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

# How pragmatism is inadequate to understand Ambedkar's scholarship

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

Jadumani Mahanand

**A**fter several decades, the scholarship of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar is getting global attention. In the last four years, four biographies by different scholars and four scholarly books, excluding a set of five volumes on Dr. Ambedkar's life and philosophy, have been written.

Still, scholars from different disciplines or through interdisciplinary approaches are reluctant to teach or research Ambedkar's thoughts.

In this context, it is interesting to see the scholarship of Scott R. Stroud explore the intellectual relationship between John Dewey and B. R. Ambedkar. His last book, *The Evolution of Pragmatism in India: Ambedkar, Dewey and the Rhetoric of Reconstruction*, demonstrated the scholarship of Ambedkar and Dewey within pragmatist thought. Initially, Stroud, as a Deweyan scholar, explored the Deweyan influence on Ambedkar's political philosophy to develop the theory of Ambedkar's navayana pragmatism.

His latest article which appeared in the *Economic and Political Weekly* titled "B. R. Ambedkar and the Evolution of Pragmatism in India", responded to some of his critiques, and defended his Deweyan argument. This essay critically engages with Stroud's article in *EPW*.

## Cannot be reduced to pragmatism

Stroud's scholarship attempts to interpret Ambedkar's political philosophy in the global pragmatist tradition. Pragmatism is a progressive philosophy; and therefore, thinkers like Ambedkar become important figures in the global pluralist pragmatist philosophical tradition, Stroud argues. However, the range of scholarship on Ambedkar over the years demonstrates that he goes beyond pragmatism – the pragmatist-Deweyan interpretation articulates only one aspect of Ambedkar's thought. Stroud provides

only a Deweyan reading of Ambedkar. Making a Deweyan interpretation of Ambedkar's multifaceted activities and intellectual engagement only gives us a partial understanding of him and reduces Ambedkar's versatile radical philosophy.

In his recent book, *Ambedkar's Political Philosophy: A Grammar of Public Life from the Social Margin*, Valerian Rodrigues explicates the wide-ranging nature of Ambedkar's scholarship of political philosophy. Rodrigues argues that John Dewey is only one of his teachers. Therefore, merely interpreting Ambedkar's thought through Dewey and pragmatism will give only one philosophical underpinning.

For example, one of the claims Stroud developed is that Ambedkar passionately learned from Dewey's teachings, which remained with Ambedkar for a long time, whether it was the French Revolution or a lecture on psychology. Further, Stroud created a speculative story through a book written by Nima Adlerblum, assuming it was Ambedkar who would attend each lecture of Dewey and reproduce Dewey's words and language. Further, Stroud focuses on Ambedkar's western education, in which Dewey's influence was central.

By doing so, Stroud wishes to portray Dewey as a permanent thinker who shapes Ambedkar's philosophy. This however seems to omit the fact that Ambedkar was a versatile reader who explored different philosophies and utilised social experiences and scholarship in his activism.

Stroud rather forcefully argues that most of the concepts and terminologies Ambedkar used in his activism and intellectual formulation accorded with Dewey. But this obsession with Dewey's impact and pragmatism on Ambedkar creates a limited kind of scholarship.

## Pragmatism falls short

Stroud defines pragmatism as "flexible,

adaptive and diverse". Arguably, Ambedkar did adopt a kind of pragmatic approach engaging with the modern state in articulating democracy. Unfortunately, Stroud is not interested to interpret this through Dewey's *The Public and Its Problem* – probably because he could not connect the arguments in the book with Ambedkar's experience; the way he engages with the state with a pragmatic approach such as negotiating with Gandhi, other Indian leaders, and the later Constituent Assembly debates. Although, Stroud equates pragmatism and social democracy, it is important to see Ambedkar's original emphasis of social democracy, and not within the pragmatist tradition.

Pragmatism is important, but inadequate to annihilate caste in a Brahmanical society. Ambedkar cited Dewey in *Annihilation of Caste*, but it is not a pragmatic text.

Stroud claims that Ambedkar learned the "psychology of habit and custom" from Dewey in thinking about the psychology of caste. But how could Stroud overlook the untouchability encountered by Ambedkar throughout his life – whether it is physical or psychological?

Stroud's articulations are lofty; it also implicitly indicates that Ambedkar's originality lies in Dewey, that Ambedkar's scholarship and experience of caste count for little, and that his reading of several texts on caste seem secondary.

