drone for the world to fall apart. In such a scenario, shouldn't India be seen pursuing the cause of peace with Russia's Putin more? Aspiring for the Nobel Peace Prize is by no means a Trump monopoly.

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Subhani

Trump assaults UN, targets all, fuels global uncertainty

K.C. Singh

After the Soviet breakup, the UN suddenly became vulnerable to US manipulation. The US even extracted UNSC approval, based on flawed intelligence, for attacking Iraq in 2003.

The high-level segment of the UN General Assembly, which began on September 23, usually has the President of Brazil as the first speaker, followed by the President of the United States. This time, the latter's speech had generated enormous global interest, because since assuming office on January 20 he has been unleashing global uncertainties.

In New York, President Trump posed the question: "What is the purpose of the UN?". He insultingly quipped: "Your countries are going to hell". The contrast could not be greater with how his charismatic and successful Republican predecessor, President Ronald Reagan, who had ushered in the collapse of the Soviet Union, had approached the UNGA. In 1982, he said: "I speak today as both a citizen of the US and the world. I come with heartfelt wishes of my people for peace, bearing honest proposals and looking for genuine progress." US foreign policy, Reagan added, stands for peace, "first, last and always". He was speaking at the height of the Cold War, with Soviet troops occupying Afghanistan. His primary aim was to advance nuclear disarmament and arms control. He wanted the threat to global peace diminished, if not eliminated.

President Trump's 56-minute address was meandering, critical of the dysfunctional UN escalator and teleprompter, besides fact-free laments and allegations that he voices regularly. He seemed to be addressing both his MAGA base and the global audience. Fact-checking experts have already annihilated many Trumpian claims. For instance, the Muslim mayor of London has neither ever suggested, or can even legally impose, Sharia in the British capital. Supremacist Christian prejudice oozed out of such allegations.

Some issues flagged by President Trump require analysis. First, his barb about the UN being ineffective in handling global crises or threats to peace and security. President Reagan, in his 1982 address, explained the genesis of the UN and the American logic in supporting its creation. In 1945, he recalled, all other major powers had suffered great human and material losses. The US alone stood dominant, besides being the sole power to possess nuclear weapons. Instead of seeking world dominance, Reagan argued, it instead "wrote a new chapter in the history of mankind", by supporting the creation of the United Nations.

However, to enable consensus amongst the principal victors of the Second World War, the veto power was made available to five permanent members of the UN Security Council. As the Cold War unfolded, between the Western powers led by the US and the Communist bloc led by the USSR, the veto crippled the UN's functioning. Until 2022, it has been used nearly 300 times. The main culprits are Russia (120 times) and the US (82 times). China began more aggressively using it as its military and economic power grew after the 2008 global financial crisis.

President Donald Trump had publicly claimed before the US presidential election that he could end the Ukraine war within 24 hours. After failing to do so, even despite a personal meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Alaska, he did a flip during his UN address. After earlier saying that Ukraine was losing the war, he now proclaimed that with Western support, Ukraine could regain all its lost territory.

In the case of Gaza, he simplistically blamed Hamas, as it was refusing to release the Israeli hostages. He ignored the Israeli attack on a facility in Qatar, which housed the leader of the Hamas delegation negotiating a peace deal. Consequently, he skipped its strategic implications for the US alliance system in the Gulf. Doubting now the US ability or willingness to control Israel, Saudi Arabia signed a military pact with Pakistan, involving Pakistan extending a nuclear umbrella to Saudi Arabia. It aims to deter an Israeli attack on Saudi Arabia.

Mr Trump continued to claim having ended seven international conflicts, including between India and Pakistan. As usual, he simultaneously laid claim to the Nobel Peace Prize. The global community has begun treating these claims with scepticism, if not contempt.

President Trump's speech consisted of two parts. One, the written script, with which he began and then ended. In between came his extemporaneous tirade against climate change, spending a quarter of his time rejecting it as the "greatest con job". His withdrawing the US from the Paris climate accord had already alerted the world about his scepticism towards global warming. But his unscientific rant, detached from data, from the UN podium bodes ill for the world's future.

Essentially, Mr Trump's attack on multilateralism basically targets three elements of the current global order. First, his rejection of the existing system of global trade, overseen by the World Trade Organisation (WTO). His unilateral tariffs on imports are being used to negotiate trade deals that open global markets to US products and force manufacturing to shift to the American mainland. This disruption is far from settled.

Second, his attack on climate change and green energy. Using the wrong facts, Mr Trump tried criticising the use of wind power for generating power. In the process, he was pushing the US towards regressive energy sources involving coal and petroleum.

Finally, he debunked the role of the UN in maintaining global peace and security. The reality is that the US has an old love-hate relationship with the UN. Until the end of the Cold War in 1991, it saw the UN as stymied by the Soviet Union. After the Soviet breakup, the UN suddenly became vulnerable to US manipulation. That explains the UNSC, after 9/11, focusing on counter-terrorism.

The US even extracted UNSC approval, based on flawed intelligence, for attacking Iraq in 2003 to eliminate its non-existing weapons of mass destruction.

A majority of UN members have always wrestled with the veto conundrum. If the interests of the "Permanent Five" members get involved, then the UNSC becomes paralysed. The first attempt to counter this was made in 1950, when the UNGA passed a "Uniting for Peace" resolution which authorised the UNGA to take action if the Security Council was stalled by veto. Once again, in April 2022, the UNGA passed another resolution requiring the permanent members to justify their use of the veto. An emergency session of the UNGA must be called within 10 days to discuss it.

The difference between the language and thinking of Presidents Reagan and Trump encapsulates the global dilemma today. At a moment of global power shift, the old arbiter is gone. The vacuum brings uncertainties.

The writer is a former secretary in the external affairs ministry. He tweets at @ambkcsingh.

LETTERS

RECOGNISING PALESTINE

The recognition of a Palestinian state by the UK, Canada, Australia, France and Portugal, allies of Israel, is nothing but a reflection of their growing outrage at Israel's conduct of the war in Gaza and steps taken by Benjamin Netanyahu's Israeli government to thwart efforts to create a Palestinian state, including by the continued expansion of settlements in the West Bank. As far as India is concerned, it cannot afford to turn a blind eye to the genocide unleashed by Israel on the hapless people of Gaza in the guise of eliminating Hamas. It is time the Indian government expressed its solidarity with Palestinians' persistent fight for an independent state and unequivocally condemned Israel for its genocide in Gaza.

M.Jeyaramachandran
Sholavandan

VICIOUS BITE

Whenever action is initiated to rein in stray dogs, playing havoc with human lives, the animal activists take up cudgels on behalf of the strays, flaunting animal welfare. Last week, more than five stray dogs entered the shed of a farmer in Ariyalur district in Tamil Nadu and mauled his eight goats to death. Let's see what stand these activists would take, given the victims, in this case, also belong to the animal kingdom.

P.G. Menon
Chennai

NO H-1B FEE HIKE FOR DOCS

The US might reduce the H-1B visa fees for doctors. This would reveal that the Trump administration acknowledges the vast knowledge, expertise and dedication of Indian doctors. This would not be good news for Indian citizens. We need the services of doctors who have been educated, moulded, trained and nurtured in India. Brain drain should never be accepted. The doctors in India need to display loyalty, patriotism and dedication by serving citizens of India. Doctors should also take an oath to serve their motherland. Doctors should not fall prey to the monetary lures of a foreign country, especially the US.

M.C. Vijay Shankar
Chennai

Mail your letters to
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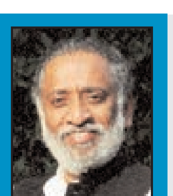
Dilip Cherian
Dilli Ka Babu



Rajesh Agrawal leading India's high-stakes trade talks with US

Rajesh Agrawal, who will soon become commerce secretary, is in charge of India's trade talks with the United States, which have resumed. Mr Agrawal, an IAS officer from the 1994 batch, is accustomed to difficult negotiations. With a career that straddles trade promotion, exports and policy reform, he has been India's go-to negotiator from Asean to Australia to the Indo-Pacific framework. He brings both data expertise and strategic intuition to the table, having earned degrees in international business, operations research, and statistics.

However, this most recent round with Washington, which began on September 16 in Delhi, is not your typical exercise. Citing India's imports of oil from Russia, the US imposed 50 per cent tariffs on Indian goods and is now seeking greater access to India's dairy and agricultural markets. For us here, safeguarding the millions of farmers whose livelihoods depend on these industries is more important than merely enacting new laws.

Therefore, the negotiation is about defining the boundary between domestic survival and international trade pressures, not just about tariffs. India's defensive posture must be transformed into bargaining power by Mr Agrawal to prevent the nation from giving up important territory in the name of "market access."

Mr Agrawal will be baptised by fire as he gets ready to assume official leadership after September 30. The world is watching to see if India can change from being reactive to dictating the rules of the game, and the stakes are high and the time frame is short.

MHA READIES NEW FACES FOR CAPF LEADERSHIP

An unusual shuffle is about to take place at the highest levels of India's Central Armed Police Forces (CAPFs). With the BSF DG scheduled to retire in November and the DGs of ITBP and CISF retiring this month, the ministry of home affairs is reportedly quietly considering its options. A new generation of leaders is expected to take over since it appears that there will be no extensions for departing IPS officers.

Among the probable selections, Vitul Kumar from the CRPF seems destined to head the ITBP, and B. Srinivasan of the NSG appears ready to take over as CISF chief. Both are seasoned officers who possess the operational and strategic expertise that these forces require. Even that decision is up in the air, though BSF DG Daljit Singh Chawdhary might still receive a temporary extension.

The meticulous planning that goes into the choices is what really sets these changes apart. The careful balancing act between cadre, experience, and merit is being highlighted by the consideration of senior IPS officers from AGMUT, UP, and other cadres representation that the MHA must maintain.

Leadership is important to the forces themselves. From border security to industrial protection, the CAPFs work in high-stakes, high-pressure situations. The stakes are far from low, even though these appointments might appear to be just another routine affair. It will be evident in the coming weeks if the MHA's decisions can keep up with the challenges these forces encounter on the ground.

RETIREES MAKE A BEELINE FOR PK'S JAN SURAAJ

At what point does a babu begin practising his campaign speeches and cease being a babu? That line is not only hazy in contemporary India, but it is almost imperceptible. In the name of "continuing public service," civil servants, retired or not, are lining up to exchange their notings for netagiri.

Take a look at Bihar. The state has turned into a VRS clearance sale with elections approaching. S. Siddharth, a senior IAS officer who is scheduled to retire in 2025, couldn't wait that long and is already predicted to receive a JD(U) ticket. Under the guidance of another retired police officer, six more retired IAS officers have joined Prashant Kishor's Jan Suraaj Party. Naturally, Bihar has form here: Raj Kumar Singh left his position as Union home secretary to become a minister in the two previous NDA governments.

Furthermore, Bihar is not by itself. With former Ambassador Taranjit Singh Sandhu, Aparajita Sarangi, K. Annamalai, and even Odisha's V.K. Pandian, who seamlessly transitioned from an IAS officer to a BJD strategist, the 2024 Lok Sabha elections appeared to be a reunion of babus. The steel frame now resembles a springboard more.

The attraction cannot be denied, though. Because of their administrative expertise, demeanour of respectability, and gravitas, parties adore these former officers. Furthermore, many people sincerely think that politics allows them to "serve the people" without being constrained by red tape. Noble words, indeed.

However, honestly, many people begin soft launching their political careers while still employed, making compromises to appease their future superiors. The cornerstone of administration, neutrality, is thrown away like yesterday's file. For this reason, it is not only desirable but also unavoidable to take a "cooling-off" period before entering politics. If not, the legendary steel frame of India runs the risk of becoming a political trampoline. And who is left to ensure that the game is fair if the referees are also players in secret?

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It's time for Indian IT firms to reduce dependence on H-1B visas

New norm with regard to H-1B visa entry fee has created more uncertainty for the Indian IT sector. At a time when AI wave is sweeping the world and trade tariffs have put technology investment on hold, Trump's latest salvo at Indian IT industry has added to the uncertainty. For decades, H-1B visa programme has been successfully leveraged by Indian IT services companies to send technology professionals to the US for working on client projects. However, this reliance has come down substantially over the years with local hiring gaining momentum.

During President Doland Trump's first term, Indian IT firms had seen tightening of visa norms with low percentage of approvals. To derisk the operating model, big IT companies have reduced their reliance on H-1B visa over the years. Meanwhile, global technology firms have been major beneficiaries of this immigration programme. According to the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), Amazon had 10,044 workers using H-1B visas as of June, 2025. While TCS has received 5,505 H-1B visas, Microsoft has 5,189 people working under this programme.

Similarly, Meta has 5,123, Apple at 4,202, Google at 4,181, Deloitte at 2,353, Infosys at 2,004, Wipro at 1,523 and Tech Mahindra Americas has 951 employees, who have got approval under H-1B visa programme. These data points indicate that global technology giant's reliance on H-1B visa programme is way higher than their Indian counterparts.

Over the years, Indian IT firms have not only hired locals for manning their US operations, many have been actively training American students in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) space for joining the tech world. Such initiatives indicate that Indian IT industry has played an active role in US socioeconomic system, contrary to the view that Indians are eating American jobs.

As Indian IT firms have a lot less reliance on H-1B visas, the new norm will have minimal impact on their operations for the current financial year. From next year onwards, Indian IT companies will try to bring in more work to offshore locations like India or near-shore locations like Canada & Mexico to reduce the impact of new norms. For critical work, companies will not be hesitant to pay $100,000 entry fee, which is likely to be passed on to the client.

All-in-all, Indian IT industry can withstand the negative impact of H-1B visa norm changes. Meanwhile, the Trump administration is now planning to replace the visa system from present lottery to wage-based system. In the wage-based system, visa will be given to professionals with a higher experience and wage. This will encourage movement of more experienced and costly human resources than junior and mid-level workers.

Therefore, this proposed norm, if passed, will be net negative for the Indian IT industry as they have to bear more wage cost for sending resources to the US. Clearly, the H1B visa programme is going through a lot of changes with far reaching impact on Indian IT industry. It is better if domestic technology industry leverages AI to get work done and reduce its dependence on the H-1B visa programme for its long-term growth.

The mammaries of Constitutional casteism

M Nageswara Rao

Unveiling the paradox

In the annals of modern Indian thought, few documents capture the tension between aspiration and reality as starkly as Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's 'Annihilation of Caste' juxtaposed against the Constitution. The former demands dismantling caste hierarchies, while the latter entrenches them through reservations for Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and Other Backward Classes (OBCs). This paradox reveals a flaw in India's legal framework—a system that perpetuates inequality under the guise of equity, nourishing elite beneficiaries while denying true justice to the masses.

By codifying caste, the Constitution contradicts the goal of caste eradication, fostering identity-based privileges. 'Social justice', often a pretext for lowered standards, produces inefficiencies in education, governance, and progress. Advocates invoking Ambedkar's legacy selectively celebrate both his critique and this compromise. A truly egalitarian society requires replacing the Constitution, which entrenches caste, with a framework that prioritizes universal equity.

The birth of annihilation of caste

'Annihilation of Caste' is an undelivered speech written in 1936 by B.R. Ambedkar, which he self-published as a book. The organisers of Jat-Pat Todak Mandal (Society for the Break-Up of Caste System), an anti-caste Hindu reformist organisation in Lahore, found the text objectionable—so scandalous, intemperate, and incendiary in promoting conversion out of Hindutva (Sanatana Dharma). Upon Ambedkar's refusal to change even a comma, they cancelled the conference. In July 1936, M. K. Gandhi refuted it in his Harijan journal's article 'A Vindication of Caste,' calling it fantasy, perverted scholarship, and intellectual dishonesty.

Contradictions in the man and in his method

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, born into the relatively privileged Sakpal family of the Mahar caste (his father a Subedar in the Army, a high position then), benefited from the very system he would later decry. He availed educational opportunities beyond most dreams, thanks to upper-caste benefactors, earning degrees from Pune's Elphinstone College, New York's Columbia University, the London School of Economics, and Gray's Inn, London.

In 1897, at Elphinstone High School, his Marathi Brahmana teacher, Krishnaji Keshav Ambedkar, gifted him his surname 'Ambedkar' out of fondness. Baroda's Maharaja Sayajirao Gaikwad, a Kshatriya, bankrolled his advanced studies and employed him in Baroda's State Service. Yet, Ambedkar spun tales of relentless oppression by Hindu society. Why? He milked the very Hindu system he vilified for personal gain, political power, and cozying up to forces bent on splintering Hindu unity and pushing conversions.

This personal paradox mirrors the chasm between 'Annihilation of Caste' and the Constitution, revealing contradictions not just in the man but in his method and vision. Ambedkar's essay demands proactive destruction of caste, viewing it as a barrier to democracy. Yet the Constitution, of which he was an architect, codifies caste through reservations, transforming fluid identities into rigid legal silos. The result? A fragmented society enshrining caste as an eternal tool of power, perpetually nursing division at its ever-flowing breast, contradicting the imperative to eradicate it.

Ambedkar's essay demands proactive destruction of caste, viewing it as a barrier to democracy. Yet the Constitution, of which he was an architect, codifies caste through reservations, transforming fluid identities into rigid legal silos. The result? A fragmented society enshrining caste as an eternal tool of power, perpetually nursing division at its ever-flowing breast, contradicting the imperative to eradicate it

Constitutional entrenchment of caste

Fast forward to 1950: the Constitution emerges as India's legal lodestar, promising equality but enshrining caste-based reservations—quotas in education, employment, and legislatures for SCs, STs, and later OBCs. By enumerating castes and tribes and tying benefits to them, it transforms fluid social identities into rigid legal categories. Logically, if the goal is annihilation, codifying caste defeats it. This constitutional fix deepens social divides, breeds bias, and sows conflict. It also fosters dependency, akin to a mother who feeds her young from her breast but traps them in eternal infancy, denying them the chance to stand alone.

The word 'caste' appears 72 times and 'tribe' (a synonym for caste) 109 times, totalling 181 instances in the Constitution. This pervasive focus underscores how deeply embedded caste categories are in our constitutional framework. Thus, far from making India an egalitarian society, the Constitution enshrines 'caste' (tribe) in stone, balkanising it down to the village level.

Reservations' flawed promise

Even after 75 years, reservations have failed to deliver real social justice to the underprivileged. While substantially boosting SC/ST representation in civil services and politics, most benefits have been cornered generationally by privileged elites, including advanced castes within each category. For STs, elites like Meenas, Banjaras, and Santhals claim the lion's share, depriving the truly marginalised. An OBC sub-categorisation commission on found that 10-25% of sub-castes receive the bulk of benefits, with 37% entirely excluded. These 'scheduled and backward' elites oppose any rekook at reservations, fearing loss of their monopoly, despite the significant damage they have caused to society's fabric.

Reservations also lower educational and recruitment standards producing certificate-holders sans academic skills while compromising efficiency in governance, health, and progress. Far from aiding the marginalised masses, reservations disproportionately harm them. Lowered teacher standards yield substandard educators in government schools and plummet quality. Affluent families flee to private schools; the poor remain, receiving inferior education. Armed with barely any real education, just certificates, they are unfit for any employment except government jobs under reservation. Where is the justice? This vicious loop extends to health and governance, mocking the marginalised as its primary victims.

Caste-based electoral politics, driven by reservations, fosters casteism, deepening social divisions, animosities, and undermining societal health. It promotes identity-based patronage, complicates governance, and fragments society instead of fostering unity. The constitutional enshrinement of caste-based reservations sparks a frenzied clamour among castes to be classified as SCs, STs, or OBCs, seeking privileges. This scramble for backwardness, far from ending caste, drives a race to entrench victimhood, monetising marginalization for benefits. This spectacle mocks the vision of an egalitarian society, cementing caste as a permanent fixture and fueling division and dependency over unity and merit.

Quality education: The true nourishment denied

Education is the great democratising and uplifting force in society. So, the true path to social justice, whatever that slippery term really means, lies in delivering top-quality education to marginalised children through free, compulsory, and intensive programs. This approach would boost their learning levels and arm them with the academic tools to compete on equal footing. With the best education and skills in hand, individuals escape marginalisation, and so do their entire communities. Yet reservations do the opposite: they block access to quality education, leaving people academically stunted and blocking real progress. True upliftment means weaning away from the teat of caste dependency, toward universal excellence, not settling for a seat at the table of mediocrity.

Conversion rights: religion yes, caste no?

Hindus inherit both religion and caste at birth. Article 25 grants religious conversion as a fundamental right. Yet Articles 14, 15, 16, 330, 332, and others imply caste (tribe) status is immutable. If both are inherited, why permit religious but not caste mobility? Why not allow conscience-driven caste conversion (mobility) to escape discrimination, as most castes claim? Why stratify Hindu society by barring internal mobility? Is it hypocrisy, or an anti-Hindu agenda, allowing Hindu religious conversions outward but not caste mobility within?

The tragedy of hypocrisy in Ambedkar's shadow

This hypocrisy mirrors today's social justice discourse: activists invoke Ambedkar in anti-caste rallies, wielding 'Annihilation of Caste' as scripture against hierarchy, yet defend constitutional caste-based reservations as sacrosanct. This isn't betrayal—it's the tragedy of half-measures, eroding credibility. If annihilation means eradication, not accommodation, a caste-imbued Constitution negates the vision. It monetises marginalisation, letting 'reserved' elites thrive while masses languish. True advocacy demands consistency: abandon Annihilation of Caste or Constitutional Casteism. You can't have both. For a casteless society, abandon the Casteist Constitution for an egalitarian, casteless one—or call the bluff.

India's inflection point

India stands at an inflection point: after 75 years of constitutional governance, caste lingers as scar and scaffold. Ambedkar's Annihilation of Caste advocates total uprooting; the Constitution he helped birth perpetuates it. The contradiction is in the man and his method. Cry foul about caste by weaving false atrocity narratives but milk and monetise it—the mammaries of the constitutional casteism. High time to revisit reservations entirely, devising efficient, non-caste-based affirmative action and best-quality free education to uplift the marginalised. But that is possible only by discarding the casteist and anti-Hindu Constitution for an egalitarian one rooted in our ancient indigenous civilisational ethos. Only then can we wean from toxic sustenance and nurse a united robust nation.

(The author is a retired IPS officer and former Director, CBI. Views are personal.)

The story of the big flag at Srinagar airport: A symbol of national pride

Nomula Srinivas Rao

In the annals of independent India, few symbols evoke such collective pride and unity as the national flag flying high against the sky. One of the most remarkable initiatives in this direction began in 2014 at Srinagar airport, under the vision of Ashok Gajapathi Raju , then Union Minister for Civil Aviation.

During his visit to Srinagar in 2014, Ashok Gajapathi Raju garu observed a striking contrast. Across the border, the Pakistani flag fluttered proudly and prominently. Yet, to his dismay, there was no visible Indian national flag at the airport. This moment of realization stirred his patriotic spirit. Determined to change the narrative, he resolved that the Tricolor must fly higher and prouder in every part of India, beginning from Srinagar itself.

Upon his return, he immediately directed the then Civil Aviation Secretary, Sri Ashok Lavasa, to take the necessary steps to erect a grand flagpost at the Srinagar airport. What began as a singular instruction soon became a movement.

In 2014, a large 36x24-foot national flag was installed on a 105-foot pole at Srinagar airport to ensure it was more noticeable and to boost patriotic spirit. The 30-meter pole has been designed to withstand strong Himalayan winds and cold weather conditions. It was commissioned on August 15, 2014.

The installation of this massive flag was not just a symbolic gesture—it was a reaffirmation of national pride, sovereignty, and unity in a region that had long witnessed challenges to its identity.

Following this initiative, airports across India began adopting the practice of installing monumental national flags. Today, over 75 airports in the country proudly display towering flagposts, greeting travelers with the indomitable spirit of India as they arrive and depart. The sight of the Tricolor soaring at airports such as Delhi, Mumbai, Hyderabad, and Bengaluru has become both a reassurance and a reminder of our collective identity as Indians.

The influence of this initiative has not been confined to airports alone. Indian Railways too joined the movement, setting up tall flagposts at major railway stations across the nation. The grand sight of the national flag at bustling junctions like New Delhi, Secunderabad, and Howrah serves as a daily reminder to millions of citizens about the sacrifices made for freedom and the importance of unity.

In Andhra Pradesh, this legacy reached another milestone when, for the first time, the MANSAS institutions, under the chairmanship of Ashok Gajapathi Raju , erected a monumental flagpost. The occasion chosen was steeped in history and symbolism—it was installed on the day commemorating the coronation of Dr. P.V.G. Raju , the revered Maharaja of Vizianagaram. This act wove together strands of regional pride, historical reverence, and national unity into one profound gesture.

The story of the big flag at Srinagar airport is more than an anecdote of administrative decision-making. It is a story of vision, conviction, and patriotism. It shows how one leader's observation and determination can ignite a nationwide trend that inspires countless citizens. As of today, hundreds of such monumental flagposts adorn airports, railway stations, and educational institutions across the country, standing tall as beacons of India's resilience and unity.

The Tricolor, flying high from Srinagar to Vizianagaram, tells every Indian the same message: Our pride is indivisible, our unity is unshakable, and our nation will always soar above challenges.

(The writer is OSD to Ashok Gajapathi Raju, Governor Goa)

LETTERS

India must be pro-Palestine

There was a time when India's total and unwavering support to the Palestinian cause was spoken of quite proudly. It was a moral stand that India took, regardless of what it meant for its interest and image. India took a stand out of principle, not expediency and held its head high. It was a badge of honour for us to identify ourselves with the ANC and PLO as they fought for justice and freedom and we looked up to Nelson Mandela and Yasser Arafat.

However, the rise of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to power in 2014 marked a marked shift from the earlier pro-Palestine stand. It was as if India lost its moral compass and began to base its foreign policy on what suited Hindu Right's world view. India has become one of the biggest buyers of weapons from Israel. India chose not to deplore and condemn the genocidal war on Gaza, as, say, South Africa did, and took a very ambivalent stand on it at international forums in an abdication of its moral obligation.

Despite his statement that 'this is not an era for war', Prime Minister Narendra Modi has made no significant effort to prevail on or force Israel to stop the war.

The friendship he cultivated with Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu seems to have come in the way of his intervening to secure a ceasefire and save the lives of innocent Palestinians in Gaza.

India abstained from a UN voting that called for a ceasefire in Gaza, even as it is acknowledged that it voted for Palestinian statehood.

That Israeli Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich who spoke of a 'real estate bonanza in Gaza' was feted in New Delhi was an ignominy. India must side with the weak and vulnerable and regain its moral stature on the world stage.

G. David Milton, Maruthancode, TN

Treat child trafficking seriously

Child trafficking is an age- old problem in our country. It is estimated that a child goes missing in India every 8 minutes. But none of the successive governments, both at the Centre and in the States have evinced interest in this regard to trace the missing kids, since independence. As a result, information of missing kids in lakhs still remained shrouded in darkness.

The Khoya-Paya portal started only during 2015, after NDA was voted to power, also apparently failed to serve the purpose, as there is no coordination among all the concerned police and child welfare organisations in the country.

This is India's greatness, even as techies of India are spread all over the world creating astounding results in the field of technology and heading world's leading tech Co's as CEOs, but within the country there is not even a centralised portal till date to trace missing children and investigate such cases! Children are the future citizen of the country.

If they are missing in large numbers, it should be treated as a highly serious problem.

The issues involved in such cases could be sheer human trafficking including for future prostitution, begging mafia, human organs mafia, thieving mafia etc. The alarming number of cases increasing every year should alert the government(s) at the Centre and in the States.

The Apex Court did the right thing by directing the union government to create a dedicated online portal for monitoring the progress of each case.

Govardhana Myneedu, Vijayawada

Mamata Banerjee can be more liberal

It is very much demeaning to hear West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee announcing a compensation of just Rs 2 lakhs to the next kin of those who died from electrocution following torrential rainsin Kolkata. Comparing with the amount of compensation announced by other states, this is too less and demeaning. However, it seems it is a telling commentary on the standard of living of an ordinary Bengali under the leadership of Mamata Banerjee. In some Southern states, the compensation is to the order of several lakhs.

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BENGALURU ONLINE

Wipro responds to CM's letter on Bengaluru traffic

BENGALURU: In response to Chief Minister Siddaramaiah's letter to Azim Premji regarding Bengaluru's traffic issues, Wipro has reaffirmed its commitment to partner with the Government of Karnataka in finding long-term solutions.

"Wipro stands committed to working with the Government of Karnataka to address Bengaluru's mobility challenges. The complexity of the city's traffic problem, driven by multiple factors, makes it clear that there is unlikely to be a single-point solution. We believe the most effective approach is to commission a comprehensive, scientific study, led by an entity with world-class expertise in urban transport management. Such a study will help develop a holistic roadmap of practical solutions for the short, medium, and long term. To demonstrate our commitment to being a part of the solution, Wipro will be pleased to engage in this process and extend support in conducting this expert study," the company stated.

Read more at https://epaper.thehansindia.com

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It is a well-known fact that those who want to rule people are, *ipso facto*, those least suited to do it

Douglas Adams

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

— Ramnath Goenka

ADDRESS ASPIRATIONS OF LADAKH'S YOUTH, ENGAGE WITH LOCALS

A seemingly Gandhian agitation for Ladakh's statehood went sideways in the peaceful town of Leh as a sudden burst of protester fury snowballed into vandalism and a regrettable loss of lives. The agitation was spearheaded by Sonam Wangchuk, who had begun a hunger strike on September 10. What's said to have lit the fuse were concerns over the deteriorating health of some strikers, an administrative response perceived unsatisfactory, and some fiery speeches at the protest venue. However, the actual cause of the violence is a matter of detailed investigation. Ladakh has been placed under curfew and Wangchuk has called off his protest. This is not the outcome he would have wanted. The engineer has inspired generations of scientists through phenomenal contributions to climate innovation and education reforms, which was showcased in the 2009 blockbuster, *3 Idiots*. Yet, now it has also emerged that the CBI is probing his Himalayan Institute of Alternatives for alleged violation of the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act.

The demand for statehood, a separate legislature and Sixth Schedule rights germinated months after Ladakh was carved out of J&K as a separate Union Territory in 2019. The Sixth Schedule provides constitutional safeguards and greater autonomy to tribal areas. If in the undivided J&K Ladakh was the region most ignored by the executive, the Union Territory status ignited a firestorm of aspirations. The protests that followed created an unexpected congruence among the Buddhist-majority Leh and the Muslim-majority Kargil, who until then were like oil and water. Political and religious groups on both sides went on to set up a joint platform and hold multiple rounds of talks with the Union home ministry.

The unrest in Leh is yet another indication of the prevailing discontent among jobless youth who lack avenues to channelise their energies gainfully. Addressing their aspirations holistically with empathy is the only way forward. Since Ladakh shares its borders with China and Pakistan, the Centre would understandably be wary of loosening its grip on the territory. Other innovative mechanisms could be thought of within the framework of the Constitution for seamless consultation with the locals on all matters instead of the Centre taking unilateral decisions through the Lieutenant Governor. As for Wangchuk, he too needs to be wisely engaged with.

CLOSE TRADE DEAL WITH EU ON EQUAL FOOTING

AFTER concluding the UK free trade agreement, the Indian government has moved fast on another trade deal—with the European Union, a bloc that accounts for 17 percent of global GDP and 15 percent of global trade. In their recent joint communication, both sides committed to concluding the negotiations by the end of 2025. India and the EU are spurred by the US's tariff tantrums to expedite the deal and cushion each other from the fallout. However, trading with Europe is not the easiest of tasks, given its stringent phytosanitary rules, and environmental and sustainability clauses. In the communiqué, the EU obliquely raised concerns over India's imports of Russian oil and defence goods. The framework, besides covering the usual issues of market access, also lays down 'robust sustainable development provisions'. These cover a wide array of issues including labour standards, gender equality, environment, and biodiversity protection.

Trade talks are no longer only about tariffs and the movement of goods and services. They cover other aspects of business, investment and even governance, and are backed by World Trade Organization norms. Issues such as gender, environment, labour, and data protection often become a drag on the negotiations. The India-EU talks, which resumed in 2022 after initial attempts in 2007, cover 24 chapters including sustainable food systems, transparency, and good regulatory practices. Some of these chapters are worded in a manner that projects a big-brotherly approach. The developed world has often criticised India for its hard stance on tariffs and some measures of protectionism. It is equally true that the EU has used non-tariff barriers such as standards and norms to limit access for Indian goods.

At the same time, as against the abrasive and unreasonable demands being made by the Trump administration, the EU is a potentially stable partner and lucrative market that India needs to pursue. Therefore, the deadline for concluding the deal must be adhered to. However, India should remain wary of accepting conditions that undermine its own policy prerogatives, cultural ethos, and sovereignty. Perhaps it is too early to learn from the recently-concluded deal with the UK, in which some earlier-held positions on non-trade issues such as gender and labour were given up. Such changes may well be needed—but they are better formulated in Delhi, not Brussels.

QUICK TAKE

POLICING THE POLICE

IN a system where it rarely happens, it's laudable that policemen have been sentenced for custodial torture. A Chennai court on Tuesday handed five policemen life terms for torturing a 36-year-old man at the Kotturpuram police station, which led to his death soon after release. The decision comes when there are increasing allegations of custodial torture across Tamil Nadu, though it is not just a state-specific malady. The National Human Rights Commission received 2,346 intimations of death in judicial custody and 160 in police custody during 2023-24. The aspect that must be improved upon is the speed in prosecuting such cases—the Chennai verdict came 16 years after the act, after the death of two of the five accused.

Most states don't depend too much on their share of the central GST kitty. While some raise considerable amounts through state taxes, others make money from royalties and dividends

HOW STATES CAN PARRY THE THRUST OF GST RATE CUTS

ALAM SRINIVAS

Journalist and author of *Storms in the Sea Wind* and *IPL: An Inside Story, Cricket & Commerce*

MANDAR PARDIKAR

BEFORE the Goods and Services Tax Council met earlier this month to finalise the new rates and transfer hundreds of products from higher to lower slabs, many experts expected verbal fireworks before the real firecrackers on Diwali. The prospect was that the larger and more voluble states would take on Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman regarding fears of a fall in revenues. As taxes come crashing down, the Centre's collections would plummet, and so would the share of states from the central booty. Shockingly, only murmurs and whispers were heard. Instead of two days, the council finished its meeting in a day. The FM claimed that there was complete consensus.

So the hype was created by the experts. The fact remains that states—including some of the larger ones—do not depend too much on the share of central GST collections. It is one of the several myths that were blasted by a first-of-its-kind decadal report—covering 2013-14 to 2022-23—on state finances that was recently released by the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG). "The 10-year comparative data… charts out a trend with respect to the fiscal parameters state-wise, and will provide useful insights to policy-makers and other stakeholders," wrote CAG K Sanjay Murthy in the foreword. As the report does so, some misgivings related to state revenues are cast in a fresh light.

Of the total revenue receipts of 28 states in 2022-23, just over a fourth (27 percent) came from the Centre's taxes. Over the past decade, the annual figure has never crossed 30 percent. Only 10 states gobbled up more than 70 percent of the amount the Centre shared in 2022-23. Uttar Pradesh was the largest beneficiary, receiving almost 18 percent of the total, followed by Bihar (just over 10 percent), and Madhya Pradesh (just under 8 percent). The decadal pattern was similar—the same 10 states accounted for 73 percent of the Centre's devolution.

Indeed, the bulk of states' revenues are generated by themselves. In economic jargon, they include states' own-tax revenues (SOTR) and state non-tax revenues (SNTR). Ironically, the former includes a part of the overall GST, or state GST (generally 50 percent), which goes directly into the states' kitty, apart from value-added tax, sales tax, excise duties on liquor, petroleum products, and electricity (all three excluded from GST), vehicular taxes, land revenue, stamp duties, and registration fees. SNTR includes royalties from minerals and mining, interest and dividends from profitable state-owned units, and user charges and profits from state enterprises involved in supplying transport, power, drinking water, and other amenities.

While 10 of the smaller states—including the seven Northeastern sisters—accounted for about 3 percent of the combined revenue receipts in 2022-23, the remaining 18 gorged on the remaining amount. For the top seven in the latter category, the annual own-taxes comprised 60-70 percent of their revenue receipts. The top contender was, surprisingly, Haryana at 71 percent; another shocker was Telangana in the third position with 67 percent. The others included the high-consumption states of Maharashtra (68 percent), Karnataka and Gujarat (63 percent each), and Tamil Nadu (62 percent). In comparison, the share of the seven sisters was under 20 percent each.

However, the buoyancy of the combined SOTR over the decade, which is calculated as the ratio between the growth of own-taxes *vis-à-vis* the state's GDP growth, went up from below 1 in 2014-15 to 1.4 in 2022-23. As expected, the figure dropped to 0.3 in 2019-20 during the Covid year, but it remained over 1, considered a healthy position, in only four of the remaining seven years. In percentage terms, the annual growth rate of overall SOTRs fluctuated wildly between -3.7 percent (2020-21) and over 25 percent the next year (2021-22), probably due to the low-base effect. The figure remained over 10 percent in four of the years under the study.

In comparison, the non-tax revenues were crucial for the mineral-rich, smaller states and some newer states formed in this century. In only eight cases was it more than 10 percent of the annual revenue receipts. For Odisha (over 28 percent), Goa (over 22 percent), and Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand (around 16 percent each), these revenues were crucial. Royalties from minerals sustained Odisha, and comprised nearly 90 percent of its SNTR in 2022-23. Similarly, Rajasthan earned almost 60 percent of its SNTR from royalties related to petroleum, minerals, and metallurgy. Both the states also earned significant amounts, over ₹2,000 crore each, from interest and dividends.

Almost 80 percent of Kerala's non-tax revenues during 2022-23 came from—guess what?—lotteries. This explains why the state agitated vociferously against the GST Council's decision to dump the tax on lotteries in the highest 'sin' category and raise the levy from 28 percent to 40 percent. What's also remarkable is that half of Telangana's SNTR in 2022-23, or nearly ₹10,000 crore came from the sale of land. In August 2025, the Telangana Housing Board sold more than 15 acres in two deals, and earned more than ₹1,000 crore collectively. There is a plan to hold a major land auction in the future to mop up ₹2,700 crore.

What is laudable is that 16 of the 28 states showed revenue surpluses—revenue receipt minus revenue expenditure—in 2022-23. One of the economically smallest states, Arunachal Pradesh, had the highest surplus. One of the newer states, Jharkhand was second. The seemingly-laggard Odisha was third. Worryingly, Maharashtra, one of the largest and richest states, showed an annual revenue deficit, albeit a minor one of less than 0.5 percent. The shockers were Punjab (30 percent), Haryana (over 19 percent), Rajasthan (over 16 percent), and Tamil Nadu (almost 15 percent). Andhra Pradesh possibly suffered from the formation of Telangana, and had the second-highest deficit of more than 27.5 percent. West Bengal, with a revenue shortfall of nearly 14 percent, was on this negative list, which is not a surprise given the state of its industries.

So a reading of the numbers reveals why there was not much protest over the prospect of the central GST kitty shrinking. Our resourceful states find one way or another to raise significant revenues of their own. The point is which routes are sustainable in the long run. But that's a different question.

(Views are personal)

DON'T MOTHER AWAY THIS CRISIS

THAMIZHACHI THANGAPANDIAN

MP from South Chennai and member of the Standing Committee on Education, Women, Children, Youth & Sports

THE surge of campus suicides is a silent scream echoing off concrete hostel walls, one we can no longer afford to ignore or smother beneath well-intentioned policy. In 2025 alone, more than 13,000 Indian students died by suicide—7.6 percent of all national suicide cases, a rate that claims one young life almost every hour. We read about these tragedies often as fleeting news items, but rarely do we sit with their urgency and stare at their roots. Institutions search for answers, governments convene panels, yet mothers mourn, friends wonder, and those closest to the crisis—students—tread a terrain of isolation.

Into this discourse IIT Kharagpur has introduced 'Campus Mothers', an initiative intending to place women as anchors of emotional care for young adults battling competitive academia. On paper, the premise is warm, almost poetic: women from faculty households voluntarily trained to recognise student distress, reaching out and listening to struggles in unassuming, everyday moments. The institute reaffirms this is not a replacement for professional mental health services, merely a supplement, a gesture of home for students far from family and familiar comforts.

But what happens when good intentions collide with internalised patriarchy? What happens when the burden of emotional labour is once again thrust upon women—not as a celebrated choice, but in reflexive expectation? Like unpaid nurses, teachers, and confidantes, 'campus mothers' are assigned a role so naturalised it vanishes into invisibility. In this initiative, emotional labour is domesticated, feminised, and rendered a campus fixture, never quite named or acknowledged as labour or expertise. The programme arises urgent and experimental, but its design belongs to a social script centuries old: women as caregivers, mothers as emotional shock absorbers.

What troubles me—and should trouble us all—is not just the reproductive logic of gendered care, but the way it shifts the lens from systemic malaise to individual intervention. Are students suicidal because they lack maternal affection, or because institutional architectures remain inhospitable to emotional struggle? Twelve percent of Indian students admit to suicidal thoughts, and 6.7 percent confess prior attempts. Academic failure, toxic competition, and family strife propel young men and women to the brink, while mental health support remains woefully inadequate.

Faculty and administration are often ill-equipped to notice silent suffering, counselling services are stretched thin, and peer environments are toxically competitive. Instead of questioning why institutions fail, we outsource the emotional hope to 'mothers'—never fathers, never paid professionals, assuming some inherited wisdom from motherhood will outwit the violence of loneliness, bullying, or discrimination.

PTI

IIT Kharagpur's Campus Mothers initiative places women from faculty households as anchors of emotional care for young students battling loneliness and competitive pressure. Even with good intentions, it domesticates and feminises emotional labour in a patriarchal manner. The lens is shifted away from the systemic malaise

Patriarchy internalises emotional labour as a woman's duty so deeply that even progressive interventions risk reinforcing it. Campus mothers are trained, yes, and participation is voluntary. Yet, there is a presumption that women, by virtue of biological experience, know how to listen, absorb, and soothe. There's no recognition of how women on campus already bear invisible burdens in both their professional and domestic spheres. This programme risks institutionalising those burdens rather than dismantling them. And when the labour is unpaid, informal, and often unrecognised, it fuses the worst of compliance culture with the soft violence of gender roles, reducing care to a free supplement instead of a rightful campus infrastructure.

What does it mean for the students themselves? Is the promise of an emotional anchor enough to shift the culture of silence and alienation? The trends are relentless: Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh lead in suicide numbers, and districts like Kota, with its infamous coaching centres, become epicentres of tragedy. We must not allow surface gestures to substitute for expensive, necessary reform. What students need are not only listening ears, but systemic change.

Mental health education must be woven into curriculums, not pasted as extra-curricular charity. Faculty should be trained not in the gendered art of mothering, but in active skills of emotional first-aid, gatekeeping, and empathetic leadership. Peer environments should reward camaraderie over competition. Professional counselling must be accessed on campus as a right, not a privilege or compensation gift after tragedy.

This is not to diminish the warmth or heroism of the women signing up for campus mothering, but to insist we see it for what it is: a band-aid on a wound that requires surgery. It is cognitive dissonance to call this progress while neglecting to fund counselling, ignoring the need for mental health professionals, or averting eyes from toxic hostels and relentless curriculum. If anything is to change, our approach to emotional labour must be radically transformed. First, by recognising its worth, next, by redistributing its load, and most importantly by professionalising care to treat mental health as a serious issue.

As I write, I am reminded of how quietly despair circulates, how rarely we witness its full force unless it lands in our backyard. Let this crisis urge us to build policies that recognise student vulnerability as a permanent condition of learning, not as a temporary inconvenience to be mothered away. Let Campus Mothers be a cautionary chapter. Grieve, critique, and act for those sorrowing in silence and those we have lost. *(Views are personal)*

MAILBAG

WRITE TO: letters@newindianexpress.com

Ignoring genocide

Ref: *Condemn Gaza genocide, allow solidarity with Palestinians to flow* (Sep 25). History seems to be repeating itself, though the names have changed to Israel and Palestine. France may think that taking down the Palestinian flag can hide the pain and the blood it symbolises, but that is not the truth. Humanity remains questionable.

Resham Khan, Dehradun

Incentivise reuse

Ref: *Focus on safe disposal, reuse of EV batteries* (Sep 25). There is a tangible way ahead in the form of extended producer responsibility, where producers not only use the government incentives and funds, but also manage the waste in an effective way.

Chiraag G V, Shivamogga

Shock treatment

Ref: *Shock of punishment* (Sep 25). The disgraceful apathy in maintenance of electrical infrastructure is a matter of deep concern. Accountability is sadly missing in our system, apart from delayed legal processes which allow the culprits to escape through legal and regulatory loopholes. Criminal negligence should not be allowed to persist.

Rajarao Kumar, Bengaluru

Judicial checks

Ref: *For a court that stands firm* (Sep 24). The Supreme Court mimics the Byzantine architecture and a common problem is its attachment to an autonomous backbone where decisions are self-managed. This prevents penetration capabilities and supervisory control, ultimately turning a blind eye on internal scrutiny.

Sureshbabu Kalyansundaram, email

Preventive intelligence

Ref: *5 killed in Leh riots* (Sep 25). When such a tragic incident takes place, it becomes almost customary to speculate who was behind the violent agitation. Prior efforts should've been made to identify and arrest the scheming miscreants beforehand.

N Rama Rao, Chennai

Non-aligned view

Ref: *India mostly with Ukraine: Zelenskyy* (Sep 25). This warrants India's balanced stand. While we manage our energy requirements, India has always supported peace talks and respecting sovereign borders. Our country is trying to keep good relations with both sides while also supporting efforts to end the war through dialogue.

Ishita Shree, Patna

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WORDLY WISE

IF THE WORD DOESN'T EXIST, INVENT IT; BUT FIRST BE SURE IT DOESN'T EXIST.

— CHARLES BAUDELAIRE

The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

THE PROTEST TEST

Ladakh is one of India's most important frontiers. Centre must speak to protesters and, more importantly, listen to them

THE NATIONAL CONVERSATION around the abrogation of Article 370 in August 2019 and its aftermath has, by and large, centred on Jammu and Kashmir — how the state was made a Union Territory, the detention of political leaders, the move to elections, and the demand for restoration of statehood. The political story has unfolded somewhat differently in Ladakh. The region that was upbeat after moving out of Srinagar and Jammu's shadow in 2019 is now rocked by protests. At least four people were killed and around 50 injured in Leh on Wednesday. A section of the youth among the protesters turned to vandalism and arson after leaders on hunger strike fainted and were hospitalised. The violence and arson, strongly condemnable, should not be allowed to overshadow the unique trajectory and the broader place Ladakh has in India's national security and imagination. The lawbreakers have to face due process but the "crackdown" needs a strong caveat: the Centre should speak to the protesters and, more importantly, listen to them.

The promise to the people of Ladakh, both explicit and implicit, in 2019 was that their cultural, ecological, and linguistic heritage would be protected. The Centre's notifications in June this year, introducing domicile-based requirements for government jobs and recognition of local languages, were steps in the right direction. However, much more needs to be done. The devolution of powers to the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Councils (LADHCs) has not been implemented, and questions regarding land ownership and large-scale energy projects remain unanswered. The cries for statehood and inclusion in the Sixth Schedule must, then, be read as demands for representation and autonomy to preserve a culture and environment that is an essential and unique part of this country's tapestry. Nearly all the UT's important political and social groups — the Leh Apex Body and the Kargil Democratic alliance, Muslims and Buddhists, leaders of diverse political persuasions — have supported the protests. This is reason enough for the Centre to talk to them and find a reasonable accommodation. Maximalist positions, such as those taken by one of the principal faces of the agitation, educator-activist Sonam Wangchuk, aren't surprising. Surely, the government has the capacity to both address it and, if needed, ensure that it does not derail the larger process of talks and negotiation.

Ladakh is one of India's most important frontiers, bordering Pakistan and China. In war and peace, its people have stood steadfastly by the country, often as the first line of defence and intelligence gathering. In the current moment, when passions are high, the protesters' demands are all within the Constitutional framework. Some political actors and organisations of various persuasions may have tapped into this sentiment and echoed the protesters, as is the case in any democracy. That is no reason to unleash a troll army to demonise the protesters as "anti-Indian", or architects of a grand conspiracy. New Delhi and Leh are on the same side, both need to work to get on the same page. The vitriol must stop before it vitiates the atmosphere further. Too much is at stake.

PLUG THE GAPS

Irregularities at Skill Development Corporation must be addressed urgently. Agency is critical to demographic dividend

THE PROBLEMS OF the National Skill Development Corporation have festered for too long. Only a few months after the NSDC's board fired its then CEO, Ved Mani Tewari, the Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship has now filed a complaint with the Delhi Police against officials alleging "misappropriation at NSDC" as per a report in this paper. Skilling is perhaps the biggest challenge facing the country — the ability to harness the demographic dividend rests on a skilled labour force. The sorry state of affairs in an agency deemed one of the "principal architects" of the country's skill ecosystem is, therefore, a cause for concern.

The NSDC's support to the skilling ecosystem was operationalised through various instruments such as funding, designing skill-based programmes and partnerships with industry. Reports in this paper, however, paint a less-than-flattering picture of the its operations. Several FIRs have been filed against its training partners across the country. Investigations have shown the "blacklisted" training partners were "allegedly tampering with attendance records to include students who were missing from training centres". This is not the first time that the NSDC has been mired in controversy. In 2015, a CAG report had noted that "there were serious issues in the governance and accountability mechanisms at NSDF (National Skill Development Fund) and NSDC and the implementation of the identified roles by these bodies". Over the years, concerns have also been raised over the quality of the training imparted and employment prospects. The corporation has an ambitious goal — to skill or up-skill 150 million people. Its recent track record does not inspire confidence.

The Centre has taken several steps to skill the country's labour force. It has, for instance, launched initiatives such as the Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY), and allocated a considerable amount of funds to this area. Under the various avatars of this scheme, Rs 10,570 crore were released till March 2024. The total number of people certified under PMKVY and STAR (Standard Training Assessment and Reward Scheme) stood at 1.13 crore, while the total reported placement was 24.4 lakh. The government's increasing involvement indicates that it recognises the criticality of the skill mission in achieving the goal of developed country status by 2047. It now needs to undertake a detailed examination of the skilling ecosystem and of the players therein. The problems need to be resolved urgently.

BRAGGADOCIOUS WORLD

At the UNGA, another entrant into a crowded cabinet of Trumpisms

US PRESIDENT DONALD Trump's address to the UN General Assembly was delivered with the air of a man both aware of his global audience and uninterested in it. He spoke, as he often does, not so much to the room as at it: "...I'm really good at predicting things, you know? ... And I don't say that in a braggadocious way, but it's true. I've been right about everything," he declared, as he accused the UN of "empty words", dismissed climate change, and chided European generosity toward asylum seekers. It was a soliloquy of self-regard primed for MAGA applause.

It is no secret that where world leaders prefer to lean into diplomatic opacity, the most powerful leader in the world prefers unfiltered fireworks: "I know words. I have the best words," he had declared at a rally in 2015 in the run-up to his first term. Braggadocious, however, isn't a Trump coinage, though it certainly sounds like a neologism that might have come out of a Mar-a-Lago branding exercise. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, the word first swaggered into existence in the late 16th century, appearing in Edmund Spenser's epic poem *The Faerie Queene*, in the form of a self-important character named Braggadocio. Over time, like Grinch and Scrooge, the name morphed into an adjective, used to describe the vainglorious for their particular affinity for bluster and self-aggrandisement.

The word now joins a crowded cabinet of Trumpisms: "Bigly", that odd lexical cousin no one quite remembers inviting, and which the Oxford English Dictionary says is an obscure adverbial equivalent of braggadocious. Then there's "unpresidented", which briefly turned a typo into a political metaphor; and of course, "covfefe", a tweet-shaped riddle. In Trump's rhetorical universe, speech is performative cosplay. But if clarity isn't the goal, bafflement may well be the strategy. As one of his predecessors, Harry S Truman, once said: "If you can't convince them, confuse them."

Listen to Ladakh

It has been India's most loyal frontier. Delhi must respond to demands with empathy and imagination

AMITABH MATTOO

I HAVE SEEN Ladakh in its stillest hours: Dawn breaking over Pangong Lake, prayers whispered at Thiksey Monastery, markets closing in Kargil. To wake up in that extraordinary calm in Leh, and then to walk across to hear His Holiness the Dalai Lama during one of his annual visits, is to understand how inspiration and serenity coexist in this fragile frontier.

To imagine this stillness broken by gunfire is to feel the fragility of our republic's peripheries; four dead in the recent eruption of violence cannot be dismissed as a mere law and order issue. Ladakh has given India its warriors, its faith, and its trust. A frontier that has stood by India deserves nothing less. Delhi, to its credit, has always recognised Ladakh's unique place in the Republic and must now redouble its efforts with empathy, resolve, and imagination to ensure an early return to Ladakh's traditional peace and quiet.

Ladakh has always been one of India's most steadfast frontiers. Its people and soldiers fought where few could even breathe and stood firm when other peripheries faltered. When raiders poured across the frontier in 1947, the Ladakh Scouts were raised from local volunteers who knew the mountains as second skin. In 1962, they resisted overwhelming odds against the Chinese. In 1971, they helped secure India's northern defences. Most memorably, in 1999, during the Kargil War, they earned the title of Snow Warriors, fighting in terrain where survival itself was an act of defiance. Colonel Chhewang Rinchen, twice decorated with the Maha Vir Chakra, became a legend. Sonam Wangchuk's (a colonel in the Indian army at the time, not the man at the centre of the current protest) leadership in Batalik during Kargil remains unmatched. Kushok Bakula Rinpoche, the statesman monk, secured Ladakh's place in the Union while protecting its spiritual inheritance and serving as India's ambassador to Mongolia, extending India's influence into Buddhist Asia. Ladakh's loyalty has never wavered. Delhi knows this, this record of sacrifice has ensured Ladakh's special place in the national imagination.

When Union Territory status was granted in 2019, Ladakhis celebrated. For the first time, they felt liberated from Srinagar's shadow. The promise was of direct empowerment and a closer bond with the Union. Centralisation was inevitable in the early stages of UT governance, particularly given Ladakh's geostrategic location at the confluence of Chinese and Pakistani frontiers. Delhi has acted with caution, mindful that this is not just a region of monasteries and pashmina but also of sensitive borders where every administrative decision has national security implications. Yet, the Centre must recognise that empowerment is essential. As Prime Minister Narendra Modi has repeatedly emphasised, integration must be accompanied by development and dignity. That delicate balance between security, ecology, and empowerment is Delhi's challenge today.

The Leh Apex Body and the Kargil Democratic Alliance, once adversaries, have forged an unprecedented common cause. When Buddhists and Muslims of this frontier speak in one voice, Delhi must listen. There are already signs that New Delhi is opening channels of engagement. Quiet conversations have taken place, and officials who know Ladakh intimately are being asked to take the lead. One such figure is S D Singh Jamwal, the police commissioner, who is among the few administrators who truly understand Ladakh, its people, its rhythms, its silences.

For decades, Ladakh's grievances were muted. Its politics was quieter, its youth less restless, its discontent rarely spilling onto the streets. That changed after UT status. Ironically, Leh and Kargil, historically divided by religion and politics, now stand united. The Leh Apex Body and the Kargil Democratic Alliance, once adversaries, have forged an unprecedented common cause. When Buddhists and Muslims of this frontier speak in one voice, Delhi must listen. There are already signs that New Delhi is opening channels of engagement. Quiet conversations have taken place, and officials who know Ladakh intimately are being asked to take the lead. One such figure is S D Singh Jamwal, the police commissioner, who is among the few administrators who truly understand Ladakh, its people, its rhythms, its silences.

Within Ladakh's new politics, Sonam Wangchuk, the celebrated innovator, commands support amongst a section of the youth, but given Delhi's deep suspicions of him, he would serve Ladakh better by stepping aside from direct political engagement so that negotiations are not clouded by mistrust. For this reason, the Centre should prefer collective leadership, represented through the Apex Body and the Kargil Democratic Alliance, rather than individual icons. This is wise. Ladakh's voice is strongest when it speaks collectively. And Delhi, for its part, is committed to ensuring that a vacuum does not develop, for it is in such vacuums that foreign actors and vested interests have historically tried to fish in troubled waters. That must never be allowed in Ladakh, one of India's most loyal frontiers.

It is true that Delhi has been cautious in extending Sixth Schedule protections or considering statehood. These are not simple matters. They carry constitutional complexities and national precedents. Ladakh's small population and enormous strategic sensitivities demand prudence. But caution does not mean indifference. Delhi's approach must reflect the weight of responsibility: Ensuring that empowerment for Ladakh goes hand in hand with preserving national security, ecological sustainability, and constitutional integrity. Ladakh today is not alienated, but assertive. Its people seek partnership, not separation. This is a moment of opportunity, and Delhi is well placed to seize it. By acting decisively and compassionately, it can secure Ladakh's trust for generations.

The way forward is clear. The Leh Apex Body and Kargil Democratic Alliance must be engaged as legitimate representatives, and dialogue must be broadened to include youth, women, and voices from remote hamlets. Hill Councils should be strengthened immediately, and a path for legislative empowerment sketched out, whether through a reformed Union Territory model, gradual devolution, or innovative provisions of the Sixth Schedule adapted for Ladakh's unique status. Mega solar projects may power India's green transition, but they cannot displace fragile ecosystems or pastoral livelihoods. Pashmina, Ladakh's pride, must be preserved alongside renewable energy ambitions. Empowering Ladakh's people strengthens, rather than weakens, India's hand on this sensitive frontier with China and Pakistan. And national parties must rise above short-term politics. Ladakh is not a vote bank; it is a living frontier that strengthens India's democracy.

The recent tragedy in Leh was not about stones thrown or vehicles torched. It was about dialogue deferred. When Leh and Kargil came together, the Centre could have seized the moment. Delay deepened frustration, and lives were lost. But it is not too late. Delhi has the institutions and the leadership, and must now demonstrate the will to act. History shows that the Republic grows stronger when it listens to its peripheries with respect. Ladakh, which has stood guard for India through snow and storm, deserves nothing less. Delhi must now act with statesmanship that is firm, empathetic, and imaginative. That is not only in Ladakh's interest, but in India's national interest. Ladakh has always stood by India. Today, India, through Delhi, must demonstrate that it will always stand by Ladakh.

The writer is dean and professor, School of International Studies; former member, National Security Advisory Board (NSAB)

BODY AS BORDER

Inaccessibility makes neighbours distant, reduces encounters to glances

OLLY MOHANTA

WHO'S MY NEIGHBOUR

An IDEAS SERIES

IT'S OFTEN THE simplest words that make us pause. The mention of "neighbour" stirred a moment of quiet reflection in me.

Born into an Army household, where moving every two or three years was part of life, I grew up with a fluid sense of neighbours and neighbourhoods. At one posting, our neighbour could be a family from Tamil Nadu; a few months later, someone from Mizoram. My earliest sense of neighbourhood was not about fixed addresses or familiar walls, but about a larger ecosystem — the regiment, the unit, the families who stood together like one extended household.

My "neighbours" included not just people but also the world we inhabited: Colonial bungalows with sloping roofs, bright dahlias lined along red-and-white brick paths, eucalyptus trees shading the roads, Enfield motorbikes rumbling past, Army gypsies and trucks parked neatly under banyan trees. There were temples and dargahs, railway tracks and parade grounds, all folded into the rhythm of daily life.

When I moved to Delhi more than a decade ago, I carried this sense with me. For the first few years, I experienced the city as an able-bodied student: Rushing into Metros, hopping onto buses, renting flats, making friends at university. My neighbours were not limited to the people in the adjacent flat, but also the guard at the gate, the vendor near the bus stop, the co-passenger on the Metro. Delhi, like the cantonments of my childhood, was a vast and complex neighbourhood.

Life changed when I began using a wheelchair. My body made way for a different way of seeing — and being seen. The same spaces that once connected me to my neighbours now kept me out. A housing society without ramps meant I was dependent on others to even enter my own flat. A Metro ride became a daily negotiation of locked gates, out-of-order elevators, and delays that made me late to class.

But life changed when I began using a wheelchair. My body made way for a different way of seeing — and being seen. The same spaces that once connected me to my neighbours now kept me out. A housing society without ramps meant I was dependent on others to even enter my own flat. A Metro ride became a daily negotiation of locked gates, out-of-order elevators, and delays that made me late to class. Boarding a train meant being lifted like luggage into an AC coach, dignity stripped away. Autos, cabs, even washrooms in workplaces — all turned into reminders that my neighbourhood was built without me in mind.

Sociologists describe neighbourhoods as networks of participation. Yet when infrastructure itself excludes, it is not just mobility that is denied — it is the chance to form bonds, to belong. Inaccessibility makes neighbours distant, reducing encounters to glances. It is a quieter form of marginalisation where the body becomes the border of one's neighbourhood.

For me, the body has always been the first site of the neighbourhood — as a child running freely through cantonment lanes, and now as a wheelchair user negotiating steps, gates, and silences. The way my body moves — or is stopped — reshapes who my neighbours are, and how I belong. It is through this embodied lens that I have learnt that exclusion is never the whole story, and that compassion quietly shines through in the smallest cracks.