Stroud argues that Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism was a pragmatic approach. But Buddhism was a life-long philosophy that Ambedkar cultivated from his childhood; giving credit or echo to Dewey is a misinterpretation. For example, Ambedkar's family were part of the Kabir Panth, which teaches the importance of ethics and morality. Further, Ambedkar read the *Budhha Charitra* in his early age which remained his sole inspiration. Ambedkar also wrote

a letter to Sharada stating, that "the only person to whom I owe all my being is Gautama Buddha."

Very importantly, Rodrigues shows in his recent book, a wide-ranging scholarship on the "epistemic location of Ambedkar" that includes Kabir's legacy, Dewey's influence, Phule's presence in Ambedkar, the social and political discourse of Bombay and India, Fabian socialism, social democracy and so on. In the Columbia alumni newspaper, where Ambedkar expresses admiration for his "great professors, John Dewey, James Shotwell, Edwin Seligman, and James Hervey Robinson", Stroud only picks John Dewey for his project of pragmatism. Similarly, one should also explore Ambedkar's time in London (LSE). How can Ambedkar's western education only focus on Dewey?

The *Annihilation of Caste* was a lifelong project for Ambedkar's emancipatory politics and philosophy. The annihilation of caste, the declaration of renouncing Hinduism and the conversion to Buddhism were revolutionary acts, not merely accorded to pragmatism. They were part of his praxis because Ambedkar could see the limitations of the modern state and constitutional democracy.

He found Buddhism to be an ultimate path. His 22 vows discard the authority of Hindu gods and goddess – it is not a reformist act either, not even restructuring Hindu society. Too much reading of pragmatism into Ambedkar suggests an American project – the same American project yet to adequately address the structural and perpetual racial discrimination faced by people of colour. Ambedkar was equally aware of the limitations of pragmatism and the modern state and hence caste annihilation was his project of emancipation.

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# Agricultural protectionism pushes up India's import tariff

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

## DATA POINT

Samreen Wani

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Tariff troubles

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



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

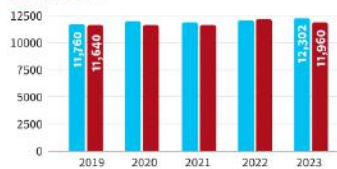


Chart 3: The chart shows the average duty (simple average) levied category-wise on imports into India (in %)

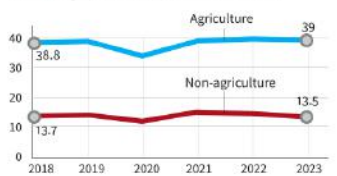
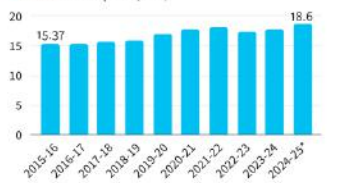


Chart 5: The chart shows the share of exports to the U.S. in India's total exports (in %)



Note: \* Data for April-November FY 25

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

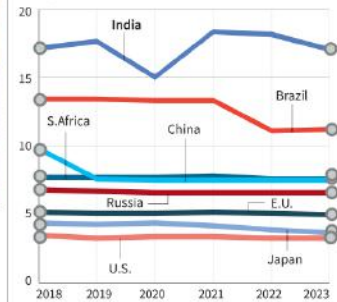


Table 4: The chart shows the average duty levied product category wise on imports into India (in %)

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

# The danger of a digital censor board

**T**here is a moral panic over a show called India's Got Latent. Much of the furore centres around some crude remarks made by a YouTuber, Ranveer Allahabadi. His remarks have been condemned by Chief Ministers, a Parliamentary Standing Committee, and even the Supreme Court.

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

## Law on vulgarity

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

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

The second legal provision



**Apar Gupta**

Advocate and the Founder-Director of the Internet Freedom Foundation

While many may argue that Allahabadi and Raina's online reach are responsible for this uproar, the fact is that the two of them are mere pawns in the great game for control of India's digital media

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

## Question of regulation

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

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

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

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

# The deeper meaning of declining school enrolment

As the world's most populous country, India hopes to reap its demographic dividend due to its burgeoning youth population. Demographers and policy planners always knew that this window of opportunity would remain open, but only for a limited time. Declining school enrolment over the past decade marks the beginning of the end of this period. This means that India may become older even before becoming rich.