Over the years, I have noticed the small, human gestures that quietly remake my neighbourhood: A security guard who carried my wheelchair when the ramp was flooded, a housekeeping staff member sprinting with keys to open the side gate at the Metro, a passerby shielding me with an umbrella in the rain. These are not neighbours by address, but by presence. They remind me that neighbourhoods are made not only of bricks and bylaws but of fleeting acts of solidarity that linger.

For me, a neighbour has never been just the family next door. It is the soldier polishing his Enfield, the vendor outside the Metro, the stranger who notices my struggle with a lock. My neighbourhood has often reminded me of exclusion, of how easily one can be made invisible. Yet, it has also shown me that, in spite of systems that fail us, people can — and do — choose to show up. And perhaps that is the truest neighbourhood of all: One where dignity is not left to chance, but shared in the small, everyday acts of those who choose to stand beside you.

Mohanta is a Delhi-based researcher and writer

SEPTEMBER 26, 1985, FORTY YEARS AGO

INDIAN EXPRESS

Sweeping changes in Union Ministry

CABINET RESHUFFLE

PRIME MINISTER RAJIV Gandhi assumed charge of Defence in a rearrangement of portfolios that saw the induction of 15 persons into the Council of Ministers and the exclusion of six. B R Bhagat is the new Minister for External Affairs while Narasimha Rao moves from Defence to Human Resource Development.

POLL HELD PEACEFULLY

STRAY INCIDENTS OF violence resulting in the death of at least one person and injuries to several others marred the one-day polling for the Lok Sabha and the Vidhan Sabha in Punjab. The polling, estimated at between 55 and 60 per cent, passed off peacefully in most areas. The poll percentage, likely to be higher after revised estimates, was encouraging in the context of the terrorist threat and compared to 1980.

CHANGE IN PMO

WITH ARUN SINGH'S appointment as Minister of State for Defence Research and Development, the Prime Minister's Office is likely to undergo a change of style. Singh was technically a parliamentary secretary to the Prime Minister but his proximity to the PM and the vantage position he occupied made him a key figure in the administration. He remained during the last 11 months a sort of chief of staff, confidant, special task man and almost a head of the PMO.

AICC-I REVAMP

WITHIN HOURS OF the reshuffle of the Union Council of Ministers and government secretaries at the Centre, the Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi, announced a recast of the All India Congress (I) Committee by adding five general secretaries and removing four. The new general secretaries are Maragatham Chandrasekhar, Ahmed Patel, Oscar Fernandes, Tarun Gogoi and Jitendra Prasad.

THE IDEAS PAGE

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"The UN, after all, is the only global forum we have for resolving conflict and safeguarding peace... There is a need to restore its credibility through reforms, including making the Security Council more representative of the wider membership."
— SOUTH CHINA MORNING POST

DIS/AGREE
THE BEST OF BOTH SIDES

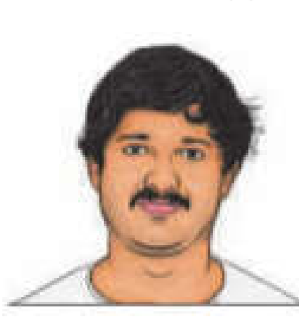
A weekly column, which offers not this-versus-that, but the best of both sides, to inform the debate

C R Sasikumar

Will the focus on traditional knowledge, underlined in UGC's draft undergraduate curriculum framework for Mathematics, undermine foundational knowledge?

New Maths course shrinks students

Draft curriculum compromises current strength in core Mathematics, fails to root itself in Indian heritage



R RAMANUJAM

THE DRAFT UNDERGRADUATE curriculum for Mathematics proposed by the University Grants Commission (UGC) seeks to create mathematical knowledge and skills that are contemporary and, at the same time, rooted in Indian heritage, in alignment with the goals articulated in the NEP, 2020. Unfortunately, as has been pointed out by a large group of mathematicians and teachers of Mathematics, it does not come anywhere close to achieving such lofty goals. It is termed a Learning Outcomes-based Curriculum Framework (LOCF) but it is hard to see what learning outcomes it assures.

Considering that the proposals will have an impact on what will be taught in thousands of colleges and universities to lakhs of students, it is important that the UGC provide a forward-looking curriculum, one that develops strong mathematical foundations, enables students to face the uncertainties of 21st-century life and contribute to socio-economic development. But the proposal compromises even the current strength in core Mathematics, adopts a mechanical attitude to applications and fails even in its attempt to provide rootedness in Indian heritage.

Any curricular proposal needs some unifying curricular and pedagogical purpose in deciding what is taught, why and how it is to be taught, and how such knowledge is to be assessed. Teachers and educational systems should have the capacity (or be able to quickly build the capacity) to implement the proposed curriculum. The draft offers no such clarity of purpose and possible implementation.

Educational researchers point out that an understanding of the historical development of mathematical ideas helps students' learning. It would be welcome if this were attempted, pointing to global achievements across cultures and placing Indian contributions in context. One well-designed course, backed by well-presented material, would achieve this. Instead, the draft proposes a long list of courses, each with mathematical content that would need, at most, a couple of classes of teaching. In fact, the content of the proposed courses on "Indian Mathematics" is all at a high-school level, ignoring further developments, and little of it can be meaningfully integrated with contemporary Mathematics courses.

In terms of curricular structure, it is certainly welcome to offer a range of options for students to choose from. But it is ridiculous to choose between one such "historical" course and a mathematical one such as calculus of variations or a skill-based one such as computer programming. What rationale can be provided for such a grouping to choose from?

It is also worth asking what an exam on such "Bharatiya" Mathematics would look like. The calculations are at school level, so perhaps information items are expected to be memorised and recalled (Note that the emphasis is not on historical analysis either). Why then would a student choose calculus of variations where getting a good grade would surely be more difficult? Implementing such choices will seriously weaken Mathematics education.

On the other hand, core mathematical competence has been compromised. In the draft structure, students learn "real analysis" in their fourth year, hence building on it for future courses is not possible. The emphasis needed on linear algebra and abstract algebra is missing. Mathematics of machine learning may be a welcome addition, but linear algebra simply cannot be relegated to be a part of machine learning. How can one hope to understand the contributions of a great mathematician like Ramanujan (offered as a course) without an in-depth study of analysis and number theory?

A mechanised approach to applied Mathematics, presenting applications in a long list of courses titled "Mathematics in X" is also problematic. There is a structural and conceptual unity to Mathematics that needs appreciation. A great deal of Mathematics was formulated to address questions arising from Physics, and fields such as the Life Sciences, Engineering, Computing and Economics lead to new Mathematics even today. The interplay between the internal disciplines of Mathematics (such as algebra and geometry) as well as between Mathematics and other disciplines is best learnt in their contexts. Many courses such as complex analysis, differential equations, discrete mathematics, probability and statistics, mathematical logic, algorithms and programming offer core techniques that help such cross-fertilisation, and elective courses such as stochastic processes, cryptography, optimisation theory and machine learning lead students towards new and exciting directions. We only get disappointed when we look for such coherence in the proposed draft, and instead find a touch of the bizarre in a proposed course on "Mathematics in Meditation".

> It is worth asking what an exam on 'Bharatiya' Mathematics would look like. The calculations are at school level, so perhaps information items are expected to be memorised and recalled Why would a student choose calculus of variations where getting a good grade would be more difficult?

A course on "Mathematics in Drama and the Arts" looks promising and welcome, but where would we find teachers (and culturally rooted material) for this course? In this sense, the proposed material for most new courses is abysmally poor in quality, in contrast to the availability of excellent texts for core mathematical areas.

No curricular reform can be implemented without its ownership by the teaching community in the country and the UGC seems to have little regard for this. Good Mathematics curricula existing in the country have not been utilised either.

We need a Mathematics curriculum that prepares the student to meet the challenges of the future by fostering problem-solving, theory building, adaptability, and the ability to apply mathematical concepts to real-world contexts. For this, it is imperative that the UGC drop the proposed draft curriculum in its entirety, and formulate one that is forward looking and builds a strong future for our students.

The writer is professor, Azim Premji University, Bengaluru, and faculty (retired), Institute of Mathematical Sciences, Chennai

Curriculum is a model for our times

Nothing in the framework prevents HEIs from giving sufficient attention to core Mathematics

MAMIDALA JAGADESH KUMAR

WHAT SHOULD AN undergraduate Mathematics degree achieve in our time of climate risk, data deluge, and fast automation? It should inculcate clear reasoning, connect abstraction with the world, and help graduates solve unfamiliar problems. The UGC's Learning Outcomes-based Curriculum Framework (LOCF) for Mathematics aims at that balance. Some critics say the Maths LOCF centralises control, sidelines the core, or smuggles ideology into the classrooms. They single out references to Indian Knowledge Systems, casting the draft as antiquarian and light on rigour while overlooking international practice that links local knowledge with modern science. The charge does not stand up when tested against the text and intent of the maths LOCF.

The LOCF model defines learning outcomes and invites higher education institutions (HEIs) to design sequences. The UGC's public notice states that the draft "will serve as a model curriculum to promote flexibility and innovation in programme design and syllabi development". The UGC has clarified that outcome-based models do not seek a national common syllabus. NEP 2020 lists as a core principle "a pride in India, and its rich, diverse, ancient and modern culture and knowledge systems and traditions". That vision asks HEIs to blend Indian ethos with modern standards.

A learning-outcomes approach does not replace an HEI's responsibility to teach core Mathematics well. It sets what graduates should be able to do: Reason with proof, model with precision, compute effectively, communicate Mathematics and connect it to society. Nothing in the framework prevents giving attention to calculus and linear algebra, real and complex analysis, algebra through group and ring theory, probability and statistics with modern inference, numerical methods, and electives in optimisation, graph theory, or machine learning. Analytical geometry and mechanics are essential in spatial reasoning and continuum models used in robotics, geospatial work, and structural design.

> Contemporary Mathematics, paired with civilisational literacy, trains comparative reasoning. Historians have shown that Madhava and his successors derived infinite series for sine, cosine, and arctangent several centuries before their European rediscovery.

The Maths LOCF prepares graduates for MSc, UGC-NET, PhD, and industry through a sequenced core. Far from squandering the opportunity, the approach embeds application, practice, math labs using Python, R, or MATLAB with code notebooks, mini-projects, and a viva. These habits are important for job roles in data analysis, optimisation for logistics, scientific programming, and actuarial work. Statistics appears as a complete core course and recurs through modelling and computation. Electives such as Mathematics in Music and Mathematics in Meditation come after core courses and flag any advanced ideas as intuitive. Isolated errors in a few references can be fixed through public consultation without invalidating the framework.

Contemporary Mathematics, paired with historical and civilisational literacy, trains comparative reasoning. Historians of Mathematics have shown that Madhava and his successors derived infinite series for sine, cosine, and arctangent several centuries before their European rediscovery. Kim Plofker, an American historian of Mathematics, has documented these techniques. Sceptics ask for independent corroboration. It exists. A vast literature traces the series results to Kerala texts such as the *Tantrasangraha-vyakhya*, a Sanskrit commentary on *Tantrasangraha*, the 1501 CE astronomy–Mathematics treatise and the *Yuktibhasha*, a 16th-century Malayalam treatise on Mathematics and Astronomy. Studying proofs from a different idiom trains comparative thinking and strengthens conceptual grip.

A well-designed elective on *kala ganana* asks students to compute the diurnal motion of the Sun and stars, connect modular arithmetic to understand calendars, and estimate errors in observational astronomy. Media reports have focused on panchanga terminology. The framework's deeper promise lies in the Mathematics that sits underneath.

Another line of criticism claims that LOCF amounts to centrally imposed syllabi. The record says otherwise. HEIs retain the freedom to design paths that reach them. That approach respects the diversity of India's higher-education ecosystem. For those who worry about capacity, HEIs can use co-teaching with domain faculty, short faculty-development modules, and vetted reading lists.

Countries have already designed similar integrations. New Zealand has formally recognised *Matauranga Maori*, the body of Maori knowledge, practice, and worldview, in science and education policy. Australia's national curriculum maps First Nations ideas to numbers, geometry, and statistics to ensure cultural and scientific integrity. In the US, the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy and the Council on Environmental Quality issued government-wide guidance for incorporating indigenous knowledge into federal research and decision-making. The University of Alaska Fairbanks' "Math in a Cultural Context" programme works with Yup'ik elders to integrate indigenous measurement, symmetry, navigation, and proportional reasoning with formal Mathematics. These examples represent institutional learning about how multiple knowledge traditions can strengthen enquiry.

India's contributions are globally recognised. Appreciating the decimal system's depth and simplicity, Pierre-Simon Laplace, a leading mathematician and astronomer, wrote: "India gave us the ingenious method of expressing all numbers by means of 10 symbols." Historians have traced trigonometric series and techniques of approximation to Indian texts that predate Isaac Newton and James Gregory. When students study how Mathematics developed in India and elsewhere, they understand that no region has a monopoly on insight.

When HEIs use the UGC's LOCF to teach modern Mathematics well, and then ask students to test claims from classical sources with today's tools, they create graduates who reason across traditions and time. Why oppose an inclusive maths LOCF that equips graduates to write proofs, analyse data, build models, and trace ideas from their origin to future use?

The writer is former chairman, UGC and former V-C, JNU. Views are personal

Books will outlive the AI invasion

... if their future is in the hands of women

ZERO HOUR
BY DEREK O'BRIEN

A FRIEND TOLD me not to do a column on this subject. It is completely pointless writing about three women, international literary rock stars, who get thousands of column centimetres of media attention and are feted all over the world. Why bother to write a column on these three much-decorated writers? They get enough.

In a 2007 article, 'Why Women Read More Than Men', Eric Weiner writes, "A couple of years ago, British author Ian McEwan conducted an admittedly unscientific experiment. He and his son waded into the lunch-time crowds at a London park and began handing out free books. Within a few minutes, they had given away 30 novels. Nearly all of the takers were women, who were 'eager and grateful' for the freebies while the men frowned in suspicion, or distaste." The inevitable conclusion, wrote McEwan: "When women stop reading, the novel will be dead."

So here I am writing about how women read, and if women stopped reading, the book market would collapse overnight. And if women are reading, why are we not talking enough about women who write?

2025 has indeed turned the spotlight on some exceptional Indian women writers. Banu Mushtaq and Deepa Bhasthi won the International Booker for Heart Lamp, a collection of short stories all centred around the life of Muslim women, mostly in Karnataka. Earthy and honest, the stories have now been read by thousands of readers in India alone. Mushtaq and Bhasthi have been deservedly celebrated all over the country and outside. The author of Heart Lamp knows intimately the lives of the women she has written of, as an activist, a lawyer and a chronicler. The translator has caught every nuance of dialect and attire and food in these stories, and together these two women have become part of India's literary history.

Meanwhile, far away from Karnataka, India, Kiran Desai, who lives in Queens, New York, spent 20 years writing her next book after her Booker-winning The Inheritance of Loss. A story of modern love, of Indians far away from India, every word Desai has written has been polished over years of being dedicated to the story she had to tell. Hours after her new novel, The Loneliness of Sonia and Sunny, was shortlisted for the Booker Prize, I asked her, "What discipline did you follow to work on a book for 20 years?" Here is what she told me: "I follow a discipline that I think is so deeply embedded in me now after all of these years of working. Every morning I go straight to my desk. I think of it as a spiritual discipline, a code of austerity that I keep so that I can work well. Every single day I work like an ant or a bee or an earthworm. Just transposing one little molecule of real life into artistic life, just carrying, transposing it every day. Like transferring one little crumb into the artistic realm and working without knowing, without a vision of what I'm working towards. So really like an ant, you know, the vision is beyond the horizon for me for very many years."

Desai's mother, the legendary Anita Desai's book Rosarita made it to Barack Obama's 2025 list of summer reads. If Anita Desai can write like this at 88, we should all be inspired. It is a gem of a book about a woman from India who goes to Mexico in pursuit of independence and art.

And speaking of Booker winners, what about the woman who started it all, Arundhati Roy? Her memoir Mother Mary Comes to Me is a riveting account of an unusual childhood, of a difficult parent, and of how a woman cannot be neatly labelled always as the perfect mother or daughter. Perhaps it's also about the creation of a writer. She writes, "I've thought of my own life as a footnote to the things that really matter. Never tragic, often hilarious. Or perhaps this is the lie I tell myself. Maybe I pitched my tent where the wind blows strongest, hoping it would blow my heart clean out of my body. Perhaps what I'm about to write is a betrayal of my younger self by the person I've become. If so, it's no small sin. But I'm in no position to be the judge of that."

But if we talk about women who write, then why not close the gap and also talk about the women who take books to readers? In many cities across the country, my friend tells me, independent stores and libraries are coming up started by women. Their aim? To take the books the last mile to readers. Away from the algorithm of Amazon, there are more and more women out there who are talking to book buyers, readers young and old, and trying to put their next magical read into their hands.

Are women the future of reading, writing and the creation of books? I don't know. But if they are, then this son of a woman who was a primary school teacher, and husband of a woman who reads voraciously, is sure books will outlive the invasion of AI.

And finally, can any article on authors who happen to be women be complete without at least a mention of a lady of Indian origin? She was born in England, and now lives between Rome and New York. She writes fluently in English and Italian. Oh yes, she speaks fluent Bengali too — her mother tongue. If you still haven't worked out which Pulitzer Prize winner I am referring to — turn the page.

The writer is MP and leader, All India Trinamool Congress Parliamentary Party

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

MYSURU'S EXAMPLE

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'A festival for all' (*IE*, September 25). The Mysuru Dasara celebration festival is a shared cultural heritage of the state, rather than being confined to a single faith. The government's decision to invite Banu Mushtaq to inaugurate the festivities reaffirms the importance of inclusivity, as enshrined in our Constitution. The opposition to her presence was not only misplaced but also posed a threat to India's secular fabric. By resisting communal politics and celebrating diversity, Mysuru has once again demonstrated that the true spirit of festivals lies in unity.

S S Paul, *Nadia*

HIS STORY AND OURS

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'The last Assamese icon' (*IE*, September 15). Assam's Zubeen Garg, who began singing from the age of three, was an icon for several generations of children and youth who grew up singing or humming his songs. Zubeen sang over 38,000 songs in 40 languages and dialects. For many, he was an embodiment of Assam's cultural pride, carrying the state's voice to national and international platforms. He also went on to compose music for 38 Assamese, four Bengali and three Hindi films. A man dedicated to strong convictions, he defied the ULFA's ban on singing Hindi songs during Bihu functions, saying that they have no right to give diktats to artistes. He also led the agitation against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). His songs will live on, his voice will echo in millions of hearts, and his memory will remain woven into the story of Assam.

Sanjay Chopra, *Mohali*

MEDICAL MISOGYNY

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Dealing in pain' (*IE*, September 24). Women's health is worryingly understudied and neglected. Fear-mongering around the intake of painkillers during pregnancy, like Donald Trump's unfounded claims, could worsen the level of care for women in the medical field. It would lead to pregnant women and assigned-female-at-birth individuals being made to withstand unbearable, unnecessary pain.

Ananya Podder, *Kolkata*

REST WELL, DICKIE

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'The no-outer' (*IE*, September 25). Aged 92, Harold 'Dickie' Bird was a gentle giant who commanded respect from the toughest cricketers. He disciplined players with a firm hand, nay finger, in 66 Tests and 69 One-Day Internationals between 1975 and 1996. The English legend's last match was the first Test for two future Indian icons — Sourav Ganguly and Rahul Dravid — against England at Lord's. Fans admired his mannerisms on the field — the double forearm stretch, a hunched stance, intense concentration, that flat cap and a baggy white coat — and they lapped up his every antic. Bird was held in such high esteem across sport that the Barnsley Football Club paid tribute to him with a minute's applause before their English Football League Cup match against Brighton. Rest well, Dickie.

Khokan Das, *Kolkata*

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If there are questions of current or contemporary relevance that you would like explained, please write to explained@indianexpress.com

EXPLAINED SCI-TECH

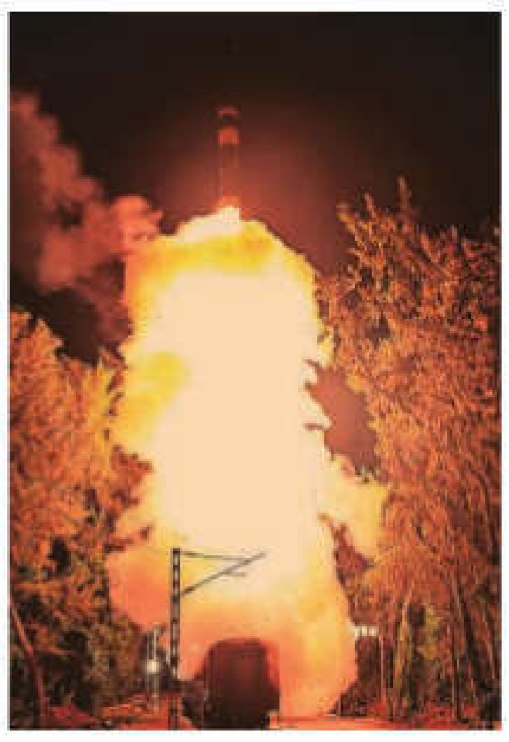
WHY RAIL-BASED AGNI-P MISSILE TEST LAUNCH IS SIGNIFICANT

ARJUN SENGUPTA
NEW DELHI, SEPTEMBER 25

IN THE early hours of Thursday, the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) test-fired the Agni-Prime (Agni-P) missile from a rail-based mobile launcher.

Defence Minister Rajnath Singh congratulated the DRDO and the Strategic Forces Command for the test, stating that it had put India in a "group of select nations" who have developed "canisterised launch systems" that can operate out of the railway network.

Thus far, only Russia, the US, China, and possibly North Korea had the capability of launching long range ballistic missiles from rail-based platforms.



Agni-P test fired from a rail-based mobile launcher. *X/@rajnathsingh*

Capability to strike back

Mobile launch platforms are crucial to a country's second strike capabilities: that is, a country's ability to survive a nuclear attack and then launch its own counterattack.

Developments in satellite imagery, mobile sensing, and missile technology have made stationary launchers vulnerable to enemy attacks.

"Silos are increasingly vulnerable to both nuclear and conventional strikes due to improvements in missile accuracy," Thomas MacDonald, of the Nuclear Policy Program, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, wrote in his paper 'Tracking mobile missiles' (2024).

This has put a premium on mobile launch platforms, which are seen by military strategists as much more survivable in case of all-out war. Such platforms include submarines, aircraft, and ground-based mobile launchers that can be operated on roads or rail.

Why rail-based launchers?

Rail-based platforms come with certain specific benefits.

■ Road-based systems can only be operated on certain routes, where the roads' dimensions and quality allow heavy missiles and launchers to be transported. While the rail-based platforms too are limited by the extent of a nation's rail network, India's roughly 70,000-km grid can carry missiles to all corners of the country, without the need for additional preparation like fixing potholes or widening road bottlenecks.

■ There are thousands of tunnels in India's railway network. These can be used by rail-based launchers to hide from enemy satellite surveillance. In fact, the capability to launch from the tracks means that the launcher can be kept in hiding till the very last moment before a missile is deployed.

■ Compared with submarine launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs), rail-based platforms are significantly cheaper to construct and maintain. As such, it is far more efficient to scale up such platforms than to maintain a fleet of ballistic missile submarines.

Agni-P: successor to Agni-I

India's hailed Agni series of medium to intercontinental range ballistic missiles was initially developed in the late 1980s. Agni-I, a medium range ballistic missile (MRBM) with a range of 700-1,000 km, was tested in 1989.

While the Agni-I platform continues to serve a specific use case, defence planners have long felt the need to upgrade some of its systems. Thus was born the Agni-P, which improved upon Agni-I's range and borrowed propulsion and navigation technologies from the Agni-IV and Agni-V missiles.

With a mass of 11,000 kg, Agni-P is a two-stage solid-fuel propelled missile with an operational range of 1,000 km to 2,000 km. It can carry high explosive, thermobaric or nuclear warheads.

DRUG-RESISTANT 'NIGHTMARE BACTERIA' ON RISE IN U.S.: CDC REPORT

PAPER CLIP
NEW RESEARCH

INFECTION RATES from drug-resistant "nightmare bacteria" rose almost 70% between 2019 and 2023, according to a new report from the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) scientists.

Bacteria that are difficult to treat due to the so-called NDM gene primarily drove the increase, CDC researchers wrote in an article published Monday in the *Annals of Internal Medicine*. Only two antibiotics work against those infections, and the drugs are expensive and must be administered through an IV, researchers said.

It's likely many people are unrecognised carriers of the drug-resistant bacteria, which could lead to community spread. That may play out in doctors' offices across the country, as infections long considered routine — like urinary tract infections — could become harder to treat, said Dr. Maroya Walters, one of the report's authors.

Antimicrobial resistance occurs when germs such as bacteria and fungi gain the power to fight off the drugs designed to kill them. The misuse of antibiotics was a big reason for the rise — unfinished or unnecessary prescriptions that didn't kill the germs made them stronger.

Dr Jason Burnham, a Washington University researcher not involved in the study, said the increase is likely linked to the Covid-19 pandemic. "We know that there was a huge surge in antibiotic use during the pandemic, so this is likely reflected in increasing drug resistance."

The CDC's count is only a partial picture. Many states are not fully testing and reporting cases. Even in states that do, cases tend to be among hospital patients sick enough to warrant special testing.

ASSOCIATED PRESS

EXPLAINED SPORTS

The javelin's arc

While emerging talent Sachin Yadav impressed with a fourth place finish, back issues prevented Neeraj Chopra from replicating his peak form during the recent World Athletics Championships in Tokyo. What does it take to throw a javelin over long distances? Strength is not everything...

NIHAL KOSHIE
NEW DELHI, SEPTEMBER 25

JAVELIN THROW is one of the most technically-challenging track and field disciplines. A javelin thrower's movement can be broken down into several phases and every tiny action matters. Athletes seek to optimise their actions during each phase to hurl the javelin further into the horizon.

Here's a breakdown.

The grip

It all begins with the grip. The athlete holds a synthetic/cotton cord wrapped around the javelin at the centre of gravity. There are three popular grips.

American grip: The thumb (inner side, closer to the throwing shoulder) and the index finger (outer side) are placed at the top of the cord while the remaining three fingers are placed around it. The index finger is key. "Make sure the pointing (index) finger is tied to the grip (cord) to transfer most of the energy," 2016 Olympic champion Thomas Röhler explains in an YouTube video titled 'How to throw the javelin'.

Finnish grip: Finland was once a powerhouse in javelin throw: till date, it has won 22 of the 81 medals in men's javelin at the Olympic Games. The Finns developed a grip in which the index finger is placed under the javelin, just above the cord. India's Neeraj Chopra, who won the gold medal in Tokyo 2020 (held in 2021) and a silver in Paris 2024, usually opts for this grip.

V-grip or fork grip: The top of the cord is gripped by the index and the middle finger, while the ring finger and the little finger go around the cord. "The reason people with elbow problems use it is because you always have the javelin on top of (above) the elbow," Röhler said.

Run-up & crossover

The run-up is where a javelin thrower gets into a running rhythm. The number of steps varies from athlete to athlete: Germany's Julian Weber takes 10 to 12 steps, while Chopra takes about 15. The idea is to gain momentum which can then be transferred into the throw.

During the run-up, the javelin is held above the shoulder level while the athlete runs in a straight line (before entering the crossover phase).

Rhythm is key, 2010 Commonwealth Games bronze medalist Kashinath Naik told *The Indian Express*. "The run up steps have to be in good rhythm. And after that when the crossover steps begin, the speed needs to increase steadily, along with maintaining rhythm," Naik said.

The crossover is essentially the movement with which the javelin thrower transitions from running straight to sideways. Entering the crossover, the thrower extends her throwing arm as far back as possible, placing the javelin in a launch position. The arm, however, must be kept relaxed.

The biggest challenge with the crossover is maintaining upper-body stability: this is because the motion requires an athlete to plant the right leg in front and across the left without transferring the weight forward prematurely.

Most athletes take three or four crosssteps (counting only the planting of the right leg); overstriding can kill the momentum gained.

The impulse stride

At the end of the crossover, the body weight is on the balls of the right foot (for right-handed throwers) as the left foot extends forward. The thrower then starts rotating on the balls of the right foot after it is first placed at an ideal angle of 45 degrees towards the throwing direction.

The athlete leans back before the power from the right leg is transferred into the throw via the hips to the upper body. This is known as the 'power position'.

"The right leg should be angled between 20 to 45 degrees. The trunk of the body should also be leaning backwards to allow for the power to be generated and rotation of the body in the direction of the throw and to enable speedy forward movement," Naik, who had coached Chopra in his early years, said.

A javelin thrower's legs are all-important. "The throw is built up from the legs. Legs, starting with the ankle and the toes, must be strong. All little joints are involved in building up the throwing movement from the bottom," Klaus Bartonietz, Chopra's coach during the Paris Olympics, said.

"I like a quote from (martial artist) Bruce Lee. He said 'take the power from the ground through your legs, the waist and into the arm'," Bartonietz said.

Block, release angle

The blocking leg, the left one for a right-handed thrower, is planted like that of a fast bowler — without bending the knee.

"The left leg during the block should land in the same line as the heel of the right leg (when the ball of the right foot was planted for the impulse stride)," Naik said.

The block allows all the power to be transferred into the throw. And in the process, it puts extreme pressure on the body. "We have one tonne of weight, which is like a small car, on the block foot... So it's really tough," Röhler had said in July.

Julius Yego, the 2015 World Champion, compared the blocking phase to a handbrake being pulled when a car stops.

"Because you need to stop. It is like, sometimes you are going 100 kmph in a car and you have to use the emergency brake," Yego had told *The Indian Express* in July.

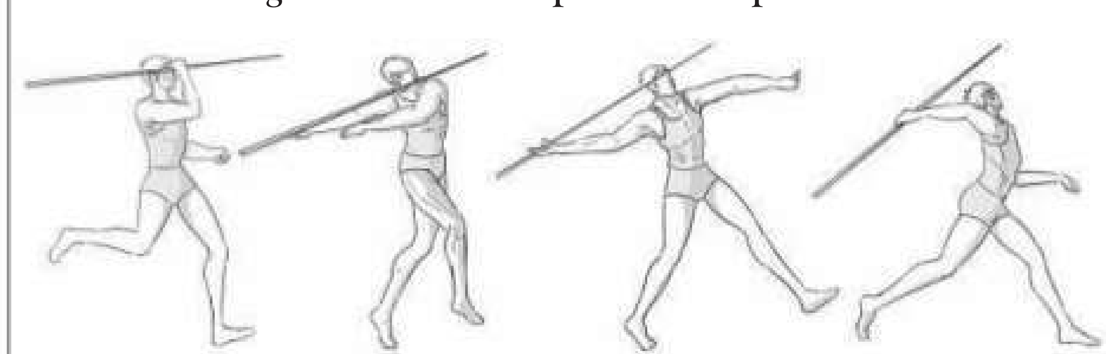
The angle of the release of the javelin should ideally be between 32 and 40 degrees, depending on the conditions on the day of the competition, to maximise the distance.

Although high school physics textbooks say that for achieving maximum range, a projectile should be launched at a 45-degree angle, this is only true for a situation where the launch occurs from the same height as the target.

In the case of a javelin, the athlete's height means that the javelin is launched from roughly 2 metres above the ground.

How to throw: sequence of steps

An athlete's movement can be broken down into several phases; nailing each of them is imperative for a perfect throw



JAVELIN BASICS

Key Specs

JAVELIN: For men, it weighs 800 grams; is 2.6 to 2.7 metres long. For women, it weighs 600 grams; is 2.2 to 2.3 metres.

SHOES: Spikes for enhanced grip and ankle support, as well as front of feet support for athletes.

ACCESSORIES: Athletes can use wrist support for medical purposes, and a lumbar support belt for back and spine protection. They are not permitted to wear a glove on their throwing hand.

Rules & Regulations

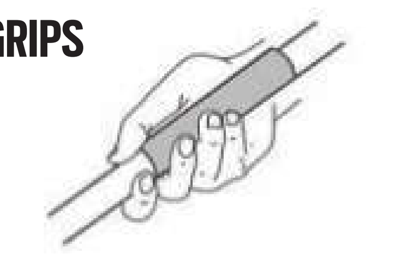
■ The runway should be at least 30 meters long. The athlete must complete the run up within this length. Stepping out of the runway leads to a foul.

■ The athlete must not turn the back to the landing area at any stage during their approach and throw.

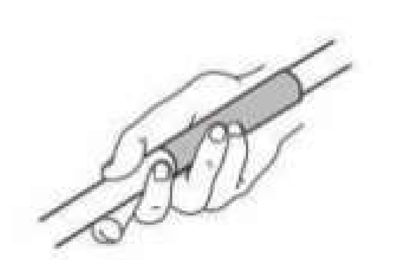
■ The javelin must be thrown over the shoulder or upper part of the throwing arm.

■ The javelin must strike the ground with the metal head before any other part of the javelin, and within the funnel-shaped throwing sector.

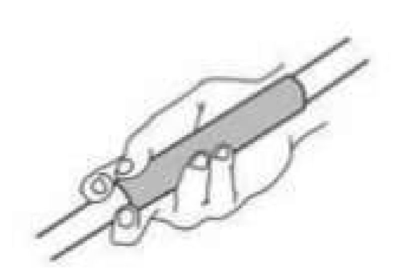
GRIPS



AMERICAN GRIP
Good option for beginners; easy to understand, use



FINNISH GRIP
More advanced option; offers better control, directed power



FORK GRIP
Also beginner-friendly; improves rotation for more controlled flight

Illustrations: Komal

'Neeraj is a speed thrower, needs to return to his strengths': Javelin legend Uwe Hohn

NIHAL KOSHIE
NEW DELHI, SEPTEMBER 25

UWE HOHN, the only man to have thrown the javelin a distance of more than 100 metres, spoke to *The Indian Express* about the techniques of some of the top throwers after the recent World Championships in Tokyo.

He revealed why Arshad Nadeem can flounder at times, how Julian Weber can touch 95m, how Keshorn Walcott nailed the gold at Tokyo, and what Chopra needs to do to return to his very best.

NEERAJ CHOPRA
INDIA, PB: 90.23M

"Neeraj is a speed thrower. He has not improved his technique and speed as much as he could have. In the World Championships, he had no rhythm. He tried to throw with just his upper body (Chopra said he had "back issues"). This tendency could be seen throughout the season, even when he threw 90 m. He needs to return to his strengths — flexibility, agility and speed — and improve hip-shoulder separation and body position. He also needs to lose weight, and get back to being an athlete again."

ARSHAD NADEEM
PAKISTAN, PB: 92.97M

"Nadeem is a power thrower. He used his body size in 2024 (Olympics). His running is bad, he has bad ground contact that had a bad influence on his technique and affected the stability of throwing position. He needs to fix his knee and improve ability to run and jump."

JULIAN WEBER
GERMANY, PB: 91.51M

"Weber is a power thrower who has improved his technique. He throws the javelin straighter than before. His weakness is the run up, which hurt him in Tokyo (World Championships). He can throw 95m if he can sort out his running and improve his rhythm."

KESHORN WALCOTT,
TRINIDAD & TOBAGO, PB: 90.16M

"His technique and power have improved, and he hit (threw) the javelins pretty clean. He can still improve his body position and release angle."

ANDERSON PETERS,
GRENADA, PB: 93.07M

"Peters is a power thrower. His technique is not great but he has gotten better. His quality of release like angle and cleanness of hitting (throwing) the javelin has gotten much better."

PB: Personal best

'Science doesn't link paracetamol use by pregnant women to autism'

Prof Sheffali Gulati, faculty in-charge of child neurology division in the paediatrics department, AIIMS, unpacks Trump's claims. She spoke to RINKU GHOSH

EXPLAINED INTERVIEW

SHEFFALI GULATI

AFTER US PRESIDENT Donald Trump linked the use of Tylenol by pregnant women to autism in children, the World Health Organization (WHO) has declared that evidence of any such link is inconsistent.

Trump also discouraged giving Tylenol to babies, and argued for using folic acid to treat autism. He further said there would be recommendations that vaccines such as the measles, mumps, rubella and varicella (MMRV) are given in a delayed manner or in smaller doses, though there is no scientific evidence to establish that these vaccines harm children.

What is Tylenol?

It is a brand name for acetaminophen, or paracetamol, which we use as a pain-reliever and a fever-reducer. Used under medical supervision and within dosage as advised by the doctor, paracetamol is safe for use during pregnancy.

Every drug should be taken based on the severity of fever and infection as well as consultation with the doctor. It should not be taken casually during pregnancy. Indians tend to self-medicate with paracetamol at the slightest hint of a body ache. That should be avoided.

Can taking the drug during pregnancy be linked to the development of autism?

First of all, there is no science-based evidence or research till date which shows that paracetamol, when taken by pregnant women as advised by the doctor, is a causative factor of autism.

This is not a simple condition and cannot be attributed to a single factor. It depends on genetic factors (related to genes) or epigenetic factors (environmental influences and behaviour that modify how genes are expressed, a process by which the information encoded in a gene is turned into a body function). These external factors include diet, exercise, early-life experiences, nutrition status, exposure to pesticides and air pollution.

What about existing evidence on Tylenol use and pregnancy?

Many observational studies have found associations but none of them could establish direct causality. There were far too many confounding factors, which suppressed conversations on the real causes of autism among children.

Research by Karolinska Institutet, Stockholm, last year found that paracetamol use during pregnancy was not associated with children's risk of autism, ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder) or intellectual disability.

This study analysed data from 2.48 million children born in Sweden between 1995 and 2019. In initial analyses, which did not account for shared familial factors, researchers found a slight increase in the risk of autism and ADHD among children whose mothers used paracetamol during pregnancy.

But in a sibling-controlled analysis, which compared siblings, the same association was not found. The mother would have been taking paracetamol in all her pregnancies but all her children weren't exposed to the risk of developing autism. In other words, the drug cannot be held up as a trigger because clearly other factors are at play.

What does current research on autism lack the most?

Any understanding of how genes impact children should begin with adolescent girls in the cohort.

They will become mothers in the future, so their nutrition status, their vaccine status, their diet, lifestyle, environment, and all that shapes them need to be studied to understand what could impact their progeny.

What is leucovorin, the drug the Trump administration says can cure autism?

Leucovorin is a form of folic acid, a B vitamin. Folate is essential for making DNA and other genetic material.

The recommendation to use leucovorin for treating autism seems to stem from studies that show how low levels of folate in the brain can lead to a condition called cerebral folate deficiency. Some studies have shown that folic acid up to 2 mg per day can improve social communication but larger studies have to be done to warrant medical use.

What about Trump's claim that vaccines should be graded in their use as they are linked to autism?

There have been extensive reviews and large-scale studies that have consistently demonstrated no association between autism and the MMR vaccine or vaccine components like thimerosal. There has been a lot of misinformation, referencing discredited research to support claims that undermine scientific consensus.

The belief that vaccines might cause autism was traced back to a paper published in *The Lancet* in 1998, which was deeply flawed and was retracted in 2010. But it set the anti-vaccine narrative.

I led a systematic review for AIIMS, where the sample comprised 2,013,752 children, from varied geographic and healthcare contexts, including national birth registries, health maintenance organisations and case–control designs. Subjects spanned North America, Europe and Asia, included both general pediatric cohorts and high-probability groups such as siblings of autistic children. No definitive link was found.

The Tribune
ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Ladakh in turmoil

Centre must thwart attempts to derail talks

LADAKH's long-preserved, much-cherished peace has been shattered by bloodshed and arson. Protests over key demands — statehood and inclusion in the Sixth Schedule — spiralled out of control on Wednesday. Four persons lost their lives in clashes between protestors and police personnel in Leh, leading to the imposition of curfew. The developments are all the more disturbing as the Centre's representatives are in the middle of negotiations with influential groups from the UT. The violence has forced renowned Ladakhi activist Sonam Wangchuk to cut short his hunger strike. In an attempt to soothe frayed tempers, he has asserted that "we do not want instability in Ladakh and the country".

Bordering China, Ladakh is central to India's strategic interests along the Line of Actual Control. Therefore, the Union government needs to handle the volatile situation with sensitivity. The gambit of accusing Wangchuk, who has a sizeable support base, of inciting the mob with 'provocative' statements may backfire. A thorough probe must be conducted to find out whether the violence was spontaneous or orchestrated. The BJP is pointing a finger at the Congress, while the police have not ruled out the role of the 'foreign hand'. However, wild speculation and misinformation should be countered strongly by the authorities. Also, any attempt to discredit the Ladakhi agitation or derail ongoing talks must be thwarted.

It was only a few months ago that new reservation and domicile policies were announced for the tourism-dependent region. The Centre's immediate priorities should be to restore normalcy and take a call on extending the Constitution's Sixth Schedule to Ladakh. This Schedule, currently applicable to the tribal population of Tripura, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Assam, has special provisions for governance and financial powers. Statehood for Ladakh is not feasible right now as a similar demand by neighbouring J&K is hanging fire. The Centre must continue to engage with Ladakhis and do its utmost for their welfare.

Trump at the UN

Ending wars requires more than rhetoric

AT the United Nations General Assembly, Donald Trump painted himself as a peacemaker, boasting that his leadership had helped "end seven wars" and restrain conflict. Yet the substance of his speech revealed something very different: a leader who weakens the very pillars of cooperation needed to secure lasting peace. Most striking was his dismissal of climate change as the "greatest con job ever." Climate change is already driving droughts, floods and food insecurity — all triggers of conflict. To deny this reality while claiming to preserve peace is a contradiction that exposes the emptiness of Trump's rhetoric.

His denunciation of migration as a force that "destroys nations" was equally corrosive. Migration has long been part of human history, shaping societies and fuelling progress. Casting migrants as threats feeds xenophobia and fractures communities. Far from preventing conflict, such rhetoric breeds resentment and division. Peace is not secured by shutting doors. Trump's broadside against the UN — branding it ineffective and hypocritical — further undermines his peacemaker claim. The UN is imperfect, but it remains the only global body that provides a framework for dialogue, humanitarian relief and peacekeeping. To attack it while presenting America as a guardian of peace is to weaken the very institutions that prevent wars from escalating.

For India, the lesson is evident. While maintaining strong relations with Washington, New Delhi must not be drawn into isolationist or sceptic politics. Instead, India should double down on multilateralism, climate leadership and inclusive global governance. Peace cannot be reduced to military restraint alone; it demands cooperation on shared human challenges. Trump's UN speech revealed the paradox of a leader claiming credit for ending wars while fanning the conditions that ignite future ones. True peacemaking requires solidarity, not slogans.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 26, 1925

Commonwealth of India Bill and the AICC

WE are sorry to learn that a resolution supporting Annie Besant's Commonwealth of India Bill was lost at the last meeting of the All-India Congress Committee (AICC) for want of a seconder. This treatment of a measure the principles of which have undoubtedly the bulk of political opinion in India behind them and which the leader of His Majesty's principal opposition in England has declared to be "an admirable basis of discussion" is as surprising as it is ill-advised. It is all the more extraordinary because the principles of the Bill are practically identical with those of the joint demand which the Assembly under the leadership of the Swarajists has within the last fortnight presented to the British Government. What prevented the AICC from according its formal support to such a measure? Is it the question of sanction? What sanction has the Assembly's own demand behind it which can be said to be lacking in the case of the Commonwealth of India Bill? Are the Swarajists, the Independents and the Liberals, who have made common cause in presenting the joint demand, of the same mind on this question of sanction, the question of the steps by which the will of the people is to be enforced in the event of the Government's refusal? Have the Swarajists themselves come to a definite decision on the subject? If not and if in spite of all this, they had no objection to the presentation of a joint demand on behalf of the people of India, why on earth could they not do the same thing in the case of this Bill?

Industry 2025: Time to pivot

India's own 4.0: Inquiry, Inclusion, Investment, Innovation

LT GEN SS MEHTA (RETD)
EX-WESTERN ARMY COMMANDER AND FORMER DG, CONFEDERATION OF INDIAN INDUSTRY

ATMANIRBHARTA: A country dependent on others for its core needs can't claim autonomy in a fracturing world. ISTOCK

THE world is no longer predictable. Wars in Europe and West Asia drag on. Supply chains are weaponised — from chips to APIs to energy. Tariff walls rise faster than agreements. The WTO limps; our neighbourhood — the Gulf, Pakistan, China — adds its own risk premium.

Nor is India alone. The United States shields its industries with tariffs, and now H-1B. Europe deploys carbon walls, Africa grapples with dependence, and ASEAN struggles with supply chain fragility. Each geography seeks insulation; only those who build inner resilience can offer stability to others.

Atmanirbharta as compass

For India, survival is no longer enough. *Atmanirbharta* is not a slogan but a mission: a country dependent on others for its core needs cannot claim autonomy in a fracturing world.

This is why the Finance Minister's call to industry carries unusual urgency: invest and pivot.

Globally, Industry 4.0 is shorthand for smart factories, automation and digital integration. For India, it must mean something deeper. Industry 4.0 is our own compass — Inquiry, Inclusion, Investment, Innovation.

Inquiry in classrooms must breed creators, not imitators. Inclusion should unlock the widest talent pool. Investment must treat profits as seed corn, not disposable cash. Innovation should build ownership instead of paying royalties. This is not the West's Industry 4.0, it is India's version, rooted in conscience and scale, aimed not just at efficiency but to inclusivity devoid of crutches.

Breaking the vicious cycle

Margins are thin because scale is weak, and scale weak because purchasing power is low. The way out is global markets with higher margins, comparative advantage and reinvestment into R&D.

Our much-celebrated IT industry is another case: a high-margin business that prefers to return cash rather than build translational AI models. The result: leadership in services but not in global products.

The mirror

Too often, we mistake volume for value. We celebrate scale, but not substance.

India assembles cars, yet no indigenous 300-350 HP engine has gone commercial. Railways still relies on foreign-designed diesels. Defence shells without power plants. Strategy cannot ride on borrowed transmission chains and horsepower.

A Stanford study ranks India fourth in AI vibrancy, engineers flood GitHub, discourse is active, skills abundant. But in patents, investment, infrastructure and foundational models, we lag. We contribute to AI, but do not own it. Vibrancy without platforms is dependency.

This is the mirror: horsepower borrowed, chips outsourced, APIs dependent, telecom leased, batteries bought. A nation of engineers still running on royalties.

The choice is stark: to persist as an IT service economy without its own products, and a hard-engineering base running on borrowed parts; or to pivot to inquiry, innovation and ownership.

> No nation of our size and talent in the Global South is better placed to lead.

Not without success

This is not failure alone. When inquiry, investment and resolve align, India delivers.

- ISRO put probes on Mars and the Moon at a fraction of global cost.
- Aadhaar, UPI, CoWIN show digital inclusion at scale.
- Despite API dependence, pharma made India the world's trusted generics supplier.
- Unicorns in fintech, logistics, SaaS prove entrepreneurial fire.
- Mission for 6G, though nascent, and Quantum, both on the way.

These successes prove the point: when policy, profit and shareholder value align, India performs. The pivot is not just technical but mental. Dependency cannot remain strategy; innovation must.

Time to pivot

Industry cannot be a bystander. It must be co-traveller, not passenger. The state can de-risk, but only industry can take the risk. Shareholders must see themselves not only as collectors of quarterly returns, but as partners in a 25-year journey. Each rupee of profit is not an end, but a passport to global presence. The nation's comparative advantages, scale, talent, geography mean little if companies aim only to survive. They must aspire to lead, co-invest with the state and carry the flag abroad.

They have the responsibility in shaping the nation's arc. The mirror is harsh, but it is also generous: it shows a vast, unfinished canvas. The call is not to retreat behind tariffs but to venture into global markets with confidence. If industry travels this path, it does so not alone but alongside policy, capital and people. Together, this quartet forms the true engine of *Atmanirbharta*.

Industry is not being summoned to serve policy; it is being invited to script history; and bring in the tide that raises all boats.

Learning from global practice

Apple, Microsoft, Google plough billions into risky research; the few wins lock in leadership. Amazon reinvests in logistics and cloud. Huawei and BYD build ecosystems in telecom and mobility. Israel turns defence R&D into startups. Everywhere, profits are treated as seed corn, not disposable dividends.

Unlocking advantage: Where policy, shareholders & capital unite

This is where India's true edge lies: policy and capital acting in concert to build global players, not domestic survivors. If both sides rise to this compact, India's advantages will no longer turn ironic; they will be iconic, compounding into returns, resilience and reach.

A yearly "conscience call" should stand beside quarterly results, measuring inclusion and responsibility.

Policy must de-risk

Policy must:

- Reward long-term R&D, not just capital expenditure.
- Co-invest through sovereign innovation funds.
- Simplify regulation so startups build, not drown in compliance.
- Guarantee swift IP protection.
- Ready Indian exports for carbon tariffs.
- Channel pension and insurance funds into innovation capital.
- Lay down norms; benchmark companies; incentivise compliance; scale up the willing and performing firms into global players.

The clarion call

This is a call for all hands on deck — policy, academia, scientists, entrepreneurs and veterans who can transit from uniform to seed unicorns. *Atmanirbharta* here is not exclusion but creation: a knowledge powerhouse that is non-invasive, inviting, sharing and caring.

India's industry has always risen when the world doubted, in Y2K, in the IT boom, in digital public goods. Today, the doubt is within: are we content to assemble and re-label, or will we design and own? The answer will not come from policy alone, but from boardrooms that choose civil courage over comfort (exceptions apart).

Blessed by geography, we anchor the global maritime lifeline in the Indian Ocean; powered by demographics of age and scale; held by a civilisational unity-in-diversity. With both successes and failures as proof, it is time to pivot. No nation of our size and talent is better placed to lead the Global South. Industry's unique opportunity is not just to ride the highway to 2047, but to lay its stones, test its spans, and open its toll gates to the world.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

> The difficulty lies not in the new ideas, but in escaping from the old ones. —John Maynard Keynes

Where jackets walked, umbrellas danced

SAURABH MALIK

THE mist in the 1990s had its own authority. It rolled down from Jakhu, slipping through the pines, draping the Mall until even Scandal Point dissolved into whiteness. We walked by sound, not sight — a cough here, a laugh there, the peanut seller's cry stretched thin: "*Garam… garam… moongphali!*" Shimla in our *bachpan* wasn't a city, it was a school play. Jackets were costumes, umbrellas props, and every foggy morning a fresh performance.

Jackets were never bought; they were inherited. A brother's windcheater, a father's corduroy, a cousin's discarded blazer — handed down like winter folklore. Each carried history: a scuffed elbow from a tumble near Lakkar Bazaar, a letter forgotten in the pocket, the faint smell of someone else's perfume that lingered. To wear such a jacket was to wear memory stitched in wool and corduroy.

Each day, we set out in the proud uniform of hill culture. Amit wore a faded bomber from his cousin, Neeraj twirled a black umbrella so wide it announced him before he arrived, and I carried my oversized corduroy jacket with a modest chequered umbrella that looked borrowed from a retired headmaster. In Shimla, walking was fashion, not function. Umbrellas and jackets weren't accessories; they were identities — subtle hierarchies stitched in cloth.

We strutted through the mist like we owned it. My pockets rattled with toffees or a folded Ritz ticket, Amit's jingled with coins for peanuts, and Neeraj insisted his jacket hid a stitched-in lucky charm — though we suspected it was only an old handkerchief. Umbrellas — well, they were for style, fencing duels on the Mall, walking a girl home under a shared canopy, and, on desperate afternoons, became weapons against monkeys lunging for our softy cones from Loveena.

It was play to us then, heritage in hindsight.

Years later, when the Himachal High Court recalled Shimla's vanishing "umbrella-and-jacket culture," it was like watching an old photograph develop in water. They weren't talking of fashion, but of a way of life — our long walks, our collisions, our laughter.

Cars may have conquered the spaces where umbrellas once clashed and jackets once strutted, but those mornings survive — pressed in memory like a rhododendron petal in a diary.

Walking was never just transit, it was belonging. Jackets were diaries sewn in fabric, umbrellas flags of childhood. The true heritage of a town lies less in its buildings than in the sound of footsteps in the mist. Cars may take us farther, but only walking ever took us home.

The high court is right. In the hills, an umbrella was never just for rain, nor a jacket just for cold — they were how we carried our childhood on our backs. And like every school play, the stage remains in memory long after the curtains fall.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Take all stakeholders on board

Refer to '4 killed, 65 injured as Ladakh statehood protest turn violent'; the sudden flare-up in Leh is worrisome. Exhibiting lack of responsibility and accountability, the Centre has blamed climate activist Sonam Wangchuk and the Congress for the violent acts of a few. The government can no longer bury its head in sand; it needs to listen to the demands of the people. The Central government cannot act on its whims and fancies and has to take all stakeholders into confidence to find a peaceful solution. The government must dwell on finding a middle path.

AANYA SINGHAL, NOIDA

Don't alienate Ladakhi youth

The Centre had given wings to the dreams of Ladakhis for statehood during the parliamentary elections. Sonam Wangchuk has been demanding inclusion of Ladakh in the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution for a couple of years now. Any dilly-dallying by the Central government may not only worsen the situation but also fuel feelings of alienation and neglect in the minds of the people of Ladakh. The government should keep in mind the recent turmoil faced by Nepal. Also, India has two hostile neighbouring nations who are always ready to fish in troubled waters.

ARUN HASTIR, GURDASPUR

Sitting on mercy petitions

Refer to 'If offence grave, why Rajoana not hanged till now, asks SC'; the mercy petition of Rajoana has been hanging fire for over 13 years. The apex court had set a deadline for the Centre to take a call on his mercy petition by March 18, but to no avail. Compelled, the convict has now approached the SC for commutation of his death sentence into life imprisonment on account of inordinate delay in deciding his mercy petition. Such petitions should be disposed of in a time-bound manner.

MD SHARMA, SHIMLA

HP govt has missed the bus

Apropos of 'CM invites global investors to explore avenues'; the HP chief minister's call to investors to put their money in knowledge services is a bit too late. Himachal missed the boom in India's knowledge economy such as IT Enabled Services (ITES), which has passed on from metros to tier II and tier III cities, providing employment to millions of skilled workers. While states like Andhra Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Tamil Nadu have brought out policies to attract Global Capability Centres through financial incentives and subsidies, HP has missed the bus. The state has several institutions of excellence including an IIT, NIT and a Central university but the unemployment rate is among the highest in the country.

CHANDER SHEKHAR DOGRA, JALANDHAR

Trump's Nobel rivalry with Obama

The claim by Donald Trump at the UN General Assembly that he deserves a Nobel Peace Prize, even if made in jest, appears to be a response to his long-standing rivalry with former US President Barack Obama. It is believed that Obama's comments at the 2011 White House Correspondents' Dinner, where he publicly mocked Trump, fuelled his desire to run for President. With Obama also being a Nobel laureate, Trump seems to be seeking the same validation. This constant desire for the Nobel Prize seems less about genuine peacemaking and more about getting even with Obama.

HARSHITA SINGLA, RAJPURA

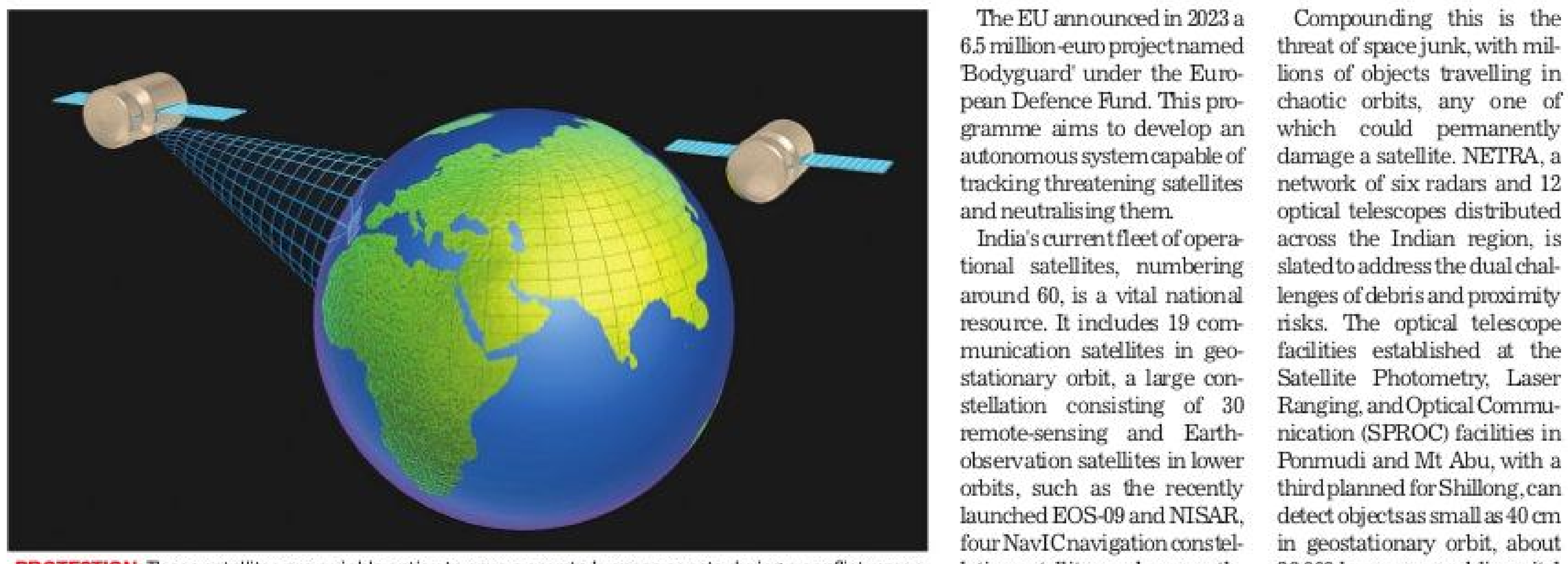
Nobody raises maids' issues

Apropos of 'Spare a thought for domestic workers'; sadly, nobody does so. House helps are neglected and exploited in Indian homes. Poverty forces families from the Hindi heartland to send their children to other states for household work. All of us are aware of their plight during the Covid pandemic when they walked hundreds of kilometres to reach their native places.

VK ANAND, CHANDIGARH

Letters to the Editor, typed in double space, should not exceed the 200-word limit. These should be cogently written and can be sent by e-mail to: Letters@tribunemail.com

Why 'bodyguard satellites' are necessary



TV VENKATESWARAN
VISITING PROFESSOR, IISER MOHALI

SAMPLE return missions to the Moon, a second mission to Mars, the imminent launch of Indians into space and the steady progress towards a permanent space station were, until recently, the tide of optimistic news coverage of the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO). However, this positive hum of the news cycle was suddenly interrupted by a ripple of strategic speculation.

An incident reportedly occurred in mid-2024 when a satellite from an unnamed neighbouring country executed a manoeuvre, bringing it within 1 km of a crucial Indian spacecraft in low-Earth orbit. While a collision was avoided, the unusually close approach was perceived as a possible test of capabilities, a silent 'show of strength' in the increasingly contested domain of space.

In 2023, the then ISRO Chairperson, S Somanath, delivering Air Chief Marshal PC Lal's 38th Memorial Lecture titled 'Strategic Capability Development in Space', said that ISRO has "observed spacecraft from friendly nations manoeuvring around Indian space assets, monitoring them."

In the wake of these incidents, reports have emerged citing unnamed sources that India is considering the design, construction and launch of dedicated 'bodyguard satellites'. India is not alone in the emerging concern for the vulnerability of space assets.

The security of satellites, which form the backbone of modern communication, navigation and surveillance, came to the fore with a notable event involving the French-Italian Athena-Fidus satellite, which was approached multiple times by a Russian Luch (Olymp) satellite between late 2017 and early 2018. The French government labelled the Russian satellite's close approach an "act of espionage."

The US' Geostationary Space Situational Awareness Program (GSSAP) satellites conducted a series of close approaches to several non-US satellites between 2016 and 2018, raising concerns about the nature of the manoeuvres.

At the heart of these incidents is a tech capability called Rendezvous and Proximity Operations, or RPOs. RPOs refer to the set of manoeuvres that allow a spacecraft to closely approach and maintain a specific relative position to another space object.

Initially developed for peaceful purposes, such as docking with space stations or servicing aging satellites, RPO tech has advanced in recent decades. With improvements in robotics, autonomous guidance systems and propulsion, these operations have become easier and more precise. A satellite can now be programmed to autonomously navigate towards a target satellite in a different orbital plane, match its velocity and hold a position a few hundred metres away, all with minimal intervention from ground controllers.

The recent Indian SpaDEX technology demonstrator mission of ISRO, which successfully docked two small satellites (SDX01 and SDX02) and later undocked them, involves similar technology.

PROTECTION: These satellites are a viable option to save a country's space assets during a conflict. ISTOCK

While this technology holds immense promise for the space sector, enabling in-space servicing and manufacturing, its dual-use nature is stark. The same capabilities that could repair a satellite could also be used to eavesdrop on its communications, inspect it for vulnerabilities, or, in a worst-case scenario, deliberately render it non-operational.

This potential to jeopardise space assets during a conflict, leaving a nation blind and deaf, has triggered a global scramble for defensive solutions.