It is no wonder that the Unified District Information System for Education Plus (U-DISE+) data for 2022-23 and 2023-24, which was released by the Ministry of Education on December 30, 2024, caused much consternation as it showed a 15.5 million drop (6%) in school enrolment since 2018-19.

## The official line versus the reality

Official sources have attributed the decline in enrolment to improvements in data collection. They explain that seeding Aadhaar numbers with enrolment eliminates multiple enrolments. This may sound plausible because it has long been suspected that some children are enrolled in multiple schools.

However, an analysis of decade-long data (2014-15 to 2023-24) on enrolment and its correlation with different independent variables, including the changes in the population in the age groups relevant to schooling, tells a different story. In fact, it shows a rather grim picture. The needle points toward the beginning of the end of the era of reaping the demographic dividend.

It is a matter of concern that school enrolment has plummeted by 24.51 million, or 9.45%, over the past decade, with elementary-level enrolment registering a rather pronounced fall of 18.7 million (13.45%). Up to this level, education has been free and compulsory under the Right to Education (RTE) Act since 2009.

In comparison, secondary-level enrolment declined by 1.43 million (3.75%), whereas senior secondary-level enrolments have increased by



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It could mark the beginning of the end of the India's demographic dividend and a population aging before it becomes rich

3.63 million (15.46%) over the decade. This means that the decline began only recently.

## Government and private schools

The data further show that enrolment in government and government-aided schools, which account for more than 65% of the total school enrolment (and the mainstay of the poor and marginalised sections of society), recorded a significantly higher decline: by 19.89 million (13.8%) and 4.95 million (16.41%), respectively.

In these schools, too, the decline in enrolment at the elementary level has been rather pronounced: 21.78 million (18.31%) in government schools and 3.85 million (24.34%) in government-aided schools. They have also experienced lower enrolment at the secondary level, albeit at a lower rate.

Private unaided schools have been an exception, as their total enrolment increased by 1.61 million, or 2.03%. Notably, however, they registered only a marginal increase in elementary and secondary level enrolment, though their senior secondary-level enrolment surged by 1.41 million (15.55%). These schools seemingly bucked the trend but did not remain entirely unaffected.

Enrolment has declined across the board and persisted since 2014-15, particularly at the elementary levels. They can neither be ascribed to methodological changes nor dismissed as a one-off temporary event. They reflect a systematic transition. The nation is at the cusp of a paradigm shift, and one does not have to go too far to prove this point.

It may not be a coincidence that the country's school-going population in the age group of 6-17 years has also declined by 17.30 million (5.78%) over the past decade. The decline in the population in the age groups of 6-13 and 14-15 years, relevant to enrolment at the elementary and secondary levels, has dropped by 18.7 million (9.12%) and 2.17 million (4.35%), respectively.

Delving deeper, the data discern a statistically significant strong positive correlation between

school enrolment and the estimated population in the relevant age group, so much so that the decline in the population of the relevant age group explains the 60.36% decline in enrolment.

The finding is further corroborated by the fact that the number of schools in the country has also declined by 79,109, from 1.55 million in 2017-18 to 1.47 million in 2023-14, a decline of 5.1%. These are in sync with the fact that India's fertility rate declined to 2.01 in 2022, which is far below the replacement level of 2.10. The persistent plummeting of school enrolment is mainly due to demographic changes, which do not augur well for the country.

## The social impact

A burgeoning youth population is necessary for enrolment growth, which India has been experiencing until recently. It has now entered the phase when the population bulge is shifting to the right. Since the process began only recently, it is reflected rather sharply in elementary-level enrolment. The effect will gradually but firmly be felt in secondary and senior secondary-level enrolment, and will finally impinge on higher education.

As is already the case in most developed countries, we will soon face the transition to a shrinking working-age population. This is disconcerting because it is happening sooner than expected.

Ideally, a country must reap as much demographic dividend as possible to generate much-needed income and wealth to support and sustain the burden of an ageing population. India will likely see its population age even before becoming rich.

Declining school enrolment has less to do with the change in data collection method than a shift in the demographic bulge to the right. Unless the 2021 Census, which is yet to begin, presents a different demographic trend, it could mark the beginning of the end of the demographic dividend for India.