In the scramble for solutions, the concept of bodyguard satellites has emerged as a viable option. The principle is analogous to its terrestrial counterpart: a dedicated, smaller satellite would be deployed to escort and protect a high-value asset, such as a military, communications or reconnaissance satellite. This bodyguard would be equipped with advanced sensors to continuously monitor the space around its charge, identifying and tracking any object that makes a suspicious approach. The measures could involve physically interposing itself between the threat and the protected satellite, using non-kinetic jamming techniques to disrupt a hostile spacecraft's sensors, or even possessing the capability to disable or destroy an aggressor.

> This bodyguard would be equipped with advanced sensors to continuously monitor the space around its charge, identifying and tracking any object that makes a suspicious approach.

This is no longer theoretical. Japan recently unveiled its defence guidelines, announcing plans to build bodyguard satellites by 2029, citing the development of anti-satellite weapons by other nations.

Following its unsettling experience with the Luch satellite, France commenced the YODA programme, an acronym for 'Eyes in Orbit for an Agile Demonstrator'. It aims to test the very technologies required for a bodyguard satellite. Initially planned for a launch in 2023, then 2024, the demonstrator is now scheduled for 2025.

The EU announced in 2023 a 6.5 million-euro project named 'Bodyguard' under the European Defence Fund. This programme aims to develop an autonomous system capable of tracking threatening satellites and neutralising them.

India's current fleet of operational satellites, numbering around 60, is a vital national resource. It includes 19 communication satellites in geostationary orbit, a large constellation consisting of 30 remote-sensing and Earth-observation satellites in lower orbits, such as the recently launched EOS-09 and NISAR, four NavIC navigation constellation satellites and seven other spacecraft, including AstroSat (astronomy) and SARAL (oceanography, jointly developed with CNES (Centre National d'Etudes Spatiales, French national space agency).

While the concept of dedicated bodyguard satellites remains officially unconfirmed, India's broader strategy for securing its orbital assets is in motion. Anchored by ISRO's Network for Space Object Tracking and Analysis (NETRA) project, this Rs 400-crore initiative is designed to provide crucial Space Situational Awareness (SSA) by tracking objects up to 36,000 km in geostationary orbit.

The urgency of such measures is clear in an increasingly congested space environment. The low earth orbit is becoming crowded with hundreds of nano- and mini-satellites. Concerns are pronounced regarding mega-constellations like Starlink, which prompted ISRO to adjust the orbit of its assets to 574 km. Despite this, more than 80 close approaches of less than 1 km were reported in 2021 alone.

Compounding this is the threat of space junk, with millions of objects travelling in chaotic orbits, any one of which could permanently damage a satellite. NETRA, a network of six radars and 12 optical telescopes distributed across the Indian region, is slated to address the dual challenges of debris and proximity risks. The optical telescope facilities established at the Satellite Photometry, Laser Ranging, and Optical Communication (SPROC) facilities in Ponmudi and Mt Abu, with a third planned for Shillong, can detect objects as small as 40 cm in geostationary orbit, about 36,000 km away, enabling vital Collision Avoidance Manoeuvres. India shares SSA data with global partners and participates in the Inter-Agency Space Debris Coordination Committee (IADC).

The Space-Based Surveillance-III Programme, approved by the Cabinet Committee on Security in October 2023, aims to fast-track the deployment of 52 military satellites for enhanced border surveillance, building on critical lessons from operations like Sindoor, where satellite intelligence proved invaluable. This, too, perhaps will contribute to the safety and protection of India's space assets.

While ISRO has not directly confirmed plans for bodyguard satellites, its 2022 report to the United Nations Office for Outer Space Affairs (UNOOSA), which mentioned the "possibility of establishing 'space-based platforms' for SSA alongside ground-based sensors", is curious and can be construed as a veiled indication that planning for India's own protective sentinels is underway.

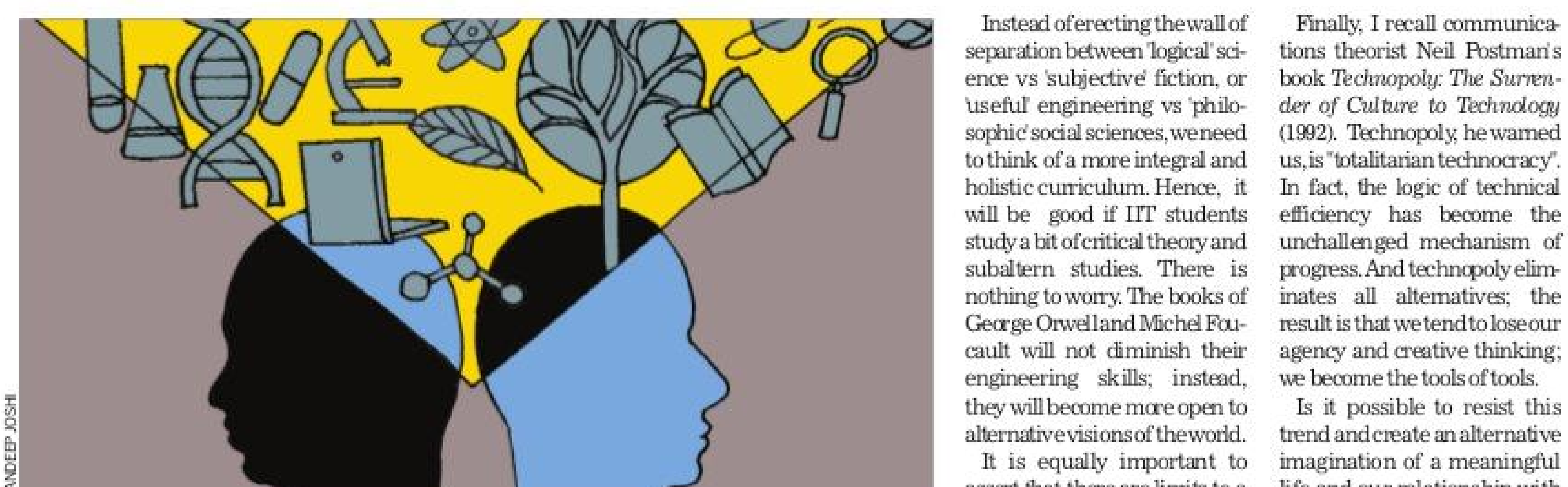
Beyond placements: The case for social sciences in IITs

AVIJIT PATHAK
SOCIOLOGIST

NOT everybody, it seems, is happy with the departments of humanities and social sciences in the IITs. Or, is it that there is some fear that the kind of critical questions some professors and researchers from these departments are raising might unsettle the primary function of the 'brand' IIT — the production of skilled and efficient techno-managers, the establishment of a close affinity between the dissemination of knowledge and the needs of the industry, and hence, the urge to retain a depoliticised/ 'value-neutral' learning milieu? In recent times, we are witnessing this tension rather sharply.

Take, for instance, an international workshop on 'South Asian Capitalism(s)' in which IIT-Bombay's Centre for Liberal Education wanted to be a partner. However, because of the discomfort with the workshop flyer, particularly its critical symbolism, the IIT authorities asked the organisers to take down the flyer from all social media platforms and remove IIT-Bombay's name from everything to do with this event. No wonder, many 'nationalists' came forward, saw it as a conspiracy and began to allege that it was another attempt by the "left-liberal ecosystem" to take over the 'brand' IIT! Not solely that.

The active presence of the Ambedkar-Periyar Study Circle at IIT-Madras has also caused some embarrassment to those who want the IITs to be free from the culture of protest and resistance. Even the Vice-Chancellor of a leading public university in the national capital — a university known for its departments of social sciences and liberal arts — has warned of the presence of the "woke-jihadi complex" in the IITs.



SANDEEP JOSHI

A meaningful response to this tension, I believe, would require a reflection on the politics of knowledge. To begin with, it is important to acknowledge that an educational centre that nurtures a new generation of vibrant young minds ought to be oceanic. That is, it should be open to diverse epistemologies and multiple traditions of knowledge. British scientist and novelist CP Snow pleaded for it sharply in 1959 in his book *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution*. He warned us of the danger implicit in the growing division between sciences and humanities.

For evolving a more comprehensive understanding of the world, as Snow argued, we need to build a bridge between the two cultures of sciences and humanities. Snow's message has acquired special relevance in our times when the hegemonic techno-science is all-pervading, and there is growing devaluation of liberal arts and humanities.

> As AI invades our imagination, it is important for scientists, visionaries and educators to redefine the role of technology in our daily life.

Let us understand it through an example. Suppose you wish to be an engineer and you are pretty good in your specialised field. However, it is equally important for you to be aware of the political economy, or the social context of your work. It is important to be reflexive, and ask yourself whether the techno-capitalist system uses you as a mere 'resource', and as a result, the knowledge you have acquired fails to serve the downtrodden in this highly asymmetrical society. Even if you are good in physics, mathematics and engineering, a meaningful study of the likes of Gandhi and Marx will further expand your mental horizon, and enrich you as a politically aware/socially sensitive professional.

Instead of erecting the wall of separation between 'logical' science vs 'subjective' fiction, or 'useful' engineering vs 'philosophic' social sciences, we need to think of a more integral and holistic curriculum. Hence, it will be good if IIT students study a bit of critical theory and subaltern studies. There is nothing to worry. The books of George Orwell and Michel Foucault will not diminish their engineering skills; instead, they will become more open to alternative visions of the world.

It is equally important to assert that there are limits to a purely technocratic/ instrumental notion of education. Of course, the narratives of 'placements and salary packages', and the presence of the IIT alumni in all major corporations across the world are tempting. Yet, it will be suicidal, if in the name of neoliberal/ market-driven logic of 'productivity', we forget that the higher objective of education, as political philosopher Martha Nussbaum said, is also to nurture the ethos of democracy, ecology, peace and social justice.

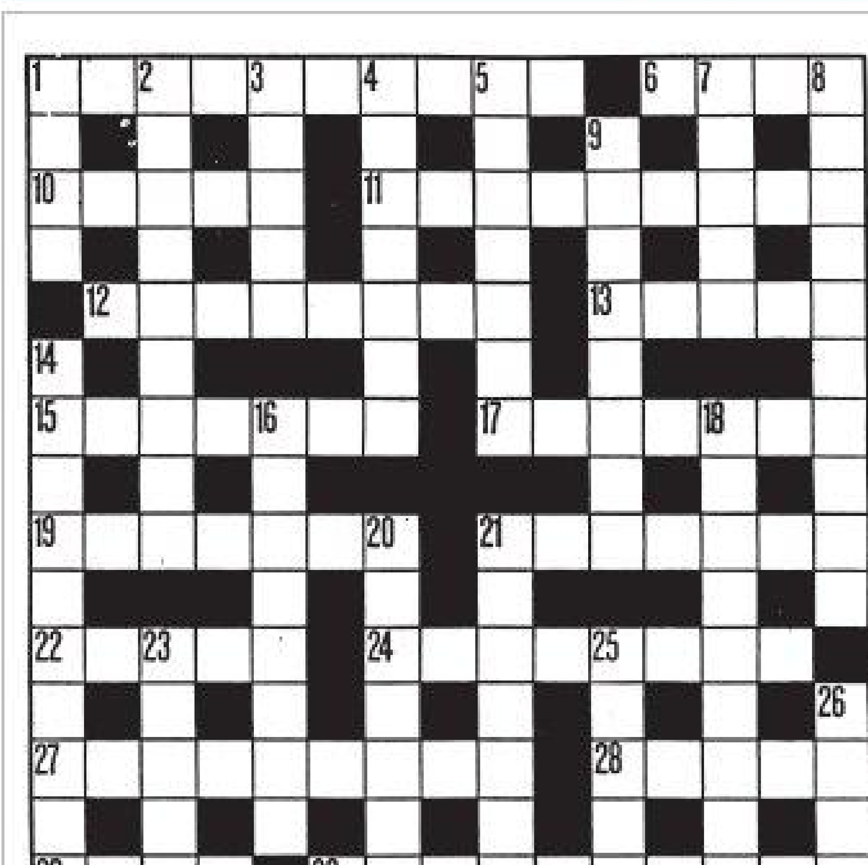
Thus, it is important for an IIT product to alter his/her self-perception: from a hyper-competitive/ atomised/ self-centric careerist to a politically conscious citizen in search of democratic and egalitarian values.

Finally, I recall communications theorist Neil Postman's book *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (1992). Technopoly, he warned us, is "totalitarian technocracy". In fact, the logic of technical efficiency has become the unchallenged mechanism of progress. And technopoly eliminates all alternatives; the result is that we tend to lose our agency and creative thinking; we become the tools of tools.

Is it possible to resist this trend and create an alternative imagination of a meaningful life and our relationship with technology? As AI invades the collective imagination, it is important for scientists, thinkers, visionaries and educators to redefine the role of technology in our everyday life. We need the spirit of critical pedagogy; we need a mode of thinking that can see beyond the lure of every new technological innovation, redefine the philosophy of life, and imagine a world free from what we are witnessing today: techniques replacing creative imagination; 'development' intensifying the horrors of climate emergency; and the alliance of billionaire technocrats and neoliberal fascists becoming a new reality.

Can the IITs be wholly indifferent to these challenges?

QUICK CROSSWORD



ACROSS
1 Stranded helplessly (4,3,3)
6 Bitter (4)
10 Sound and reliable (5)
11 Under the weather (3,6)
12 Refute (8)
13 North American lake (5)
15 Person of pragmatic disposition (7)
17 Severe suffering (7)
19 In the absence of (7)
21 Showing unusual promise (7)
22 Country of southeast Asia (5)
24 Habitual sleeplessness (8)
27 Call attention to (9)
28 Abnormally tall (5)
29 Variety of cabbage (4)
30 At minimum expense (2,3,5)

DOWN
1 An expectant silence (4)
2 Gad about (9)
3 Make sense (3,2)
4 Cease to participate (4,3)
5 Ruminate (7)
7 Smell (5)
8 Eager for action (6,2,2)
9 Worried (8)
14 Elicit no response (4,1,5)
16 Hero worship (8)
18 Get rid of (9)
20 Instruction (7)
21 Entreat (7)
23 Take keen delight (5)
25 Enchantment (5)
26 A short distance (4)

Yesterday's solution

Across: 1 Playful, 5 Alarm, 8 Straw poll, 9 SOS, 10 Easy, 12 Pinnacle, 14 Tremor, 15 Galaxy, 17 Khartoum, 18 Lead, 21 Odd, 22 Off-season, 24 Field, 25 Topiary.

Down: 1 Piste, 2 Air, 3 Fawn, 4 Look-in, 5 As long as, 6 Associate, 7 Mystery, 11 Skedaddle, 13 Foothold, 14 Take off, 16 Outfit, 19 Dingy, 20 Seep, 23 Spa.

SU DO KU

7		4					9	
5				9	8			
	9		2					
		9		2			7	
3		6				5		1
	1			6		8		
					2		1	
			9	3				6
	5					7		4

HARD

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

3	2	8	6	5	4	1	9	7
7	5	4	3	9	1	8	2	6
1	9	6	8	2	7	3	4	5
9	8	1	7	6	5	2	3	4
2	6	3	1	4	8	7	5	9
5	4	7	2	3	9	6	1	8
4	3	2	9	8	6	5	7	1
8	1	5	4	7	2	9	6	3
6	7	9	5	1	3	4	8	2

CALENDAR

SEPTEMBER 26, 2025, FRIDAY

- Shaka Samvat 1947
- Aashwin Shaka 4
- Aashwin Parvishte 11
- Hijari 1447
- Shukla Paksha Tithi 4, up to 9.34 am
- Vishkumbha Yoga up to 10:50 pm
- Vishakha Nakshatra up to 10:09 pm
- Moon enters Scorpio sign 3.24 pm

FORECAST

SUNSET: FRIDAY 18:14 HRS
SUNRISE: SATURDAY 06:13 HRS

CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	36	25
New Delhi	35	24
Amritsar	34	24
Bathinda	35	22
Jalandhar	34	24
Ludhiana	35	24
Bhiwani	36	26
Hisar	37	23
Sirsa	36	25
Dharamsala	29	20
Manali	28	17
Shimla	25	16
Srinagar	31	14
Jammu	35	24
Kargil	26	07
Leh	21	04
Dehradun	33	23
Mussoorie	24	17

TEMPERATURE IN °C

OUR VIEW

BLOOMBERG

Link up the rural energy economy to galvanize it

India's biofuel programme has served farmers well. To boost rural incomes, let's use fiscal resources to weave it into an expansive web of rural feedstock supplies from diverse sources

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's recent inauguration of a massive bamboo-based bio-refinery in Assam to produce fuel-grade ethanol is testimony to the government's resolve to diversify feedstock for biofuels beyond India's mainstay of maize and sugarcane. The biofuel initiative has had considerable success. Filling stations today supply petrol with up to 20% ethanol content, aiming to serve three objectives: *one*, reduce foreign exchange outflows, since we import 88% of our oil needs; *two*, raise farmer earnings; and *three*, reduce carbon emissions. But diversifying inputs is a challenge. To appreciate this, a review of the measures taken to arrive at the current blend is instructive.

Over the last decade, the Centre, through public-sector oil companies, has provided price and volume purchase support to the miller-distillers who mill farm produce and distil it for ethanol. With rising volumes and fuel blending targets, maize has seen a 70% jump in prices over the last four years, while sugarcane prices have held firm. Without the ethanol blending programme, not only would prices slide, cash liquidity at the farmer's end would also suffer, since the use of cane for biofuels has seen cane crushers paying their dues quickly. On the other hand, reduced hydrocarbons in our fuel tanks, thanks to blending, has not stanched forex outflows much, since petrol constitutes only around 17% of India's petroleum-product usage; also, rising EV adoption is likely to dampen demand for petrol. Clearly, the scheme exists largely for the benefit of farmers. India's acreage under maize cultivation is expected to expand robustly this year, but concerns of food security on account of farmers switching to this crop are unfounded at this stage; this crop's share of overall farm acreage would still be modest compared to that of wheat and rice, which are diet staples in India.

Having achieved momentum in its blending programme, the government should take a closer look at its economic costs. After all, maize and sugarcane are the low-hanging fruits for the purpose, as they are laden with high starch that converts to energy-rich ethanol. Bamboo is a less efficient source, but given its plentiful availability in the Northeast, Assam is a good location for a biofuel project. In time, a bustling service economy could come up around it. For greater diversity, though, we must harness raw materials like farm residue. The challenge here lies in developing supply chains for aggregation that would make it worthwhile for economic agents to collect, cart, crush, ferment and extract fuel-grade ethanol. State support for this must also cover the use of baling machines that operate for two months a year at most, which deters farmers and service providers from buying them, but can bundle up crop residue neatly for transport. This would meet the twin aims of 'Swadeshi' energy and reduced pollution from burnt residue. Such a network would weave India's biofuel programme into the larger rural energy economy, which ranges from solid fuels like wood pellets that 'co-fuel' power plants to gaseous fuels like compressed biogas, which serves cooking, transport and industrial needs. We must create the links needed for farmers to access various energy markets and find the best prices for their produce. This will raise incomes and insulate them better from farming vagaries like drought. Success would animate countryside commerce and justify our fiscal investment in such a network.

THEIR VIEW

Don't expect AI to transform the world overnight: Let's be patient

Like all tech revolutions, AI will take effect slowly. This is also why we must slow down to pace up

VINEET NAYAR
is founder chairman, Sampark Foundation.

Artificial intelligence (AI) will not save us. But people using AI might. Everywhere I go, I hear the same breathless excitement. Generative AI is hailed as the new saviour. Some worship it as the ultimate game-changer. Others whisper about disruption and doom. Valuations climb, pilot projects multiply and everyone seems desperate to be the first to claim they've cracked the AI code. But fire illuminates and blinds in equal measure.

Transformations can take long: History is full of technological promises that did not arrive overnight. Electricity took more than 30 years to change how we lived and worked. Why? Because dangerous currents had to be made safe, buildings had to be rewired, tools re-engineered and new systems imagined.

The internet followed the same arc. The 1990s promised instant fortunes in the 'click economy.' By 2000, the dotcom bubble had wiped out trillions in market value. Yet, from that wreckage came Google, Amazon and the architecture of the digital age. The collapse wasn't failure—it was the clearing of the runway for serious transformation. AI is no different. You can't just retrofit yesterday's design and expect tomorrow's results. True change demands time, courage and reinvention.

The wrong question: Most companies are asking the wrong question. They want to know: Which AI tool should we adopt? What pilot should we run? Which function should we automate?

Valid questions, yes—but not the first ones. The more important ones are: Are we willing to unlearn the old rules and rethink the new? Which problems really matter now? Can we re-imagine the nature of work itself? Too many leaders are squeezing AI into existing workflows like an ill-fitting part. A few are setting up AI labs or rolling out new strategies, but rarely do I see a company restructuring decision-making, re-engineering processes or rewarding employees for taking intelligent risks. The danger is not that we miss the AI wave; it's that we ride it blindly.

Smarter questions, not software: The business leaders who will harness AI's true power will ask "What should we become?" rather than "What should we adopt?" This is not about smarter software, but about smarter questions.

Take education. AI will never replace teachers, just as the internet never erased classrooms. Learning is about human connection, empathy, motivation and trust. The revolution occurs when technology empowers teachers to do more. Or look at healthcare. Hospitals that successfully re-engineered diagnostic workflows with AI did not hand decisions over to algorithms. They used AI to triage urgent cases instantly, route results to the right doctors and reduce delays. Doctors gained time to focus on critical judgement and care.

Many startups are using AI to analyse markets, but the final calls rest with human intuition. Across sectors, one truth is clear: AI is the co-pilot, not the captain. Its value comes not from automation, but from amplification.

Slow is fast: Sometimes, the fastest way forward is to slow down. Start with problems, not tools. Ask where your workflows are broken and whether AI can help redesign and not just automate them. Create labs that don't merely demo AI, but prototype entirely new ways of working. Train humans first, beginning with the leaders themselves. Redefine performance indicators so you measure not only AI adoption or outputs, but also the culture of experimentation and collaboration it sparks. Above all, lead visibly. Employees don't follow technology, they follow intent.

Trust at the centre: AI can hallucinate, distort or leak sensitive data. These are not IT issues but business continuity risks. Without trust, employees will resist, customers will withdraw and regulators will intervene. With trust, AI can become a multiplier of innovation. We need strong governance and embedded transparency, with identity, access and data consent being non-negotiable.

The human work ahead: Will AI reshape industries? Yes. But not because we panicked or raced to replace people with machines. It will happen because we slowed down to integrate it with intent. Because we re-engineered systems, redefined leadership and respected the profoundly human nature of change. Enterprise-wide AI adoption is still at the pilot stage. Productivity gains are visible but fragmented. We are not at a tipping point, but only at the beginning. The future will not come by accident, but because we did the hard work of preparing for it. That work is slow, messy and human. There lies a paradox: the AI revolution is less about machines and more about us.

QUICK READ

Electricity and the internet followed a long arc to transform the world. AI will be no different. We shouldn't be asking what tools to adopt but how we can use AI to re-imagine what we do.

Sometimes, the fastest way forward is to slow down. Start with problems, not tools. Ask where workflows are broken and whether AI can help redesign and not just automate them.

10 YEARS AGO


mint
Modi promises US CEOs faster decisions
PIPE deals up 40% so far this year
How VW's American ambitions planted the seeds of its downfall

JUST A THOUGHT

The automation of work is the defining story of our time.

KEVIN ROOSE

GUEST VIEW

India's cement demand will soar but emissions need not

JOYDEEP MUKHERJEE & VIBHA DHAWAN

are, respectively, co-chair, GCCA India, and managing director, HeidelbergCement India; and director general, TERI, and president, GRIHA Council

As India charts its path towards becoming a developed nation by 2047, infrastructure is expected to be the backbone of this transformation. Every facet of this progress—from affordable housing to expressways—would rest substantially on cement as a foundation. As the sector is a critical enabler of growth and urbanization, its environmental responsibility will be in focus.

With transformative initiatives such as PM Gati Shakti, Housing for All and India's Smart Cities Mission, cement demand is poised to rise sharply. At the same time, the sector contributes nearly 7% of the nation's total greenhouse gas emissions. This paradox of being both essential and emission-intensive makes the cement sector a crucible of climate and economic challenges.

Projections indicate that cement production in India will rise from 427 million tonnes in 2023-24 to around 1.5 billion tonnes by 2070. Per capita consumption is expected to nearly triple from 290kg to 877kg. In line with India's net-zero target for 2070, the cement sector must accelerate its decarbonization. A recently unveiled roadmap jointly developed by TERI, the Global Cement and Concrete Association (GCCA India) and leading Indian industry stakeholders charts a pathway. Some of the key decarbonization strategies are as follows:

First, by 2070, 35% of fossil fuel waste can be repurposed as alternative fuels in cement plants, paving the way for a complete shift to low-carbon fuels which could significantly lower emissions. In addition, supplementary cementitious materials like fly ash and slag are gaining prominence; blended cements are expected to dominate the market. Portland Pozzolana Cement (PPC) and Portland Slag Cement (PSC) are innovative options, alongside Composite Cement, Limestone Calcined Clay Cement (LC3), and Portland Limestone Cement (PLC), which will play a vital role in future production.

India's cement industry has several immediate options to speed up its decarbonization. One such opportunity lies in increasing the permissible limit of supplementary cementitious materials (SCMs) in blended cement. For instance, raising the fly ash content in PPC from 35% to 40% could lead to a significant reduction in carbon emissions. It has been successfully implemented in Indonesia.

Adopting alternative cement types such as hydraulic cement offers another promising pathway. It is already widely used; for example, in Thailand, where it serves as a common replacement for Ordinary Portland Cement (OPC), particularly in the ready-mix concrete (RMC) industry. About 80% of Thailand's annual cement demand is already met through hydraulic or blended cements. These can substantially reduce clinker consumption, thereby lowering the carbon footprint and offering cost-effective routes to achieve emission reduction targets.

Second, the cement industry is increasing its reliance on waste heat recovery and renewable power through captive renewable energy plants and carbon-free electricity accessed via open-access models. Technologies like kiln electrification, currently at its pilot stage, hold long-term promise. These shifts will not only reduce emissions, but also cut dependence on fossil fuels, thereby helping decouple economic growth from environmental degradation.

Third, improving the efficiency of cement use is vital. Smart urban planning, design optimization and the adoption of ready-mix concrete, pre-cast structures and durable building materials will cut overall requirements by up to 30% by 2070. Innovations in construction practices, from improved site efficiency to optimised mix designs, will be crucial for efficient cement use.

Fourth, the efficiency of clinker production is expected to rise significantly. Cement plants can cut specific thermal energy use from 731kcal per kg to 705 in the near-term by adopting low-carbon fuels and advanced technologies.

Last, carbon capture and storage technologies are projected to account for a quarter of the sector's emission reductions by 2070. Although currently at their pilot stage, once commercially commissioned, they will be critical for achieving deep decarbonization.

QUICK READ

Cement has a critical role in India's infrastructure-focused economic emergence. Thankfully, this 'hard to abate' sector has various pathways to decarbonize production.

Alternative cementitious materials and blended cement will chart the way forward. Other innovative approaches must be explored too. Supportive policies will be necessary.

Indian industry plans to fast-track its deep decarbonization efforts. Strong policy frameworks will determine its pace. In the near term, regulatory incentives must promote energy-efficient technologies and market uptake of low-carbon (blended) and alternative cement. In the long term, substantial public investment and policy support will be needed to scale up breakthrough technologies such as green hydrogen.

Market-based mechanisms also have a pivotal role. Carbon pricing and building certification systems that reward low-carbon materials can send powerful economic signals for innovation and sustainability.

Decarbonizing the sector demands the cooperation of cement- and policy-makers, researchers, financiers and civil society. Public-private partnerships, climate-aligned finance instruments and harmonized international standards will be crucial.

In pursuit of Viksit Bharat, India's cement industry has a crucial role to play. The future demands more than incremental change; it calls for bold innovation, forward-looking policies and a shared determination to drive progress. If we act decisively to decarbonize the cement sector, it will help lay the foundation for a resilient, low-carbon India for generations to come.

THEIR VIEW

Rate reductions are welcome but GST reform is a work in progress

Consumption will get a boost but India still has too many rate slabs and the macro impact demands careful consideration

SUDIPTO MUNDLE
is chairman, Centre for Development Studies.

PTI

The large reduction in goods and services tax (GST) rates from 22 September, the start of this year's Navratri, followed an equally large increase in the exemption threshold for personal income tax six months earlier in the 2025-26 budget. In a well-publicized message, Prime Minister Narendra Modi described this as a bumper Diwali gift for consumers, especially those in the Indian middle class. Limiting herself to the economic rationale for the rate reduction, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman explained that a significant increase in the purchasing power of consumers, assuming the rate reduction is fully passed on, will jack up aggregate consumption demand and hence economic growth, apart from giving relief to small producers. Critics have claimed that the GST rate reduction is motivated by the forthcoming Bihar elections and other state polls to follow. That may well be true. However, this column will confine itself to the economic implications of the GST rate reduction.

Introducing a value added tax (VAT) like GST in a large federal system like India was exceptionally challenging because of many conflicting interests, such as between producers and consumers, between the central government and states, and between producing and consuming states. Hence, the launch of GST in India took a very long time. The idea of introducing a VAT in India was first mooted by the Indirect Tax Enquiry Committee (under L.K. Jha) in 1977. The GST Council of State Finance Ministers, chaired by Union finance minister Arun Jaitley, was finally able to roll out the GST 40 years later in 2017, thanks to what came to be known as Jaitley's grand bargain: his assurance to states that they would be compensated for 5 years for any revenue loss, computed using a very generous formula. However, once the states were on board, GST was introduced in a great hurry without proper preparation. GSTN, the electronic tax information network, had not fully stabilized, nor were the required administrative arrangements in place, such as the training of officials, etc. Most importantly, GST was rolled out with multiple rates, which led to problems of tax-gaming and relative price distortion. Undoubtedly, it was India's most important tax reform after 1991, but it required a lot more to be done.

Though there were some rate adjustments earlier, the latest rate rationalization is by far the most significant, covering around 450 goods and services. Of these, about 400 goods and services have had their rates lowered, while a small number, about 50 items, have had rates increased. The 12% and 28% rate slabs have been abolished. Most items earlier taxed at 12% will now be taxed at 5%, while a handful will be taxed at 18%. Most items taxed at 28% earlier will now be taxed at 18%. Thus, virtually all items will now be taxed at either 5% or 18%. A handful of non-merit or luxury goods (and services) will be taxed at 40%. At the lower end, a few items taxed at 5% will now not be taxed at all, while a few high-value items like gold jewellery will continue to be taxed at only 2-3%. Thus, despite the abolition of two GST slabs and most items now being taxed at 5% or 18%, we still effectively have a five-slab rate structure in place, compared to the single- or two-rate structure in most of the 175 countries that have a VAT. Rate rationalization remains a work in progress.

What will be the macroeconomic impact of this rate rationalization? Clearly, private consumption expenditure will get a boost. But what does it imply for government expenditure? To assess the revenue impact of the rate rationalization, it is useful to keep in mind that those items taxed at 5% or not taxed are mostly necessities with price-elasticity and income-elasticity of demand compared to those items taxed at the 18% rate. There is therefore likely to be some shift in the share of private consumption expenditure away from 0% or 5% GST rated goods towards those rated at 18%. But the main point to note is that there will be a significant revenue loss, at least in the short run. The finance ministry has estimated this (on the basis of 2023-24 data) at ₹48,000 crore for the current fiscal year, which would be about ₹96,000 crore for the full financial year 2026-27. How will the government handle this revenue loss?

If it aims to achieve its fiscal deficit target of 4.4% of GDP in 2025-26 despite the GST revenue loss, this will probably entail a significant cutback in capital expenditure. Committed items under revenue expenditure make it difficult to further trim revenue expenditure, which was already compressed during 2023-24 and 2024-25. However, a reduction in government capital expenditure is likely to offset the expected positive growth impact of the boost to private consumption expenditure due to GST rate reduction. There is much evidence that government capital expenditure has a very strong impact on growth.

Alternatively, the finance ministry can focus on its new monitoring target for fiscal consolidation, namely reducing the debt-to-GDP ratio from 55% to 50% (+/- 1%) by 31 March 2031. This will allow more flexibility in managing the fiscal deficit and enable the government sustain its commitment to high capital spending as it adjusts its aggregate spending path over the next 4-5 years. The logic spelt out here for the central government also applies to state governments, which will suffer a similarly large GST revenue loss.

These are the author's personal views.

QUICK READ

Despite two GST slabs being axed and most items being taxed at 5% or 18%, we still effectively have a five-slab rate structure, compared to the global standard of a single rate or two at most.

If a lower tax mop-up reduces the Centre's capital expenditure, it could offset the expected positive GDP growth impact of the consumption boost delivered by GST rate reduction.

MINT CURATOR

AI will price our flight tickets: It's not new but we will hate it

Dynamic pricing has long existed but AI can personalize it deeply

ALLISON SCHRAGER
is a Bloomberg Opinion columnist covering economics.

AI aware of how badly we need an air ticket could raise the fare accordingly. ISTOCKPHOTO

I am something of an airline reward-points obsessive, or worse. I lurk on blogs and some more dodgy corners of the internet to learn the latest strategies and promotions. I know the stakes are low, but it's fun— even the outrage, the latest of which was ignited among the Delta flying community when the American airline announced it was using AI to set prices.

Its mistake was using the term "dynamic pricing, " which people interpret as personalized pricing, like charging people more depending on why they are flying. Delta is not doing that (yet), at least not with AI. But it is coming, not only for airlines, but also for many consumer businesses. And we will all hate it—but we should all prepare for it.

'Dynamic pricing,' like consumption taxes or market-rate-rent, is something only an economist can love. Such pricing usually means a price that changes depending on when you buy—say, when Wendy's wanted to charge less for burgers outside of peak lunch hour. The plan caused such an uproar that it was abandoned. But it would have been better for customers, who could have saved money by eating lunch later (or earlier, if they were hungry).

Dynamic pricing is not the same as personalized pricing, which is based on someone's personal characteristics, such as how much they can pay or how much they value the good or service. People hate dynamic pricing, but they tend to hate personalized pricing even more.

Neither dynamic nor personal pricing is new. In some ways, they represent a return to a more traditional way of pricing, when people haggled in markets. Prices then often depended on the time of day or a customer's bargaining skills, or even the mood of the seller. In this era of mass consumption, however, something about this practice feels wrong and makes people angry—even in the economically savvy points community.

Dynamic pricing powered by technology became more noticeable with ride-sharing apps that charge higher prices when and where there is more demand. But it long predates Uber—movie theatre tickets are cheaper during the day. Airlines also practised dynamic pricing before the AI revolution, charging different prices for the same flight depending on when people buy their ticket, how full the plane is, the day they fly, and so on.

Airlines face a difficult problem setting their prices. Earning a profit requires them to fill planes—despite no-shows and weather delays. They serve customers with wildly different pricing sensitivities and travel needs. The market is also very competitive, with many people searching competitors' fares (sometimes using AI) to find the best price.

It is not surprising airlines are using new AI tools to make their prices even more dynamic—these complex problems are what AI is made for. And for fliers with more flexibility, it could mean cheaper air fares. And, frankly, personalized pricing already exists: People can pay more for an upgrade in class, a better seat, a checked bag or a meal. In all these cases, the airline is charging a price based on the customer's ability to pay or comfort preference.

Dynamic and personal pricing is one reason that flying has become cheaper and more accessible over the years: Leisure travellers generally pay far less than business fliers. The difference now is that the algorithm will get better at setting personalized prices. It's all but inevitable, in fact, that AI will be used to set personalized prices for pretty much everything sold online. If data exists, sellers will want to use it.

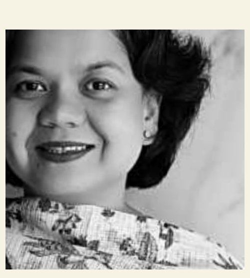
Aside from its impact on consumers (see above: they'll hate it), this new world has broader implications for the economy and society. How will it affect measures of inflation? Will more price-sensitive consumers get lower prices and a different inflation rate? What about data—will there be laws or norms about what companies can use? If someone spends months researching their dream vacation, bookmarking sites and messaging friends and family, and then finally decides to buy—will the seller know how excited they are and jack up the price? What if their dishwasher breaks and they are desperate to buy a replacement? Will we all need to adjust the privacy settings on our browsers?

In a world powered by enormous of data and the technology to make sense of it, more dynamic and personalized pricing is the future, whether we like it or not. When we buy online, maybe the prices we pay will be unique to us. It may be harder for retailers to pull off differentiated pricing in brick-and-mortar stores. So maybe in-person shopping is due for a comeback—though it's unlikely in the travel industry, not least because we addicts need the web to feed our habit.

MY VIEW | PEN DRIVE

Imposter syndrome: Why success often feels like a fluke

DEVINA SENGUPTA



writes on workplaces and education at Mint.

They say you are "worth it." That you deserved out-of-turn promotions. Your bets have worked well for the company, and hence you have been allotted a senior position. But then a creepy feeling rises at the nape of your neck when you face an experienced group of contemporaries or hear a hushed whisper after you make a point, with perplexed looks around the table signalling that you may have missed your mark. A voice whispers in your head: You are *not* worth it.

A part of you clamps up. You retreat into your cabin. You work harder than ever to ensure they do not detect flaws. They don't. Your rise in the company is meteoric now. But every now and then, that hushed feeling creeps back in. An old mocking voice whispers: You are faking it, and sooner or later, you will be exposed.

'Imposter syndrome' was coined by psychologists Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes in 1978 in their paper 'The Imposter Phenomenon in High-Achieving Women.' It described a persistent sense of phoniness among highly capable women.

"The term impostor phenomenon is used to designate an internal experience of intellectual phoniness which appears to be particularly prevalent and intense among a select sample of high-achieving women. Despite outstanding academic and professional accomplishments, women who experience the impostor phenomenon persist in believing that they are really not bright and have fooled anyone who thinks otherwise," the paper noted.

That same year, the first moon orbiting Pluto was discovered and named Charon. The so-called Camp David Accords were signed, hailed back then as a landmark peace treaty in the Middle East.

The peace did not last, Pluto was later found to have four more moons, but the imposter syndrome dug its tentacles deep. Over time, we realized it is not just women, but high-achieving men too who suffer from this condition. Many begin attributing their success to luck, a golden chance, a mentor or fortuitous circumstances. External factors must have contributed to their success, they suspect, because they believe they themselves were never good enough.

I first heard of 'imposter syndrome' while recruiting young executives for business process outsourcing (BPO) jobs in 2006. The dotcom bust a few years earlier had taken its toll; call centres and BPO units were in the spotlight and talent-hungry. Barely a few years into their jobs, these young superstars were given teams of 20 to handle. Their confidence was on overdrive, their swag unmistakable, but cracks showed early. When a team leader left, a successor was quickly appointed, so a sense of 'fluke success' was common.

This syndrome is agnostic to gender, hierarchy, age and social conditioning. Scions of business families groomed to take over the reins may display the strategic acumen that comes with generational confidence. But they too can be enveloped in this feeling of phoniness, worrying that their closest aides see through them every day. Ironically, while the productivity of those battling the condition may seem high, it is often short-lived. To keep yourself charged when you believe your success is a façade is a mammoth task. And mammoths did not survive.

I wonder if imposter syndrome is even more pronounced today, when one is surrounded by endless positive affirmations. For those of us born in the early 1980s, mediocrity was not a dirty word. It was assumed that most people were average, with sparks of talent in one or two areas that could be honed with perseverance. Successes and failures, whether in a drawing competition or board exam, were rarely extreme. You participated. You tried your best. You were seldom celebrated.

But times today are different. Mediocrity has been expunged. Everyone is told they are 'special.' The most basic step towards progress is labelled a 'win.' And when acknowledgement becomes routine, the jolt of joy that should come with true celebration loses force. You realize that everyone is triumphant and therefore no one is truly special. The edge you thought you had feels short-lived, just waiting to be exposed.

At a time when workplaces are discussing empathy, the top brass is getting coached and mentorship programmes are being designed for young employees with high potential, the imposter syndrome also needs to be addressed. Coaches and therapists teach coping mechanisms, and the sooner these are identified, the better. Because your colleague, junior or senior may see only a smug professional who works hard but is rarely satisfied.

While researching this subject, I came across famous people who admitted they never felt worthy of their accolades. Albert Einstein, for instance, once remarked to a friend: "The exaggerated esteem in which my lifework is held makes me very ill at ease. I feel compelled to think of myself as an involuntary swindler."

The feeling of being an 'involuntary swindler' is far more common than we realize, especially in the corporate world.

QUICK READ

'Imposter syndrome' was first coined to describe a persistent sense of phoniness among highly capable women but it's widely accepted that it cuts across gender, age and other variables.

Scions of business families groomed to take over the reins may display the strategic acumen that comes with generational confidence but they too may wonder if it comes across as fake.

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Efficient administration

GST Appellate Tribunal needs close monitoring

The goods and services tax (GST) architecture has been significantly improved in recent weeks. First came the simplification of tax rates. GST has moved mainly to a two-rate structure, along with a higher rate for select sin goods. The move has considerably simplified the tax structure. The second big improvement came on Wednesday with the launch of the GST Appellate Tribunal (GSTAT) by Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman. This was a big missing piece in the overall GST construct. The body was envisioned in law, but its establishment was delayed owing to legal challenges. As a result, it will start with an initial load of 480,000 appeals.

The Principal Bench of the tribunal will be in New Delhi and will act as the National Appellate Authority for Advance Ruling from next financial year, which will help improve clarity in tax administration. The tribunal will have 31 state Benches, each comprising two judicial members and one technical member from both the Centre and the state. The initial composition of the state Benches, which envisaged having one judicial member, was challenged. The law provides for a three-tier appeal structure in GST: First, the Appellate Authority; then the Appellate Tribunal; and finally, high courts and the Supreme Court. Now with the launch of the Appellate Tribunal, the administration of GST should get streamlined.

As the tribunal has been established and will start addressing appeals, there are certain capacity-related issues that need careful monitoring. It will be important that Benches have adequate infrastructure and human resources. There is a significant backlog of cases that need to be disposed of at the earliest. Capacity constraints at the tribunal may lead to similar conditions faced by the broader judicial system. It is worth pointing out that even well-intended laws can lead to suboptimal outcomes if institutions involved in their administration are not adequately provided for. The outcomes under the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code are a case in point. Inordinate delays, partly because of capacity constraints, are affecting outcomes. It must be understood that in commercial matters, delays in the settlement of disputes can substantially increase the cost of doing business. Capacity constraints often also affect the quality of judgments, which end up clogging the higher judiciary.

It is also important for the tax authorities to be more careful in proceeding against businesses. Excessive tax demands often lead to litigation in both direct and indirect taxes, which must be avoided. It is no one's case that tax evaders should not be brought to book, but it must also be ensured that genuine and honest businesses are not harassed. Further, while a reduction in the number of GST slabs will itself simplify the indirect tax structure, processes need to be further simplified. Simple processes will themselves reduce disputes and litigation. Nevertheless, despite the delay, the establishment of the tribunal should improve the functioning of the GST system. As pending appeals are addressed, they would also provide clarity to stakeholders and potentially reduce future litigation. Nonetheless, the progress under the GSTAT will need to be closely monitored in the near term.

Maritime ambitions

New package can increase capacity substantially

The Union Cabinet's approval of a ₹69,725 crore package for the shipbuilding and maritime sector will boost India's capabilities. Structured around four pillars, including strengthening domestic maritime capacity, enabling long-term financing, developing shipyards, and building human capital, the package is ambitious in scope. It also aligns with broader national goals of energy efficiency and sustainable growth. Nearly 95 per cent of India's foreign trade by volumes passes through maritime routes. Its geography also offers an advantage. Straddling major global shipping lanes in the Indian Ocean, India can serve as a hub for trade, logistics, and vessel maintenance. Yet India's shipbuilding industry has long lagged behind global leaders such as China, South Korea, and Japan. This is partly due to fragmented policy support, high financing costs, and under-investment in shipyard infrastructure.

The new package introduces an integrated approach. The Shipbuilding Financial Assistance Scheme will now be extended until 2036, with a substantial corpus of ₹24,736 crore, alongside a Shipbreaking Credit Note, worth ₹4,001 crore. A National Shipbuilding Mission will steer the overall effort, ensuring continuity and accountability. The issue of long-term finance is expected to be addressed through the creation of a Maritime Development Fund with a corpus of ₹25,000 crore. This includes the Maritime Investment Fund and the Interest Incentivisation Fund, which are designed to improve project bankability and attract private capital. The recent decision to grant large commercial ships infrastructure status is also significant. It will enable owners of ships to access long-term and low-cost financing.

Another crucial element of the package is the focus on skilling. Modern shipbuilding requires precision engineering, automation, digital-design tools, and adherence to global environmental standards. With International Maritime Organization regulations increasingly mandating energy efficiency and reduced emission, ships must be greener, lighter, and smarter. Skilling India's workforce to design and build such vessels is essential if it wants to capture future demand. Much of the global fleet is ageing, and environmental norms are tightening. Shipping companies worldwide are seeking vessels that consume less fuel, emit fewer pollutants, and integrate new technologies such as LNG (liquefied natural gas) propulsion, hybrid systems, and digital navigation tools.

However, challenges remain. For decades, Indian shipyards have struggled with cost overruns, project delays, and inconsistent policy support. The government must therefore ensure that incentives are tied to performance, that shipyards are modernised with clear benchmarks, and that financing channels are transparent and easily accessible. The private sector too must play its part. To succeed, Indian shipyards must aggressively court global orders, form technology partnerships with established international players, and focus on export. The government, for its part, should also look at complementary measures such as reducing logistics bottlenecks at ports. If implemented effectively, the overall package is expected to substantially increase shipbuilding capacity, generate nearly three million jobs, and attract investments of around ₹4.5 trillion. But beyond economics, it will bolster national, energy, and food security, while reinforcing India's geopolitical resilience in a turbulent world.

Tax-to-GDP: Numbers and optics

Takeaways from some successful countries that improved their tax collections and what it means for India

ILLUSTRATION:BINAY SINHA

A snapshot of countries with high tax-to-GDP ratio

2000	2022	2023	Difference*		World Bank classification	Taxes which contributed
14.3	27.8	27.5	13.4	Nicaragua	Low-middle income	Corporate tax, social contributions, GST
20.9	32	28.9	11.1	Korea	High income	Personal income tax, social contributions
11.7	22	21.9	10.4	Kyrgyzstan	Low-middle income	Corporate tax, GST
19.2	29.6	27.8	10.3	Argentina	Upper-middle income	Social contributions, GST
23.3	33.5	—	10.2	Tunisia	Low-middle income	Personal income tax, Social security contributions
25.3	34.4	—	9.1	Japan	High income	Social contributions, GST
14.4	23.7	24.4	9.3	Georgia	Upper-middle income	Personal income tax, GST
20.3	29.9	—	9.6	Morocco	Upper-middle income	Corporate tax and social contributions

In the ratio between 2000 and 2022

Source: OECD

R KAVITA RAO

Discussions on the tax-to-GDP ratios for India have often cited the country's performance in comparison to other nations. The underlying analysis refers to simple comparisons to other similar countries or to statistical tools like the stochastic frontier analysis. The South Asia Development Update, 2025, of the World Bank, too, uses this approach. The tax gap from this method indicates the shortfall in revenue collection relative to a potential. The broad conclusions in the latter suggest that the tax gap for India is similar to that of Emerging Markets and Developing Economies. This approach assumes that tax collections depend primarily on the structural features of the economies.

An alternative way of examining this question is to identify countries that have reported a significant increase in the tax-to-GDP (gross domestic product) ratio over a given period and to examine the drivers behind such improvements in revenue performance. Using information from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) database on global revenues, an attempt was made to identify countries that reported a significant increase in the tax-to-GDP ratio between 2000 and 2022. Excluding small island nations and oil-rich countries, the table provides a snapshot of some countries that reported an increase in the tax-to-GDP ratio of over 9 per cent. These include some low-middle-income countries, some upper-middle-income countries, and some high-income countries. Clearly, the need to raise tax revenue mobilisation is a concern shared by many nations.

It might be interesting to study how these countries succeeded in raising and maintaining a higher tax-to-GDP ratio. Each of these countries has implemented various tax reform measures to expand the tax base and improve revenue collection. Some of these countries reported consistent increase over the entire period — Nicaragua is a good example. Others attained a higher level around the time of the global financial crisis and maintained it thereafter - Georgia, Morocco, and Kyrgyzstan fall in this category. On the other hand, Japan and Tunisia experienced growth during and after the global financial crisis, followed by Korea from 2015. The drivers of growth in tax collections appear to differ across countries, as reflected in the differences in the taxes contributing to that growth.

The table also provides information on the sources of increase in the ratio. The focus is on four major groups of revenues — corporate tax, personal income tax, goods and services taxes, and social security contributions (reported as social contributions in the table). An interesting thing to note is that, of the eight countries presented in the table, six report an increase in social security contributions. The second most common contributor to the increase is taxes on goods and services, which include value-added tax (VAT), as well as customs duties and excises.

Some questions arise regarding the role of social security contributions. These contributions, often paid partly by the employer and partly by the employee, are similar to the provident fund contributions for formal sector employees in India. In India's tax system, such contributions are not included in tax collections. An easy way to improve the optics of the tax-to-GDP ratio could be to include these contributions in the tax collection framework, which would also expand the government's liabilities. In other words, it would affect optics alone, with no impact on resources available to governments.

A conceptual question however remains: Can the existence of a government-guaranteed social security system create a better relation between the state and its citizens? Popular perceptions among middle-class taxpayers suggest that people are uncomfortable with the expenditure priorities of the government. A survey by Vidhi Legal on the impact and incidence of tax evasion in India explores perceptions regarding government expenditures and reports that less than half the people believe that tax money has been put to good use. Establishing a closer link between taxes and perceived benefits might encourage better compliance.

The author is director, National Institute of Public Finance and Policy, New Delhi.
The views are personal

Giving civil servants wings

"Can you arrange a study tour to Gujarat to visit the Jamnagar refinery and meet Chief Minister Modi?" asked Trinh Van Chiến, chairperson of the People's Committee of Thanh Hóa province in Vietnam.

It was a winter morning in 2012. Mr Chiến headed the province's executive arm, serving a population comparable to that of an average Indian district. In function and responsibility, his role closely resembled that of a district magistrate (DM) in India. I was working for the World Bank and was there to explore whether the Bank should lend to Thanh Hóa.

What I witnessed in Thanh Hóa left a lasting impression. Mr Chiến rattled off statistics on provincial gross domestic product (GDP), investment, exports, employment, and budgets with the fluency of an investment banker. He knew exactly which firms had created how many jobs or attracted how much investment. He regaled us with global insights gained through study tours to dozens of countries. He had done his homework on Gujarat, too. With the Nghi Son oil refinery about to be built in Thanh Hóa, he wanted to study the Jamnagar refinery and was aware of Narendra Modi's success — at a time when many Indians seemed oblivious to the latter's achievement.

DEEPAK MISHRA

In Vietnam — as in many East Asian countries, from Japan to China — officials like Mr Chiến are a key ingredient in their nations' success. Even bureaucrats operating in remote and poor provinces possess a strong grasp of global megatrends, an intimate knowledge of the local economy, and an unbounded passion for progress and prosperity. They operate like chief executive officers — setting direction, building and leading teams, ensuring execution and accountability, and interacting constantly with citizens and industry.

Inspiration without perspiration

Contrast that with the Indian context. Our civil servants, at the time of their entry, are among the smartest and brightest anywhere. Yet many DMs lack the kind of economic fluency their East Asian counterparts display. Forget higher-order goals like setting a vision or building teams; many have limited understanding of the economic challenges and opportunities facing their district, and few can authoritatively cite district-level macro statistics.

It's not their fault. We recruit the finest, but then drown them in sprawling mandates, indulge them with the trappings of power and protocol, fail to measure or reward performance, and give them neither the autonomy nor the tools to operate effectively. Harsh as it sounds, much of our district-level administration still functions as it did under the British Raj.

Inspiration from Delhi, without perspiration on the ground, will not deliver gleaming cities, first-class infrastructure, globally competitive manufacturing, millions of jobs, or 8 per cent growth — all prerequisites for a Viksit Bharat.

Reforming with PrIDE

Given our federal structure, any change in the bureaucracy has to be a collaborative effort between New Delhi and the state capitals. Also, a full restructuring of the civil service, even if desirable, is a non-starter. Keeping these constraints in mind, and assuming the support of the political leadership, here are a few pragmatic steps — encapsulated in the word "PrIDE" — that can make frontline administration more productive and accountable.

Prioritise: Replace colonial-era titles (district collector/magistrate/commissioner) with contemporary labels (district chief executive officer, D-CEO). Change their primary mandate from maintaining law and order to the rapid development of their district. Hold the D-CEO and the top 50 senior district officers jointly accountable for the key pillars of progress — growth, jobs, and service delivery — which they can influence through effective implementation of programmes and projects, as well as by initiating new initiatives. Establish 10–12 district development indicators (DDIs) to measure improvement across each pillar, and track them annually through an independent agency.

Incentivise: Ideally, seniority- and time-bound promotions should give way to performance-based progression, but that may be too disruptive. Instead, create an incentive system that disburses a small part of the state's annual budget (less than 2 per cent) to districts as block grants based on changes in DDIs, treating the latter as KPIs (key performance indicators) for the district's senior administration. The exclusive focus must be on outcomes, not inputs like meetings chaired, hours worked, or VIPs attended.

Decentralise: Allow operational flexibility to senior officers in district matters and enable them to work directly with the chief secretary's office — assisted by a district support team — to solve problems that directly affect the district's development. Authorise the DMs to spend incentive funds (block grants) as they deem most appropriate for the district, in consultation with local politicians.

Empathise: Liberate senior district officers from the drudgery of handling personal requests of local Members of Parliament/ Members of Legislative Assembly, protocols and event management, election duty, court appearances, and other hyper-micro tasks that currently consume around a third of their office hours. Hold local politicians to account for interference, and encourage VIPs not to consume scarce human capital by insisting on excessive protocols and practices.

Closing the loop

As Gujarat chief minister, Narendra Modi was a relentless learner — proactively seeking ideas, listening to experts, and adapting global best practices to his state's needs. He inspired peers abroad: Mr Chiến's team toured Jamnagar in 2013, though they couldn't meet Mr Modi, who by then had hit the national campaign trail. Now, as Prime Minister, he can close the loop by instilling East Asian rigour into a mission-driven bureaucracy — the essential precondition for a Viksit Bharat.

The author is the former director and chief executive of ICRIER

Common man's guide to financial independence

BOOK REVIEW

SANJAY KUMAR SINGH

One of the burdens of being a high-profile chief executive officer of a mutual fund house — Radhika Gupta, one of the co-authors, heads Edelweiss Mutual Fund —is that people accost you with questions about investing everywhere — airports, marriage functions, and even in the market during saree shopping outings. What is dismaying is the nature of the questions they ask. They reflect a short-termism that is one of the root causes for investors floundering in the equity markets.

"Should I invest in the Bank Nifty (or some stock) now?" Most people want tips. Very few pose questions such as: How can I build a portfolio for a medium-term goal, like buying a car or accumulating the down payment to buy a house? Or, how can I build a diversified, all-weather portfolio that can be held for the long term for goals such as my child's education and my retirement? This book is an attempt by the authors to answer such critical questions and equip retail investors for lasting success.

Ms Gupta and her co-author, Niranjan Avasthi, senior vice-president at the same fund house, begin by offering real-life examples to illustrate how a lack of financial acumen can prove ruinous. A friend of Ms Gupta lost her husband suddenly to a heart attack. After the grief came panic about her financial situation. A few financially savvy friends thankfully stepped in to sort out her finances.

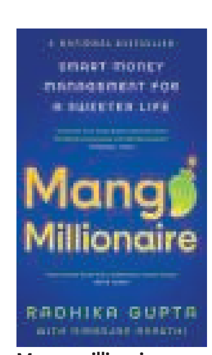
Mr Avasthi tells the tale of a friend who invested in a newly-launched cryptocurrency. As the token's value soared, so did the friend's confidence. Despite repeated warnings, he refused to book profits and diversify. His misplaced bravado had a tragic denouement: The token's promoters performed the classic rug-pull, vanishing with investors' funds. All that Mr Avasthi's friend was left with were worthless tokens and regret.

Though money is critical for keeping body and soul together, most people without a finance background avoid learning about managing their personal finances. Already burdened with the responsibilities of office and home, they view learning personal finance as an onerous chore. Besides, a lay investor faces many obstacles. Finfluencers who abound on social media are hard to trust. Books written by academics tend to be excruciatingly dense. Until recently, most investing tomes tended to be written by foreigners. While informative, such books often do not address the opportunities and challenges unique to investing in India, such as how to circumvent mis-selling.

Many platforms have mushroomed that have made DIY (do-it-yourself) investing in equities easy. But owning a Porsche alone is not enough; it also needs to be driven well. Similarly, easy access to financial instruments does not always translate into good investment decisions in the absence of knowledge.

With the Indian economy outpacing others, many young professionals earn handsome salaries early in their careers. But a high income does not guarantee wealth. While our parents' generation lived by values like VFM (value for money) and SST (*sasta, sundar, tikau*), recent ones live by YOLO (you only live once). Dining out, foreign holidays, and shopping for branded goods often leave little for investing.

The authors aim to help retail investors overcome these pitfalls. They offer a practical 10-30-50 framework for saving: save 10 per cent of income in the twenties; 30 per cent in the thirties; and 50 per cent thereafter, when incomes usually peak. They also advocate savings deducted at source (SDS): Set your SIP date early in the month so that a portion of your salary gets invested before it can be spent.



Mango millionaire: Smart money management for a sweeter life
by Radhika Gupta with Niranjan Avasthi
Published by Macmillan Business
264 pages ₹275

In an age when availing of debt has become absurdly easy, many fall into a debt trap. A chapter is devoted to avoiding this pitfall. There is another on risk and return where concepts like risk tolerance and risk capacity are explained. The authors elaborate on how diversification and a long investment horizon can serve as an antidote to many risks. An overview of taxation comes next, followed by a chapter on insurance: Put your defences in place before sallying forth to invest.

The authors also offer core insights on asset classes like real estate, gold, fixed income, and mutual funds. They round off by diving into topics like portfolio construction, handling behavioural biases, and finding the right financial advisor.

The book's simple style is meant to allow even non-finance readers to breeze through it. The constant stream of stories and anecdotes drawn from cinema and the lives of family members and friends keeps the reader engaged.

More than knowing which stocks or mutual funds to invest in, beginners need holistic knowledge on how to manage their finances and avoid mistakes early on. Without guidance, developing such a perspective can take years. This book's merit lies in offering that framework within a mere 264 pages.

The book's title, *Mango Millionaires*, is a clever play on the Hindi term *aam janta*. It offers the knowledge and toolkit that can put a layman on the path to wealth — not overnight, but steadily over time.

Tejas Deal Takes Off, But Imports Stay Key

Together, they will ensure combat-readiness

The Tejas contract that MoD signed with Hindustan Aeronautics Limited on Thursday for 97 Mk-1A jets, valued at over ₹62,370 cr, is a high-profile bid to boost domestic armaments production. Two-thirds of the fighter jets will be indigenous, which should contribute to strategic autonomy. Global uncertainty over supply chains requires increased local defence procurement, and there are positive externalities in terms of economic growth and technological advancement. Indigenisation and combat-readiness share a complex relationship, but are on the whole complementary processes. Both need to be enhanced to adapt to the country's changing strategic needs. Domestic industry must be allowed to grow into the role of a reliable supplier while operational capability can be ensured through imports.

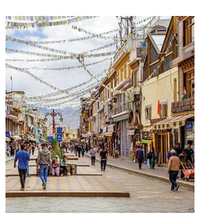
India faces a delicate balance in defence import substitution, having to match slow-moving domestic capability with rapid changes in the technology of war. Its ambition is to reach an acceptable level of indigenisation that is supportive of combat readiness. This mixed model for defence purchases defines India's strategic interests, alongside its need for food and energy security. It also has spillover effects on India's trade strategy that permits arms and oil to work as balancing agents as the country widens its export footprint.

The Tejas deal brings out some of the conflict between indigenisation and operational efficiency. Delay in delivery of an earlier order for the jets has been mitigated by raising the technical threshold in the latest order. Dependence on foreign suppliers for parts such as engines has also been addressed partially. Tejas remains a work-in-progress. The navy and army have had a head start over the air force in indigenisation because of the weapons platforms involved. This has to change due to the evolving role of air power in combat. India has progressed to export competitiveness in missile production. With a stronger push, larger platforms will eventually yield to the strategic need for local development.

Engage With Ladakh, Not Finger-Pointing

When Ladakh was carved out as a UT in 2019, after the abrogation of Article 370 and bifurcation of Jammu and Kashmir, there was jubilation, but also unease. Tribal groups — STs make up 97% of the population — understandably feared that they would be overridden by 'outsiders', 'investors' and political interests. Those early apprehensions have only hardened into today's palpable street unrest.

At the centre of the agitation are four key demands. One, demand for Ladakh's statehood, along with extension of the Sixth Schedule that safeguards tribal land, culture and autonomy in states like Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram. Its absence in Ladakh is increasingly glaring. They are also seeking separate Lok Sabha seats for Leh and Kargil, in addition to employment reservations for locals. Few embody this dramatic shift in Ladakhi mood from 2019 to 2025 more than Sonam Wangchuk. Once a vocal supporter of UT status, the environmentalist and educator has, since 2024, become the rallying voice of Ladakh's disillusionment. To GoI, he is now agent provocateur.