# Eroding federalism

## Central funding for States in education should be delinked from the NEP

**B**y withholding Tamil Nadu's central share of Samagra Shiksha funds for rejecting the National Education Policy (NEP 2020), the Union Government is flexing its muscles to coerce States into submission. This move also undermines the intent of the Samagra Shiksha scheme (2018-19), which consolidated the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan, and Teacher Education programmes. The scheme was designed to ensure equitable access to quality education for all schoolchildren. Since last year, Tamil Nadu has repeatedly flagged the non-disbursal of ₹2,152 crore, warning that the funding shortfall has severely strained its school education infrastructure, affecting nearly 40 lakh students and 32,000 staff members. Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan has explicitly blamed the State for the impasse, declaring that the funds will be released only if Tamil Nadu implements the NEP in "letter and spirit". Adding fuel to the fire, he has insisted that the State adopt the three-language formula, mandating Tamil, English, and a regional language in schools. This stance disregards Tamil Nadu's long-standing opposition to the trilingual system, dating back to 1937, and its firm commitment to a two-language policy of Tamil and English since 1968. Going a step further, Mr. Pradhan has accused Tamil Nadu's leadership of being divisive and politically motivated. He even suggested that the State needs to "come to terms with the Indian Constitution" and adhere to the "rule of law", implying, quite unwarrantedly, that the State was not being run in line with the statute.

Unsurprisingly, the response in Tamil Nadu has been swift and sharp, especially on the language issue, which remains non-negotiable for most political parties in the State. Chief Minister M.K. Stalin has rightly questioned which constitutional provision mandates the three-language policy and warned that such blatant coercion will not be tolerated. While the NEP claims it does not "impose Hindi", successive Union Governments have, until now, respected Tamil Nadu's autonomy over its language policy. Policies governing subjects in the Concurrent List of the Constitution require flexibility and dialogue to ensure successful implementation across diverse regions. A rigid, one-size-fits-all approach risks undermining cooperative federalism and fostering resentment among States, which are equal stakeholders in central schemes. A more pragmatic approach would be to delink Samagra Shiksha and the Pradhan Mantri Schools for Rising India (PM SHRI) scheme from the NEP and instead tie funding to generic performance indicators. At the same time, Tamil Nadu would do well to finalise and roll out its long-pending State Education Policy as a viable alternative to the NEP, ensuring academic continuity and stability for its students.



# Quakes may well sharpen India's seismic readiness

**T**wo years ago, on February, 6, 2023, the people of Türkiye and Syria were jolted out of their sleep. At least 17,000 were killed, with their numbers mounting within minutes, as a great earthquake shook those countries in the early hours after 4 a.m., at 7.8 on a scale of 0 to 10. A second jolt came like a collaborator of the first, nine hours later, destroying whatever buildings stood on or around the scene of the first trauma.

'Fault lines' is an expression that we come across and use as we might 'glaciers' or 'deserts'. That is, without realising that it refers to an intensely volatile and totally unpredictable phenomenon, like the temper of the proverbial sleeping dragon or demon. Fault lines lie between the 15 log-jammed major tectonic plates on which the earth's thin crust sits.

These lines can slumber for decades, even centuries, quietly, one may say so 'sweetly', that their very existence can be forgotten by all except seismologists. Until...the fault line stir, rise, shake and then go on to mutilate, destroy and kill whatever lies on and along those lines. Depending on the degree of the awakened one's temper, the fury lasts or abates till such time as it lasts or abates.

## Nature's brewing tension

India's Indian Plate pressing onto the Eurasian Plate sculpted the Himalaya. The fault line involved runs right along the great Himalayan arc that stretches from Kashmir to the North East. It also implicates adjacent tracts in Pakistan, the Tibetan Autonomous Region of China, Nepal and Bhutan.

We are but dimly aware of this. For those of us who do not live in those stunningly beautiful tracts, that region means and evokes snow, pure air, clear waters, holidays and leisure. But we must know, must understand, the concurrent 'scene' which is about potential rubble, ravaged hill sides, mutilated river courses. And trauma.

We must shake ourselves out of our dangerous illusion, our perilous innocence about the reality beneath our feet. Seismologists tell us that the two great tectonic plates, the Indian and the Eurasian, have now slept their really deep sleep long enough now and that the built-up pressure inside their folds cannot be expected to hold its tension much longer.

Sure enough, a little over just one month ago, on January 7, 2025 at 9:05 a.m., an earthquake measuring Mw 7.1 struck Shigatse city of the Tibet



**Gopalkrishna Gandhi**

is a former administrator, diplomat and Governor

Autonomous Region of Southwestern China. Between 126 and 400 people were reported killed and 338 were injured. Unmindful of national borders and oblivious of lines of actual or notional control, the quake made itself felt in Nepal and in Northern India.