GoI's response so far has been curfews, blame-shifting and insinuations. The BJP insists the protests are 'instigated', or 'manufactured by Congress'. But such 'sourcing' dodges the wood for the trees. It echoes the same dithering one saw in Manipur — with disastrous results. If Delhi believes Ladakh's unrest can be smothered with police orders, communication blackouts and finger-pointing, it should think again. What the region demands is not rhetoric but recognition: that within the post-370 dispensation, Ladakh's aspirations deserve as much weight as its strategic geography. Ignoring this reality risks letting yet another sensitive frontier slip into prolonged, combustible instability.

JUST IN JEST

Being caught on cam in 'half-pants' is not being caught 'naked'

Defamation, the Shorts & Long of It

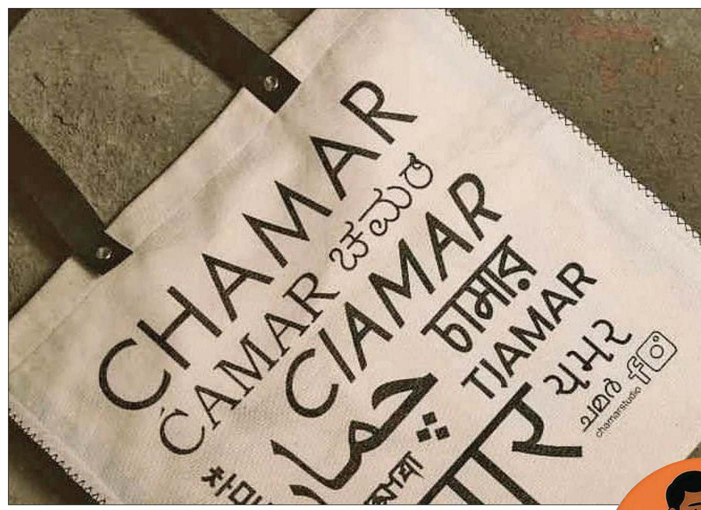
Have you noticed how in India, whenever many men mean 'naked', in most cases they actually mean '*only* kachha-banian'? It's this same cultural conflation of what constitutes au naturel, more-revealing-than-covering underwear, and perfectly ho-hum homewear that seems to have got BJP spokesperson Gaurav Bhatia's knickers in a twist. Well, shorts, actually, as he explained after filing a defamation *suit* (funny that) against multiple persons sharing a video online showcasing the otherwise kurta-clad Bhatia caught 'off-guard' during a national TV debate. The Delhi High Court, too, even while advising politicians to develop 'thick skin', ordered the supposedly scandalous clip be taken off the ether. Is nothing 'casual' any more?

How wearing shorts in one's own home is both a privacy issue *and* public humiliation is a bit confusing. Unless Bhatia broke into metaphorical tears by the barrage of rude, anatomical taunts from trolls who found shorts to be a short-cut for being risqué. Post-Covid, video calls/recordings have established the 'Narasimha avatar' practice of wearing 'proper' clothes above the waist and 'casual' clothes below the equator to be SOP. This incident may now strike terror in the seat of countless pants. Even as the court order, not the revelatory video, will now not let us 'unsee' a comfy Bhatia for a very long time.

Never mind intent, banning caste display doesn't diminish but reinforces invisible ways caste works

Less Visible Made Invisible

Gilles Verniers



No more tote for tat?

Paris: The Uttar Pradesh government issued a 10-point directive on Sunday to enjoin officials across the state to prohibit 'caste-based markings' in police records as well as public display of caste-based signs, with the aim 'to eliminate caste-based discrimination'. This directive is a compliance measure with an Allahabad High Court judgment delivered on Sept 16, in which the judge, in a case unrelated to caste, declared that routinely noting caste in FIRs, arrest memos or public records was 'regressive' and 'anti-national' because it glorified caste. The directive also furthers the prior decision of the UP government to ban caste-based political rallies and to require erasure of caste signs in public spaces.

Proponents of these decisions argue that such forms of display and mobilisation of caste identities are socially and politically divisive, and that their restrictions favour equality. They underline that caste is frequently used to foment discord, discrimination and violence.

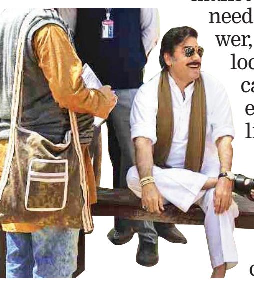
Invisibility benefits those who already dominate, because their power appears natural and unquestioned

Critiques of the decision argue, not without reason, that simply banning caste display does not address the fact of discrimination, and that preventing disadvantaged groups from using their caste identity to mobilise impedes their constitutional right to organise politically.

One effect of such vague and sweeping orders is to expand the scope of arbitrariness in the wielding of local authority. It will be left to local officials and power-holders to determine what constitutes a legitimate and illegitimate caste display. It also involves unequal treatment of groups, since certain forms of caste display are, in fact, legally protected, as in the case of scheduled castes and scheduled tribes.

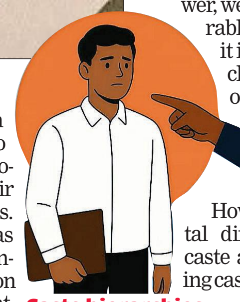
More importantly, it ignores the simple fact that caste dominance is most effective when caste identities are *not* flouted publicly. In many parts of India, including UP, caste hierarchies are enforced not through loud proclamation but through ordinary, normalised practices around the access and use of public spaces and facilities, or around hiring.

Who gets addressed respectfully or gruffly depends on these invisible lines of social demarcation, which are least challenged precisely when they are normalised. Dominant castes do not need signboards to signal power, their control of land and local institutions. Banning caste signs in housing societies, for example, does little to address housing segregation.



On the contrary, non-dominant groups often rely on caste display to seek recognition and challenge the domination of entrenched elites. Such directives contribute to delegitimising the democratic expression of their identity and interests. What may be construed as a glorification of caste includes the manifestation of pride from groups that have been historically marginalised.

Caste hierarchies are often enforced not through proclamation but through ordinary, normalised practices around use of public spaces and facilities, or hiring



This attitude towards caste also reveals the ambiguity of BJP's position on caste and political inclusion. The rise of BJP in northern India was based partly on a strategy of targeting and inclusion of specific non-dominant backward groups, among OBCs, SCs and STs. Token representation granted to these groups did not fundamentally alter the balance of power between old and new elites and those excluded from power.

A caste-neutral façade allows the state to claim modernity and equality, while more profound inequalities persist. It also shifts attention away from redistribution or affirmative action debates, focusing, instead, on symbolic erasure. If anything, banning caste display, however intended, reinforces the invisible ways caste works.

Regarding police records, the ban on caste labels poses serious questions. While they can be used to profile or target communities, they are also necessary to track caste-based crimes.

Proponents of the ban underline that the presence of a court ruling grants legitimacy to the decision. While technically valid, this view ignores that such decisions are often based on normative judgments made by individual judges in cases that are sometimes unrelated to the issue. Such rulings aren't always based on law either, which is concerning. In this instance, the case involved a liquor smuggler seeking to have the criminal case registered against him dropped.

This is not to say that dismantling caste's grip on the distribution of power, wealth and status is not a desirable objective. On the contrary, it is essential that India moves closer to BR Ambedkar's idea of a true social democracy, in which liberty, equality and fraternity are not just constitutional ideals but lived realities.

However, there is a fundamental difference between curbing caste and *concealing* caste. Making caste invisible does not make it disappear. Quite the contrary. By erasing its signs in public, the structures of inequality that sustain it are left undisturbed, even reinforced. Invisibility benefits those who already dominate, because their power appears natural and unquestioned, while those who seek to resist are denied the visibility they need to mobilise and demand justice.

Banning public display of caste identity has little impact on dominant groups, since their dominance does not rely on explicit caste signals. These bans weaken underprivileged groups' ability to assert themselves, and mobilise and organise, because these activities depend on visibility. As a result, the terrain gets further tilted. Dominance continues quietly, while democratic expression loses one of its tools.

The writer is researcher at CERI (Centre for International Studies), Sciences Po, Paris

Perfect GST Pill, Now for the Cure

Ramnath Krishnan

GST rate changes unveiled on Sept 3 are expected to have a significant bearing on economic outcomes. The changes affect more than 400 goods and services, with the median rate on these items falling to 5% from 12%. This should provide a much-needed boost to domestic economic activity.

The rationalisation should spur higher discretionary spending on additional goods and services. It could also lead to upgrades in purchases of better-quality products or added features for some consumer goods categories, at similar or slightly higher spending levels. However, part of these savings may also be channelled towards debt servicing or building up savings, especially by lower- and middle-income households.

The timing of these changes — the onset of the festival season — is opportune. Besides, the relatively short time span between the date of announcement and implementation (Sept 22) helps address concerns around deferment of purchases and treatment of tax on inventories.

The rationalisation is expected to augur well for consumer-oriented sectors such as FMCG, apparel, textiles, electronics, 2-wheelers, passenger cars and hotels, making these more affordable, and encouraging upgrades and first-time purchases. Besides, the cut in rates on medicines, some medical supplies and equipment, and exemption on health insurance premiums are expected to enhance healthcare affordability and accessibility for patients, boding well for the pharma and healthcare sectors. Further, investment-related sectors such as commercial vehicles and cement, which feed into construction activities, also stand to benefit from the lowering of GST rates.

Higher domestic consumption would augur well for economic activity in H2 FY26. Ideally, a boost in domestic consumption could offset part of the adverse impact of Trump's tariffs on about half of India's exports to the US. Improved outlook for India's GDP growth for H2 FY26, along with the

Run, shoppers, run

better-than-expected Q1 print, has led to revising FY26 GDP growth projections to 6.5% from 6%.

A desire to boost market share should result in a quick pass-through of rate rationalisation in various sectors. Accordingly, GST rate changes are expected to have a meaningful impact on inflation prints. Migration of items from the 18% or 12% slabs to the lower 5% slab largely pertains to food and miscellaneous segments in the CPI basket, including daily essentials, durables and some services.

Notably, some automobile OEMs have announced discounts and price reductions after GST cuts ahead of the festive season. Several FMCG companies have also announced they will pass post-cut benefits to end-consumers.

Overall, a little more than 10% of the CPI basket is experiencing a decline in prices. A reduction of about 25-50 bps in headline CPI inflation prints from Q3 FY26 through Q2 FY27 owing to GST rationalisation is expected. The average CPI projection for FY26 has been pared down to 2.6% from the earlier estimate of 3%. Moreover, the GST rejig is likely to exert a softening bias on the inflationary expectations of households, a key marker for MPC to assess monetary policy outcomes as it meets next week.

While the impact of GST rationalisation on different sectors, economic activity and inflation is relatively clear, its impact on the fisc remains somewhat ambiguous. GoI had highlighted a net revenue foregone of ₹0.5 tn. This seems manageable and can be comfortably absorbed by GoI and states. Besides, the second-round effects of higher spending resulting in higher indirect and direct tax collections could also offset part of this amount.

Overall, GST rationalisation has come at the right time to support India's macro outlook. Let's see how it turns out once the numbers are released closer to the year-end.

The writer is MD & Group CEO, ICRA

Why Flipkart Can't Do a PhonePe

Manish Maheshwari

What if two companies born under the same roof, nurtured by the same parent and scaling in the same Indian market end up taking radically different IPO paths? That's the paradox of PhonePe and Flipkart.

Both Flipkart and PhonePe are majority-owned by Walmart. From being a subsidiary of Flipkart — which acquired the digital payments company in 2016 — PhonePe was spun off as a separate company in December 2022. But PhonePe is sprinting toward a public listing, while Flipkart, once the poster kid of India's startup boom, is still figuring out its IPO playbook. This divergence isn't just about two separate companies, but it also reveals deeper lessons about India's capital markets, strategic positioning and the maturing tech ecosystem.

India is at an inflection point. Its consumer internet giants — Paytm, Zomato, Nykaa, Policybazaar — have tested public markets with mixed results. Now comes the second wave: fintechs, ecommerce platforms and SaaS companies that are better capitalised, more disciplined and operating in a post-correction environment.

For founders and investors, the IPO question is no longer 'if', but 'how' and 'when'. The stakes are massive: public markets not only provide liquidity but also signal legitimacy, setting benchmarks for the entire ecosystem. PhonePe's IPO readiness rests on 3 pillars:

❶ **Market leadership** PhonePe dominates India's UPI payments with over 45% share. Unlike Paytm, which juggles multiple business lines, PhonePe has built a razor-sharp identity around payments and financial services.

❷ **Simpler story for public investors** PhonePe can tell a straightforward story: growing transaction volumes, financial inclusion, and monetisation through insurance, mutual funds and lending. Investors like clean narratives. Public markets reward clarity.

❸ **Regulatory tailwinds** GoI has blessed UPI as the backbone of digital payments. PhonePe is not fighting regulators but it's aligned with the system. That makes it a safer bet compared to fintechs perceived as too disruptive.

In short: PhonePe looks like a utility with upside. Markets love that. Flipkart, in contrast, faces headwinds:

▶ **Profitability puzzle** eCommerce remains a capital-intensive business. Margins are thin, and competition with Amazon and Reliance JioMart is unrelenting. Investors know this is a long game. But public markets are impatient.

▶ **Complex structure** Flipkart's sprawl includes fashion (Myntra), logistics (Ekart) and now even healthcare. Great for private growth, messy for public narratives.

▶ **Global parent dynamics** Walmart's majority stake in Flipkart creates tension. Should Flipkart IPO in India, the US, or both? Walmart wants global visibility, while Flipkart wants local resonance. This alignment delay slows decision-making.

Flipkart is still a juggernaut. But unlike PhonePe, its IPO case is harder to compress into a 3-min elevator pitch. This divergence offers a powerful framework for thinking about IPO readiness:

▶ **IPOs are about narrative** PhonePe's path shows that clarity of narrative — not just GMV or user counts — drives market confidence. Founders should ask: can I explain my business in one sentence to a retail investor?

▶ **Spin-offs create sharper value** PhonePe's separation from Flipkart unlocked its ability to chart an independent IPO. Conglomerates may create synergies privately, but in public markets, investors reward focus.

Flipping over different bars

▶ **Timing, a strategic weapon** PhonePe is capitalising on momentum in digital payments before saturation sets in. Flipkart, by waiting, risks being overtaken by changing market moods or regulatory shifts.

▶ **US-India corridor matters** Flipkart's global entanglements highlight a bigger theme: Indian companies must decide whether their 'centre of gravity' lies in India's capital markets or on Wall Street. That decision shapes everything from valuation multiples to governance expectations.

PhonePe and Flipkart's diverging IPO strategies mirror India's broader startup ecosystem. The first generation of unicorns is no longer just chasing growth at all costs. They're wrestling with profitability, governance and market positioning. This is a healthy sign of India moving from adolescence to adulthood in tech. The capital markets will demand discipline. But they'll also reward it.

For founders, investors and policymakers, 3 lessons stand out:

❶ **Simplify the story** Public markets punish ambiguity. Be clear about your identity and path to profitability.

❷ **Design for separation** Build companies so business lines can stand independently if needed. It maximises optionality.

❸ **Think global, act local** The IPO venue debate (India vs US) will become a recurring theme. Founders must weigh valuation premiums against domestic relevance.

PhonePe and Flipkart teach us that IPOs are not just financial events but are also narrative events. They crystallise a company's story in the minds of millions of investors. If India's tech ecosystem gets this right, we won't just create a few successful IPOs but also build the muscle memory for turning unicorns into enduring public institutions.

The writer is former VP, Flipkart

THE SPEAKING TREE

An Offering To Divine

ULLHAS PAGEY

In the resplendent tapestry of Indian festivals, aarti is a luminous thread, weaving devotion into the ethereal fabric of spiritual communion. This sacred ritual embodies the soul's ardent yearning for union with the Supreme, according to the Bhagwad Gita's discourse on Bhakti Yog. Krishn unveils the path of devotion, where the heart, unburdened by worldly fetters, offers itself wholly to the Divine.

The aarti, with its circling flames and resonant chants, mirrors this surrender, each flicker a metaphor for the devotee's love, dispelling ignorance and ego. As the camphor burns, leaving no residue, so, too, must the devotee dissolve selfhood into divine adoration, a practice Krishn extols.

In the vibrant chaos of festivals, aarti becomes a sanctum of stillness, uniting souls in collective reverence. Rhythmic clanging of bells, fragrance of incense and luminous arc of light elevate the mundane to the celestial, aligning with Krishn's counsel to Arjun: those who dedicate their actions, mind and intellect to the Divine attain eternal peace. The ritual teaches humility, for in offering light to the omnipresent, we acknowledge our own fleeting nature. It fosters purity, as the devotee becomes a vessel for divine grace. A devotee, according to Krishn, must be compassionate, egoless, equanimous in pleasure and pain, forgiving, content, steadfast in meditation, self-controlled, dedicated to the Divine, and neither agitated by nor agitating to others.

Thus, aarti is not merely a tradition but profound spiritual praxis, guiding us toward liberation through love.

ALGO OF BLISSTECH

Catching Autumn

Autumn is an enchantress. It arrives without fanfare, slipping into the calendar like a melody waiting to be hummed. The sun softens as stubborn monsoon starts to retreat. There's a whisper of winter in the air, just enough to make your first tea or coffee of the day taste like poetry.

The mornings get crisper — cool enough to make you (want to) linger a little longer in bed. Trees begin shedding leaves like old stories, while the sky turns a brilliant of blue. If you're lucky, from your balcony you will see the sway of the white, feathery flowers of the kash — really a wild variety of sugarcane — sway in the breeze.

Markets brim with marigolds and festivals — Navratri, Durga Pujo, Diwali — each celebration wrapped in the scent of incense and rustle of silk. The air feels cleaner, the mood lighter, even the traffic seems to hum in a lower octave, at least from the distance.

Autumn is a season of balance: between heat and chill, bustle and stillness, memory and anticipation. It's a time when the soul stretches, the heart sighs, and everything feels like it's exhaling in time.

Chat Room

More Caste A/cs In Vote Banks

Apropos the Edit, 'Calling the Bluff of Caste Empowerment' (Sep 25), the caste-based elites are not only ghettoised remarkably in politics but more castes are trying to get space in the privileged reserved category. The Constitution framers were compelled by historical reasons to allow reservations based on caste for a limited period — which was not only expanded to an almost permanent period, but casteism was being accredited on an admirable pinboard prompting more castes to crave to be included. On creating more vote banks, the Karnataka gov did not hesitate in incurring a heavy financial burden for a caste-based census clothed as a survey. Against that background, the UP gov's notification to ban caste-based rallies deserves at least one clap. Alas! We all are in a predicament facing regionalism, parochialism and communal discrimination wrongly branded as constitutional.

K Rajendran
Chennai

CONTRAPUNTO

It has been said that a pretty face is a passport. But it's not, it's a visa, and it runs out fast

– JULIE BURCHILL

Germane Idea

*What Germany's envoy told **TOI** should become the immigration blueprint for developed nations*

Within days of America jacking up H-1B visa fees, to deter immigration for work, Europe's top two economies have signalled their keenness to take in foreign talent. UK's finance minister-equivalent, Rachel Reeves, said on Tuesday, "We are expanding our global talent and high potential individual visa routes." A day later, German ambassador to India, Philipp Ackermann, told **TOI** that skilled workers should consider the opportunities that Germany has to offer.

This isn't surprising. Top talent is a prerequisite for technological advancement and economic growth. So long as America's doors were wide open, its premier research universities, business ecosystem and relatively higher salaries made it the first choice. Now, with the high barrier of a $100,000 visa fee, and increasingly shrill anti-immigrant rhetoric, other nations can draw more skilled workers. China, which is not only the second largest economy but also has the largest number of patent filings each year – three times more than US in 2023 – will reportedly launch a 'K visa' on Oct 1 to attract STEM workers.

When it comes to attracting Indians, UK and Germany still have the advantage of democracy. UK's pitch is interesting because, as late as May this year, Starmer was drumming up a different sentiment: "We risk becoming an island of strangers." But it's chiefly directed against low-wage and low-skill immigrants. In Germany also, there have been anti-immigrant stirrings, but as Ackermann said, "Migration is…a problem when it comes to refugees and asylum seekers, but skilled labour from India is excluded from this discussion." Already, some 3L Indians have overcome the language hurdle to work in Germany.

Although Germany remains Europe's biggest economy, it has struggled with technological change. Its health system still relies on fax, and few govt services are online. Its auto industry has lost ground in the China-led electric revolution. An infusion of Indian tech workers could help it in these areas. For Indian students, the low cost of studying at Germany's public universities, and the freedom to stay on for 18 months after graduation, increase the chances of finding work and settling down eventually. It's a win-win situation for both sides. Recognition of Indian degrees, and ease of getting visas, will make it that much easier to attract the best talent from India. Trump, a descendant of German immigrants, might want to take notes.

Doctor No

NMC must end the preferential treatment it's been giving to doctors' complaints. Treat patients fairly

Five years ago National Medical Commission was formed with the hope that it would bring greater accountability and ethical standards in the medical profession. The death of its infamous predecessor, Medical Council of India, was not mourned. But one thing MCI used to do and NMC has consistently failed to do, is accept appeals from patients and families "aggrieved by the decision of the state medical council on any complaint against a delinquent physician". What makes this a glaring injustice is that appeals by doctors aggrieved at state council decisions are happily "allowed". Is there any public interest served by such a double standard? Of course not.

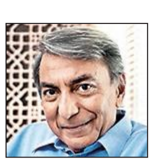
Plenty of adverse outcomes in medical treatment have nothing to do with negligence. But plenty do. Consider how in April this year, Madhya Pradesh police arrested a 'cardiologist' on charges of performing surgeries on the basis of forged medical documents. The thing is when patients or their families do suspect that they have suffered because of professional lapses, specific acts of commission or omission, the burden of proof on them is significant. As a July paper in the *Medicine and Law* journal says, "the evidence is skewed under the custody of the doctors." On top of this power balance, state medical councils keep terrible health. For example, over the last four years, Maharashtra's council has acted on less than 1% of the complaints of medical negligence, malpractice, fake certificates etc it received. Only two complaints were resolved in this period and even that was in 2022.

In India, there are strong structural barriers limiting patients' practical ability to exercise their rights. Awareness and advocacy of these rights is also weak. There is no independent ombudsman listening to patient appeals, as in UK and Canada. But at least its regulatory body should not treat patients like hostile entities. Patients need doctors…but doctors need patients, too.

Approving govt

From wine shops to whatnots, everything and everyone might be worthy of a sarkari stamp of merit

Jug Suraiya



A large sign I pass daily in Gurgaon says Govt Approved Wine Shop. This is clear evidence that nitpicking critics notwithstanding, govt is on the ball and doing its job 24/7.

Despite America's slapping a punitive 50% tariff on Indian products to stop us buying Russian oil, despite persistent food inflation and a falling rupee against the dollar, despite infiltrators continuing their dastardly doings in Kashmir even after the resounding success of Operation Sindoor, despite all these and the many worries and burdens of elected office, govt finds time and get-up-and-go to scout around and identify, presumably after meticulous scrutiny by certified sommeliers, a Gurgaon wine shop worthy of its approval, and presumably do the same for similar establishments elsewhere.

In the public interest govt might extend its seal of approval to other entities.

A govt approved pizza takeaway would assure customers that all the ingredients that went into the making of the comestible were of the best quality, and the mozzarella was the asli cheez, and not a second-rate substitute.

jugular*vein*

Similarly, bookshops might also come under the purview of govt approval, which would ensure that nothing objectionable and likely to offend the sensitivities and sensibilities of any and all sorts was to be found within their sanitised premises.

Retail outlets apart, govt could bestow approval on entire professions. A govt approved physician, for example, would allay anxiety that the person the patient was consulting was not a bigger quack than Donald Duck with a fake degree, but a bona fide taker of the Hippocratic oath.

Barbers and hair stylists, as well as darzis, could seek govt approval to show that they were a cut above the rest. Govt approved carpenters could be depended upon not to chisel customers or hammer them with inflated bills. And govt approved masons could be relied upon not to drop a brick but to cement strong ties with employers.

Perhaps the ultimate govt approval might be awarded to govt approved electoral candidates who could assure voters of a govt approved govt.

Adieu, MiGhty Fighter

As the MiG-21 flies into the sunset after 60 years of service with IAF, a former commander of a squadron looks back on the many times it proved more than a match for enemy fighters

Arjun Subramaniam

Retd Air Vice Marshal

It was an uncompromising teacher of fighter pilots, a nimble "bird" with handling comparable to a sportscar, but as MiG-21 flies into the sunset today after 60 years of service with IAF, what will be remembered most is its formidable record of keeping the country safe.

Sabres rattled in '65

Inducted in 1963, the first MiG-21 variants – Types 74 and 76 – from 28 Squadron were deployed on the western front in Sept 1965, after the first wave of Pakistani strikes, and caused significant damage. Operating primarily in the Combat Air Patrol (CAP) role at bases such as Adampur and Pathankot, they were a counterweight to Pakistan's F-104 Starfighter. In internal messages, PAF advised its F-86 Sabre pilots not to engage the MiGs. 28 Squadron's commanding officer, Wing Commander 'Mally' Wollen, almost took out an F-86 Sabre with his heat-seeking K-13 missiles.

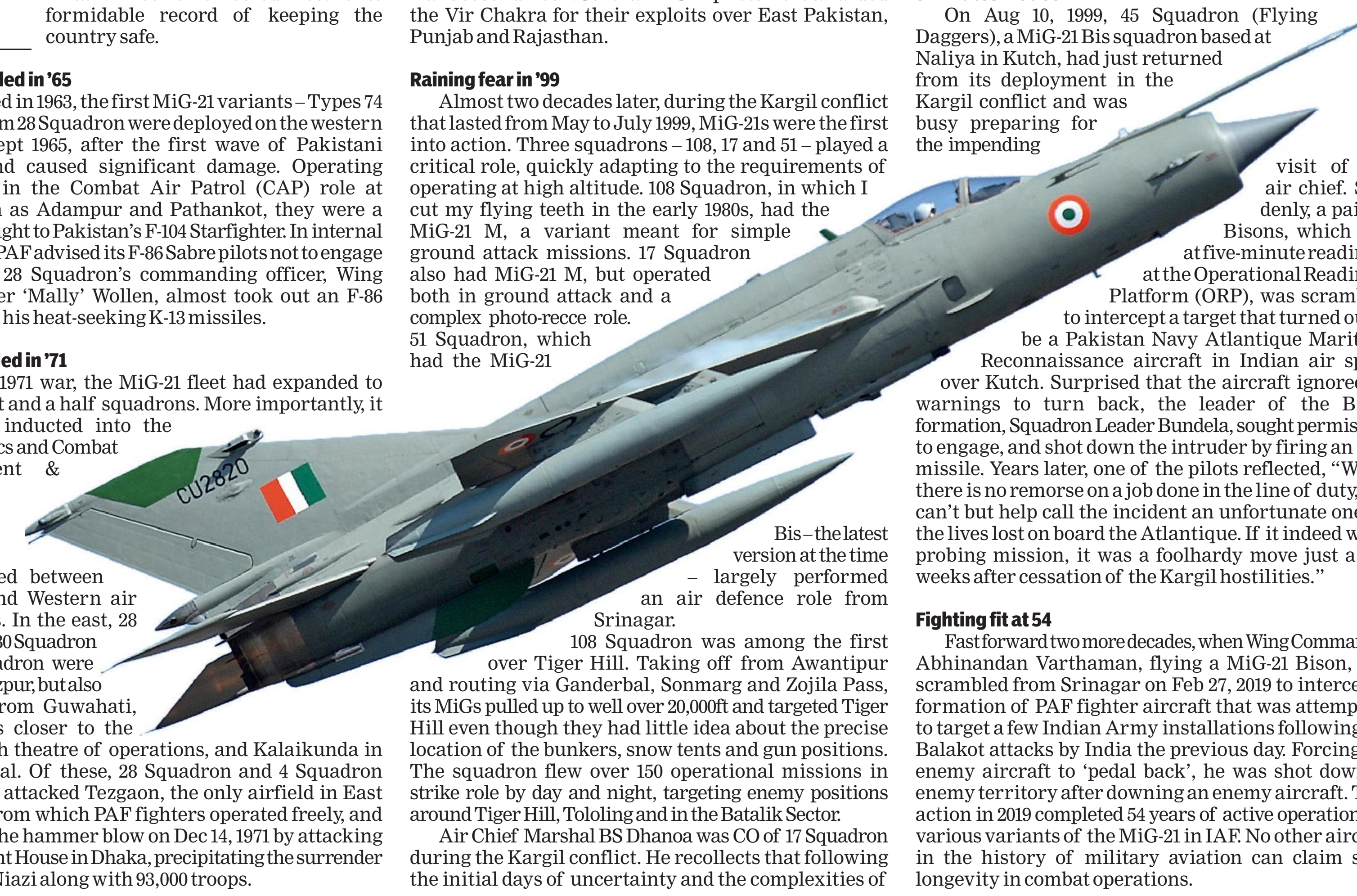
Pak grounded in '71

By the 1971 war, the MiG-21 fleet had expanded to about eight and a half squadrons. More importantly, it had been inducted into the IAF's Tactics and Combat Development & Training Squadron (TCDTS). The fleet was divided between Eastern and Western air commands. In the east, 28 Squadron, 30 Squadron and 4 Squadron were based at Tezpur, but also operated from Guwahati, which was closer to the Bangladesh theatre of operations, and Kalaikunda in West Bengal. Of these, 28 Squadron and 4 Squadron repeatedly attacked Tezgaon, the only airfield in East Pakistan from which PAF fighters operated freely, and delivered the hammer blow on Dec 14, 1971 by attacking Government House in Dhaka, precipitating the surrender of Lt Gen Niazi along with 93,000 troops.

On the western front, five MiG-21 squadrons operated out of Adampur, Amritsar, Halwara, Hindon, Jamnagar, and a few other airfields in both air defence and ground attack roles. They scored 13 aerial kills in dogfights against PAF's Starfighters, Sabres, MiG-19s and Mirages. MiG-21s from TCDTS participated in night bombing missions and night combat air patrols (CAPS) in the war's second week. Several MiG-21 pilots were awarded the Vir Chakra for their exploits over East Pakistan, Punjab and Rajasthan.

Raining fear in '99

Almost two decades later, during the Kargil conflict that lasted from May to July 1999, MiG-21s were the first into action. Three squadrons – 108, 17 and 51 – played a critical role, quickly adapting to the requirements of operating at high altitude. 108 Squadron, in which I cut my flying teeth in the early 1980s, had the MiG-21 M, a variant meant for simple ground attack missions. 17 Squadron also had MiG-21 M, but operated both in ground attack and a complex photo-recce role. 51 Squadron, which had the MiG-21 Bis – the latest version at the time – largely performed an air defence role from Srinagar.



108 Squadron was among the first over Tiger Hill. Taking off from Awantipur and routing via Ganderbal, Sonmarg and Zojila Pass, its MiGs pulled up to well over 20,000ft and targeted Tiger Hill even though they had little idea about the precise location of the bunkers, snow tents and gun positions. The squadron flew over 150 operational missions in strike role by day and night, targeting enemy positions around Tiger Hill, Tololing and in the Batalik Sector.

Air Chief Marshal BS Dhanoa was CO of 17 Squadron during the Kargil conflict. He recollects that following the initial days of uncertainty and the complexities of targeting barely visible targets at such high altitudes, his squadron was among the first to attempt GPS-assisted level-bombing, both by day and night. The move paid off, not in terms of destruction of targets but psychological degradation, keeping the Pakistani intruders guessing when the next attack was coming.

5 minutes' notice

On Aug 10, 1999, 45 Squadron (Flying Daggers), a MiG-21 Bis squadron based at Naliya in Kutch, had just returned from its deployment in the Kargil conflict and was busy preparing for the impending visit of the air chief. Suddenly, a pair of Bisons, which was at five-minute readiness at the Operational Readiness Platform (ORP), was scrambled to intercept a target that turned out to be a Pakistan Navy Atlantique Maritime Reconnaissance aircraft in Indian air space over Kutch. Surprised that the aircraft ignored all warnings to turn back, the leader of the Bison formation, Squadron Leader Bundela, sought permission to engage, and shot down the intruder by firing an R-60 missile. Years later, one of the pilots reflected, "While there is no remorse on a job done in the line of duty, one can't but help call the incident an unfortunate one for the lives lost on board the Atlantique. If it indeed was a probing mission, it was a foolhardy move just a few weeks after cessation of the Kargil hostilities."

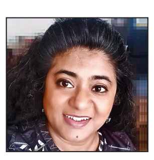
Fighting fit at 54

Fast forward two more decades, when Wing Commander Abhinandan Varthaman, flying a MiG-21 Bison, was scrambled from Srinagar on Feb 27, 2019 to intercept a formation of PAF fighter aircraft that was attempting to target a few Indian Army installations following the Balakot attacks by India the previous day. Forcing the enemy aircraft to 'pedal back', he was shot down in enemy territory after downing an enemy aircraft. That action in 2019 completed 54 years of active operations by various variants of the MiG-21 in IAF. No other aircraft in the history of military aviation can claim such longevity in combat operations.

Is Bollywood's Caste Of Characters Changing?

Two new movies, *Dhadak 2* and *Homebound*, put casteist discrimination front and centre, a break from Hindi film industry's decades long commercial strategy of ignoring this social reality

Anna M M Vetticad



If your only exposure to Indian society is through contemporary Hindi cinema, you might assume that the caste system is finished – because subjugated castes have virtually disappeared from Hindi films in recent decades.

This is why Shazia Iqbal's *Dhadak 2* and Neeraj Ghaywan's *Homebound*, both produced by Karan Johar's Dharma Productions, are significant. *Dhadak 2* – released in theatres in Aug, and scheduled to begin streaming today – is a remake of Mari Selvaraj's pathbreaking Tamil hit *Pariyerum Perumal*, a Dalit-Brahmin romance. It's a rare 21st century Hindi screen venture dedicated entirely to caste. *Homebound*, which comes to theatres today, is about a Dalit and a Muslim who are friends.

Casting out caste | That *Dhadak 2* originated in the Tamil industry is no surprise, considering that in the past decade and a half, Tamil cinema has led the way in mainstreaming Dalit and Adivasi representation in Indian films.

The 1990s were a watershed in Hindi cinema's decline. Until then, Hindi films frequently depicted hegemonic land-owning castes. Meanwhile, middle-class disaffection with the establishment was echoed by the Angry Young Man of the 1970s and 80s. This character had been over-used by the time a triad of films about wealthy NRIs, wealthy and joyous, ultra-traditionalist Indian joint families, and hip-looking Indians in branded Westernwear jolted the box office in the 1990s. Commercial Hindi filmmakers who were shopping for a safe formula in post-Babri India, sensing a shift in the audience, found it in these tales of pretty people in pretty clothes addressing concerns palatable to conservatives.

Sooraj Barjatya's *Hum Aapke Hain Koun!* (1994), Aditya Chopra's *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995) and Johar's *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (1998) kickstarted this phase of taking a sanitised view of India. Like them, their successors upheld the status quo in the name of culture – often packaged in superficial modernity. Industry 'wisdom' gradually concluded that even mentioning caste was risky. In time, films other than glossy family dramas and romances too largely began skirting casteism. The industry ultimately stopped acknowledging the very existence of a caste system.

Anubhav Sinha's *Article 15* (2019), Ghaywan's *Masaan* (2015) and *Homebound* – which is India's entry for the 2026 Oscars – are among a handful of productions that defied norms during this period by focusing on caste politics.

Deleting substance, diluting plots | *Dhadak 2*'s predecessor illustrates the Hindi industry's gingerly approach to caste.

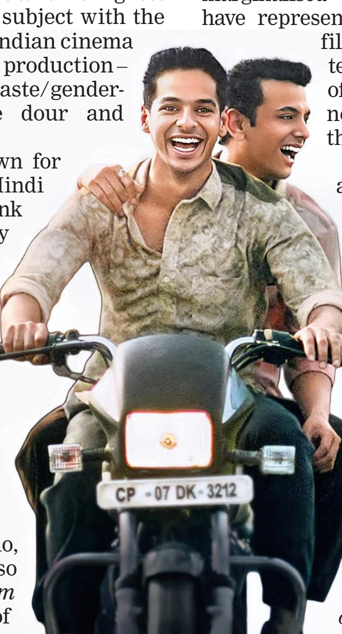
In 2016, writer-director Nagraj Manjule's *Sairat*, the tragedy of a rich upper-caste woman and poor Dalit man in love, became Marathi cinema's all-time highest grosser. By embellishing his bleak subject with the standard trappings of commercial Indian cinema – attractive leads, lively music, sleek production – Manjule rejected the notion that caste/gender-themed films must perforce be dour and financially unviable.

Johar's Dharma, which is known for glitz and glamour, remade *Sairat* in Hindi as *Dhadak* (2018), directed by Shashank Khaitan. Bizarrely, *Sairat*'s primary element – caste – got only a passing mention in *Dhadak*. The powerful original story was reduced in the Hindi retelling to just another princess-and-pauper romance.

Jeo Baby's Malayalam hit, *The Great Indian Kitchen* (2021), received similar treatment. The intricate interplay of gender, religion and caste in the original was deleted in its Hindi remake, Arati Kadav's *Mrs.*

Missing storytellers | In this scenario, it's remarkable that *Dhadak 2*, also from Dharma, is faithful to *Pariyerum Perumal*'s unbridled condemnation of caste atrocities. Writers Rahul Badwelkar and Iqbal have even improved on the Tamil script by giving substance and agency to *Dhadak 2*'s heroine, Vidhi, unlike the vaguely written Jothi from the original.

Pariyerum Perumal's producer, Pa Ranjith, a director of several caste-themed blockbusters, and Manjule have been instrumental in pushing casteism to the forefront of Tamil and Marathi cinema. It's perhaps no coincidence that both are Dalit, and make no bones about their caste identity. This in itself underlines a major lacuna in the Hindi industry: the absence of Dalits and Adivasis in influential positions, Ghaywan being an exception.



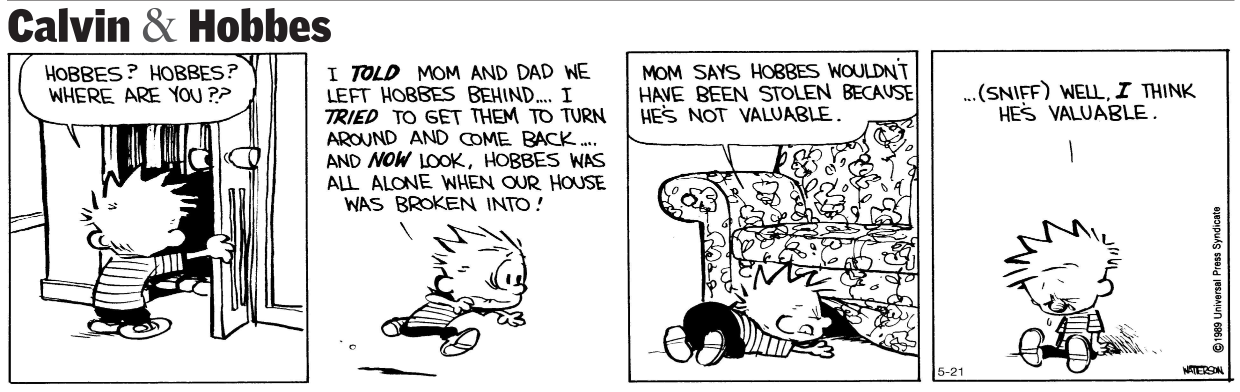
This is not to say that only members of a marginalised community would, should or could depict that community in their works. The point is that minority, marginalised and persecuted communities ought to have representation not only in films, but also in filmmaking, because they have a right to tell their own stories. The good intentions of individuals from dominant groups are no substitute for the lived experiences of the oppressed.

Those currently controlling Hindi cinema are either risk-averse (and fear that Dalit themes will "hurt sentiments"), or right-wing, or so shielded by their socio-economic privilege that they're oblivious to the reality of caste.

Badwelkar and Iqbal captured this truth in a meta moment in *Dhadak 2* when Vidhi (Triptii Dimri) tells her Dalit classmate Neelesh (Siddhanth Chaturvedi): "I thought all this (casteism) was a thing of the past." He replies: "Those who never go through it feel that way." As it happens, "those who never go through it" also dominate the Hindi film industry, and decide whose stories are worth telling.

The writer is author of The Adventures of an Intrepid Film Critic

Calvin & Hobbes



Sacred*space*

When people ask me if a god created the universe, I tell them that the question itself makes no sense. Time didn't exist before the big bang, so there is no time for God to make the universe in.

Stephen Hawking

God Sees The Truth But Waits

Aditya Mukherjee

Leo Tolstoy's short story *God Sees the Truth but Waits* is a timeless reflection on the moral presence of God in human life. Through the tragic life of Aksionov, a man wrongfully imprisoned, Tolstoy portrays God not as an immediate deliverer from suffering but as a constant moral force, watching, guiding, and ultimately redeeming. The story suggests that divine justice operates on a scale beyond human impatience, and that faith in the Supreme's presence gives meaning even to suffering. In this way, Tolstoy captures the paradox of divine nearness and silence, reminding readers that while human beings may despair, God remains an integral part of life's unfolding truth.

This belief in the Divine's integral presence is not unique to Tolstoy. Many writers, both Indian and Western, have echoed this conviction in their own ways. Rabindranath Tagore consistently emphasised the immanence of the Omnipotent in human existence. In *Gitanjali*, Tagore writes not of a distant deity but of a God who dwells within the heart and breathes through rhythm of daily life. For the poet finds Him in human love, nature, and the silent strength that sustains a weary soul. Much like Tolstoy, Tagore portrays God as a force whose presence gives meaning even to sorrow.

In the Western tradition, William Blake's poetry reflects this sense of God's closeness. In *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, Blake explores how divine presence permeates human life, even amid oppression and pain. In 'The Lamb', Blake affirms God's gentle care, while in 'The Tyger', he wrestles with the mystery of a creation that holds both beauty and terror.

Closer to Tolstoy's moral concerns is the American writer Nathaniel Hawthorne, particularly in *The Scarlet Letter*. Hawthorne often depicted God as the ultimate moral witness whose presence exposes hypocrisy and validates genuine repentance. While human societies may err in judgement, divine truth persists and eventually triumphs. This echoes Tolstoy's idea that while injustice may prevail in the short term, God's vision extends beyond the horizon of human limitations.

THE SPEAKING TREE

In modern Indian literature, MK Gandhi's writings, though not fictional in nature, also highlight the centrality of Divine. For Gandhi, the Supreme was synonymous with Truth, an eternal principle guiding human action. Like Tolstoy, whom Gandhi deeply admired, he believed that holding onto faith in God sustains moral courage even when worldly justice falters.

Taken together, these voices – Tolstoy, Tagore, Blake, Hawthorne, and Gandhi – affirm that God is not an abstract figure removed from the human condition, but a sustaining presence embedded within it. Whether as moral witness, intimate companion, creative force, or eternal truth, the Divine remains central to how humanity endures suffering, seeks justice, and finds meaning. Their writings suggest that while the Almighty may appear silent at times, He is never absent. It is in this paradox – Omnipresent both waits and watches – that literature across cultures finds a shared truth: the Divine continues to remain an integral part of human life, shaping moral and spiritual journey of humanity. As William Blake urged, we are invited to glimpse the Divine even in the smallest details of existence: *To see a World in a Grain of Sand / And a Heaven in a Wildflower / Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand / And Eternity in an hour.*

Opinion

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 26, 2025

WORK IN PROGRESS

Prime Minister Narendra Modi

As the economy continues to grow, the tax burden will continue to decrease. With the blessings of the citizens, the reforms in GST will continue

Politics over cinema

HC's decision to stay a cap on ticket prices shows why govts should allow market forces a free play

THE KARNATAKA HIGH Court's decision on Tuesday to stay the state government's move to cap cinema ticket prices at ₹200 should be welcomed. The court expressed doubts about whether such a cap was "reasonable", considering that the costs borne by movie theatres and film producers are likely to vary depending on where the film is exhibited. Most experts, rightly, saw the price cap as a political move and argued that what was really needed is dynamic pricing across formats and properties, allowing premium cinemas to charge higher rates while ensuring affordable access through low-cost theatres. Multiplexes will lose flexibility in their plans, premium screens will take a back seat, and eventually, consumers will lose choice. There is no doubt that the Karnataka government's move went against the principle of laissez-faire or a free market which is necessary to ensure that businesses thrive. Unforeseen regulatory changes of this kind can seriously jeopardise a company, putting at risk precious capital invested by the promoters and other investors as well as bank loans. Minority shareholders are also vulnerable to such actions.

The state government has said the step has been taken in public interest. But populist policies like loan waivers and free electricity must be eschewed. Companies must be left alone to run their operations without interference—that's what economic freedom is all about. While multi-screen premium cinemas with fewer than 75 seats are exempt from the price cap, exhibitors had questioned the rationale for fixing prices at a point when audiences might be willing to pay more for a better experience. They have a point. Whether they are airline tickets or hotel rooms, pricing should be the prerogative of those in charge. Consumers have the choice—if they are willing to pay, the state should accept that.

It's true that that there are instances of governments protecting citizens' interests. Even a rich nation like Israel brought in the Popcorn Law. The law specifies that closed entertainment venues—movie theatres, sports arenas, and theatres—that sell food and drinks cannot prevent customers from bringing in their own. The Popcorn Law was passed as an amendment to the Consumer Protection Law and the objective was to help consumers. Legislators had argued that families, if they wished, should be allowed to carry food from home. They believed this would encourage owners to lower prices of refreshments. In India, however, the Supreme Court's stance was completely different. Although a couple of state governments batted for consumers, arguing they should be allowed to carry food into the cinema halls, the apex court has ruled against this.

The point is that consumers anyway have other choices for their entertainment. Over-the-top (OTT) viewership is on the rise with the number of users having grown at 10% and estimated at about 601 million, according to Ormax Media. Paid subscriptions are nudging 150 million and with telcos bundling these services with their offerings, this could rise further. The number of active users of connected TV (CTV) increased a sharp 87%, driven by the rise of smart TVs with the user base at around 129.2 million. This translates to an estimated 35 to 40 million CTV homes. Many a producer are now opting for a direct OTT release or a quick streaming after a theatre release. So there is no reason for the government to be the Big Brother and control ticket prices. It's not the government's job anyway.

SEBI'S REFORMS

THEY ADDRESS BOTH ENDS OF SPECTRUM: MEGA ISSUERS ACCESSING PUBLIC MARKETS & SMALL RETAIL INVESTORS

Push for market efficiency

SANDEEP PAREKH

Managing partner, Finsec Law Advisors

THE SECURITIES AND Exchange Board of India (Sebi) has long been tasked with walking a careful line between deepening capital markets and protecting investor confidence. Over the past decade, its approach has gradually shifted, and the decisions announced at its board meeting on September 12—ranging from easing initial public offering (IPO) norms for large issuers to recalibrating related party transaction (RPT) thresholds, streamlining foreign investor access, and broadening mutual fund (MF) participation in alternative asset classes—reflect this evolution. Taken together, they signal a regulator conscious of market realities and willing to fine-tune compliance without diluting oversight.

One of the most consequential reforms is the proposed amendment to the Securities Contracts (Regulation) Rules, 1957, relating to the minimum public offer and minimum public shareholding requirements for large issuers. Under the revised framework, issuers with a post-issue market cap between ₹50,000 crore and ₹1 lakh crore may list with a public float as low as 8% (subject to a floor of ₹1,000 crore), while those above ₹5 lakh crore may list with just 1% public offer (subject to a minimum dilution of 2.5% and a floor of ₹15,000 crore). Timelines for achieving 25% public shareholding have also been extended, up to 10 years for the largest issuers.

This bifurcation of thresholds represents a more calibrated approach to different issuer sizes. Forcing very large companies to dilute aggressively at listing could result in oversupply, weak valuations, and potential instability. The revised norms ease compliance while maintaining significant market float over time. A balance must be struck between accommodating market absorption capacity and preserving genuine public participation.

In parallel, Sebi has amended the Sebi (Issue of Capital and Disclosure Requirements) Regulations, 2018, to broaden anchor investor participation in IPOs. From two categories earlier, anchor investors will now form a single class with participation rules tied to issue size. The anchor portion has been raised to 40% of the institutional book, with one-third reserved for domestic MFs and the remainder for insurers and pension funds. Undersubscription in the insurer and pension fund tranche can be reallocated to MFs.

These changes are expected to diversify anchor books and provide structured opportunities for long-term institutional investors. Broader participation by foreign portfolio investors (FPIs) operating multiple funds also becomes easier, aligning India with global practices. While such reservations improve stability and credibility in the anchor book, the regulator must ensure they do not restrict issuer flexibility. Expanding the overall pool of eligible institutions may achieve the same objective without rigid segmentation.

Corporate governance remains another focal point. Amendments to the Sebi (Listing Obligations and Disclosure Requirements) Regulations, 2015, introduce scale-based thresholds for determining material RPTs. Thresholds are now linked to company turnover, with higher bands for companies with turnover exceeding ₹20,000 crore. Subsidiary-level thresholds have also been harmonised with parent-level requirements to avoid arbitrage.

This shift toward proportionality is welcome, as fixed numerical triggers were arbitrary and often disproportionate. By doing so, the framework becomes more rational. At the same time, audit committees must retain discretion to examine transactions beyond mere numbers, as governance risks often lie in qualitative context. Codifying omnibus approval validity periods and clarifying that a "holding company" means only a listed holding company also introduces consistency in industry practices and removes existing ambiguities.

> Sebi's role will be to maintain a delicate balance between growth and oversight, facilitation, and vigilance

Other decisions taken at the board meeting are reflective of Sebi's effort to make it easier to do business in the securities markets by simplifying compliance and reducing procedures for participants. For instance, the introduction of the Single Window Automatic and Generalised Access for Trusted Foreign Investors (SWAGAT-FI) framework is designed to unify and streamline access for objectively identified low-risk foreign investors like sovereign wealth funds, pension funds, and regulated retail funds. By offering benefits such as 10-year registration validity, exemptions from certain ownership restrictions, and simplified demat account structures, the framework reduces regulatory complexity while signalling India's intent to attract stable, long-horizon capital.

Domestically, Sebi has broadened the scope for accredited investors and large value funds in the alternative investment space. Accredited investor-only schemes will enjoy flexibility on *pari-passu* treatment and tenure, while the threshold for large value funds has been reduced from ₹70 crore to ₹25 crore. These reforms recognise the sophistication of accredited investors and expand the potential investor base, though regulators must monitor whether such relaxations are used disproportionately by funds seeking to avoid compliance.

Perhaps the most significant reform is the reclassification of real estate investment trusts (REITs) as equity instruments for mutual fund investment purposes. Both REITs and infrastructure investment funds were treated as hybrid instruments. Now, REITs will fall within equity allocation limits and become eligible for index inclusion, unlocking passive flows and lowering the cost of capital for real estate developers. This is aligned with global practices.

Sebi addressed investor protection and financial inclusion through MF reforms. It has reduced exit load caps from 5% to 3%, revised distributor incentives to encourage inflows from beyond the top 30 (B-30) cities, and introduced a new incentive for onboarding female investors. These measures, though incremental, reflect a regulatory intent to democratise access to financial products and support underrepresented segments of investors.

Sebi has also cleared governance reforms for market infrastructure institutions, requiring two executive directors in addition to the managing director, with defined roles in operations, compliance, risk, and investor grievances. While aimed at enhancing accountability, rigid role definitions may limit flexibility and a board-approved governance framework could have achieved the objective without such constraints.

Viewed in totality, these decisions reflect a regulator that is increasingly pragmatic, adopting differentiated rules for different categories of issuers and investors, promoting digital facilitation, and seeking to harmonise with global standards. The reforms address both ends of the spectrum—mega issuers accessing public markets and small retail investors from B-30 cities.

Yet, execution will determine credibility. As India's capital markets continue to expand in depth and global relevance, Sebi's role will be to maintain this delicate balance—between growth and oversight, facilitation, and vigilance. The task now is to ensure that facilitation does not outpace vigilance, and that in seeking to open doors, the regulator does not lower guardrails. Over a longer period of time, many of the details should be simplified.

*Co-authored with **Navneeta Shankar** and **Yash Vardhan**, associates at Finsec Law Advisors*

China's Chery is right to face the music on Russia

IT'S NOT EASY to end a relationship after two decades. But Chery Automobile's decision to leave Russia, its largest single market after China, in order to pursue better prospects elsewhere is the right course to take as it lists in Hong Kong.

Chery, founded nearly 30 years ago in the eastern industrial river town of Wuhu, was unusual among its cohort of state-owned carmakers for not being listed. On Thursday, it made a solid stock market debut after raising $1.2 billion due to strong demand, finally joining rivals Geely Automobile Holdings and Great Wall Motor. Its shares rose as much as 14%.

Chery has been China's biggest vehicle exporter since 2003, just two years after it started selling basic sedans to its first overseas customer, a dealer in Syria. Following the exodus of global brands from Russia after Moscow's invasion of Ukraine, Chinese players have filled that gap. Chery has established itself as the biggest foreign carmaker in Russia. Even its listing, being led entirely by Chinese investment firms, may have been touched by the association. JPMorgan Chase did not work on the deal, although it had been chosen by Chery to do so. Some Wall Street banks have shied away from collaborating with firms that have exposure to markets sanctioned by the US.

In its listings prospectus, the Chinese automaker said it had ended transactions with Iran and Cuba to mitigate regulatory risks and was disposing of operations in Russia. As a result, revenues from the country have fallen from 25.5% of total sales in 2023 to 17.7% last year. The figure stood at 10.7% in the first three months of 2025.

Chery's pivot is a major victory for activists who have been urging global firms to divest because of Moscow's war. But it's clear the decision to exit is not just humanitarian. As I've written before, countries worldwide—including friendly ones—have been imposing protectionist measures on Chinese firms, especially carmakers with excess capacity.

JULIANA LIU

Bloomberg

Even in case of Russia, there are clearly boundaries in what President Xi Jinping has previously described as a "no-limits" partnership. Last October, Moscow started imposing an import fee that effectively lifted the prices of small-engine vehicles by more than $8,000 each. Combined with ongoing economic troubles, the market is deteriorating. Sales of cars in Russia contracted by 26% in the first eight months of the year, according to Cui Dongshu, secretary general of the China Passenger Car Association. All major brands, including home-grown market leader AvtoVaz, the maker of the Lada, have seen sales fall sharply.

In the long run, Chery's exit from Russia is a good move, Gregor Sebastian, a senior analyst who focuses on autos at the Rhodium Group, told me. Its export success there has hit a limit, he said, and producing cars locally would expose it to US and European Union sanctions. The strategy does set it apart from Great Wall, which is reportedly expanding capacity at its factory south of Moscow, and Geely, which produces vehicles in Belarus intended for Russia.

The natural question to ask is what other markets could fill such a glaring hole in Chery's balance sheet. While 60% of sales came from China last year, the market is plagued by a fierce price war and virtually everyone is looking abroad. Chery is still the top exporter, although EV- and hybrid-maker BYD is catching up quickly.

According to *Bloomberg Intelligence*, Chery could redirect its gasoline cars to Latin America, Africa, and West Asia. Those regions have fewer trade barriers and consumers are looking for deals. *BI* estimates Chinese vehicle exports might still grow by 10% this year, despite the decline in Russia. That's down from the 20% expansion in 2024.

For its part, Chery is talking up an upcoming joint-venture factory in Spain, its first in Europe, and a desire to localise operations in the region. An executive said recently the firm was weighing whether to establish additional production facilities in the UK or Italy. About 20% of proceeds from the Hong Kong listing have been set aside for further overseas expansion.

Last month, the carmaker sold more vehicles abroad than at home, a milestone touted as "record breaking". It's an achievement many of its peers are trying to emulate. Leaving Russia will be painful for Chery and place particular short-term pressure on profit margins. In the fullness of time, though, it will absolutely be the correct decision as it shakes off a sanctions risk and prioritises more lucrative markets in the West.

Tariff war: India's choices & world order

PARTHA CHATTERJEE

Dean of academics, Shiv Nadar University

India must ensure the contours of the trade agreement with the EU are akin to the one with the UK, and it is in place as early as possible

It's a season of change
And if you feel strange
It's probably good
—*Year of the Snake* by Arcade Fire

IT IS A year where we are witnessing more than just change—it is upheaval, and it is hard to feel good about it. Since World War II, there has been a broad agreement on open and orderly trade. It was never perfect, and it was crumbling in certain ways. But in the wake of Trump's tariff war, the scaffolding that was holding it together is about to give way. The whole configuration is poised to change, and India in particular will have an impact on the reconfiguration. India is one of the nations that is worst hit by Trump, who has imposed 50% tariff on its imports. This could potentially reshape not only trade between India and the US, but also have much broader geopolitical relationships. While the recent Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit provides a glimpse of it, what emerges is still uncertain. India, which has cultivated the US as a strategic partner over the last few years and has the US as its largest trading partner, faces stark choices.

Half of the 50% tariff that the US has imposed on India is on account of India buying a large amount of crude from Russia. So, the first choice India must make is whether it should continue buying oil from Russia. So far, it has not stopped. More than economics, this is driven by the need to assert geopolitical independence. From a purely economic lens, things are greyer. Russia has emerged as a major supplier of crude oil to India in the last three years. If such a switch is possible in such a short time, it can also be reversed. The question is if that will fan inflation. Crude prices were $71 per barrel (bbl) in 2021 before the Russia-Ukraine war. It shot up to $101/bbl when the war began, but fell thereafter and has stabilised to about $80/bbl. While India buys a large share of Russia's exports of crude, it is only 1.5% of global volumes. If India stops buying from Russia, it is unlikely that there will be a catastrophic surge in global prices. Moreover, according to a study published in the Reserve Bank of India Bulletin in July, a 10% increase in crude prices will increase inflation in India by only 20 basis points. As such, though there will be a cost, the economic fallout of discontinuing the import of Russian crude will be manageable. So, the decision to continue to buy Russian oil is due to other strategic considerations. If India continues to buy Russian oil, and the 50% tariff on Indian goods remains in place, there will be economic consequences. The most obvious is that the high tariffs will impact exports from labour-intensive sectors like textiles and gems.

These two sectors together export about $20 billion to the US, which is about 30% of each of these sectors' exports. A fall in exports for these sectors will reduce dollar flows to India, possibly offsetting any gain in the reduced outflow of dollars due to buying oil at a lower price. This will also lead to job losses, unless Indian exporters can find alternative markets for their products, which is not easy. It requires understanding that market and competition, managing regulatory and customs hurdles, and finding a network of buyers. Can the new bonhomie with China, or for that matter BRICS, help? Unlikely.

> If India continues to buy Russian oil, and the 50% tariff on Indian goods remains in place, there will be economic consequences

India has a record high trade deficit with China to the tune of $99.2 billion in the last financial year. The trade surplus with the US is $41.2 billion. China is also an exporter of textiles and gems. In fact, China's exports of textiles to the US are about five times that of India's. India, on the other hand, exports mostly raw products like ores, organic chemicals needed for pharmaceuticals, and cotton. It is unlikely that the Indian exporters will find much solace in the closer relationship with China. The story is similar for Russia or some other members of BRICS.

However, India can find hope in relationships with economies like the European Union (EU) or the UK. Trade patterns between India and these economies are somewhat similar. India already exports to these countries. The EU is the second-largest market for India's textiles after the US, and India exports significant amounts to the UK—though in both economies, it lags exports from countries like China and Bangladesh. So, the network and the know-how already exist, and there is also room to grow. The recently concluded India-UK comprehensive economic and trade agreement eliminates duties for most of India's exports, giving further impetus to trade. It was announced that India expects to conclude the years-long negotiations with the EU by the end of this year. India must work expeditiously to ensure the contours of the agreement are similar to the India-UK one and it is in place as early as possible. India's choices will profoundly reshape the world order. This is just the beginning of the season of change, we can only hope we feel good by the end of it.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Vagaries of weather

Apropos of "Resilient countryside" (*FE*, September 25), with monsoon blessings the countryside cheers up as has been shown in National Bank For Agriculture And Rural Development (NABARD) data. However, as you have rightly said, the vagaries of weather have brought miseries to many farmers mostly in Punjab. A vast tract of fertile land near Punjab's rivers has been eroded and mountainous sand and silt have created problems of sowing wheat crop in the coming season. Both the government as well as NABARD must formulate an effective plan for bailing out farmers in the state by reclaiming their cultivable lands. The Punjab government must also be transparent in spending central grants and manage river embankments. Aspersions are cast on dam management. The grain-bowl state needs the Centre's support.
—Brij B Goyal, Ludhiana

Ladakh on the edge

The youth-led protests in Ladakh reflect a genuine demand to preserve local identity, culture, and resources, highlighting calls for statehood and protections under the Sixth Schedule. The recent violence is alarming but stems from frustration over unemployment and perceived neglect, showing how peaceful protests can escalate when dialogue fails. A balanced, practical response requires the government and local leaders to engage in transparent discussions, address socio-economic grievances, expand education and job opportunities, and channel youth energy into constructive civic participation—measures that can de-escalate tensions and build long-term social harmony in the region.
—Muhammad Asad, Mumbai

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