## In the media

On January 10, *The Hindu* had an editorial, "Damage control", that said, 'If the epicentre had been located closer to India, the damage could have been manifold.' And added, 'Earthquakes in the Himalayas evoke a special kind of dread in the country.' The comment was right. Dread they do cause. But have they occasioned the kind of intense and urgent planning that is needed? Have they occasioned national alertness, resolve and action? The Editorial went on to say, 'Unfortunately, predicting the day and time is outside the ambit of current science. Thus, the best we can hope for is insulation against the projected damage. It is in this context that infrastructure development in the Himalayan region must be viewed. While several of these projects are intended to smooth the movement of people and goods, the recurrent landslides and glacial lake outbursts that wash away dams, hydropower projects, and roads serve as a constant reminder of the inherent fragility of the region. Every form of infrastructure in the region – power plant or dam – must take into account the imminence of a major earthquake and the associated costs factored into planning.'

The Editorial said, 'Adhering to already existing building codes, not only in the Himalayas but in the surrounding Indo-Gangetic plains, can go a long way in limiting the inevitable damage.' If such adherence was good enough as a response one month ago, the earthquakes that shook the national capital on February 17, and within four hours, Siwan in Bihar, suggest that adherence to existing codes is not enough. Not enough by half.

Social media told us that there were people in Delhi who said they had never felt a tremor so big. This was impressionistic, perhaps, but impressions that come from real sensations under one's feet are real in a way that reports and reconstructed scenes are not. One post said 'today Delhi and Bihar, tomorrow West Bengal...'

It was salutary and sobering to see a post from Prime Minister Narendra Modi, barely back from his brief visit to the United States, reaching out to the people of Delhi, asking them to stay calm and take precautionary steps. The really meaningful

precautions are not within the means of the people. They must come from government, from the state.

We are now in a contingency that must take into account: high probability; high financial and physical cost if provided for, and incalculably higher if not provided for.

The principle is the same as in any insurance arrangement: the higher the risk the higher the premium.

## Time to act, and quickly

We need, not just quickly, not just urgently but quite immediately, to provide for state expense on, first, fore-closing and rolling back engineering enterprises that weaken the earth's crust, especially rocky terrain, in India's seismic risk zones in the ascending calibration of II, III and IV.

Second, super-imposing on the existing seismic zonation maps which are really x-ray plates, new carefully drawn mapped-plans for the protection (which can include evacuations, demolitions and re-building) of highly vulnerable structures, and assessing the seismic status of high follow-on secondary risk structures such as like hydel projects and atomic reactors (Narora in Uttar Pradesh is located in Zone IV).

Third, setting up a seismic building insurance scheme wherein premiums for insuring against collapse can be offered and encouraged.

Fourth, doing an assessment of the costs of rescue, temporary sheltering and rehabilitation zone-wise, of dislocated populations.

Fifth, fast-forwarding collaboration with countries that are experts in the field on earthquake anticipation through sensors, and architecture nostrums. This would involve expenses on hiring consultants.

All this sounds grim. But we should tell ourselves that there is the 'good news' that we are, as of this moment, ahead of the big seismic shock that has been anticipated by seismologists. We are capable of planning with some composure, even as we recover from the shock of February 17, not in a post-shock trauma accompanied by fiscal crippling. And, we have an institutional advantage in the shape of a Ministry of Earth Sciences and a Disaster Management Authority waiting to be harnessed in any scheme towards seismic resistance.

The 'motto' is brief: earthquakes are not to be prevented, they can scarcely be predicted, even in our age of Artificial Intelligence. But they can be prepared for. Is anyone doing that?

India must shake itself out of its perilous innocence and be prepared for the reality beneath the earth's crust



# Time and timing

## The validity of the CEC selection process needs early adjudication

Once again, the manner of appointment of the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) and Election Commissioners (EC) has become controversial, with the government going ahead with the process laid down in its December 2023 law, which is under challenge before the Supreme Court. Last week, the Court had deferred the hearing to February 19, while observing that if there was any development in the interregnum, it would meet the consequences of a subsequent decision on the validity of the Act. Ignoring a request from the Leader of the Opposition (LoP), Rahul Gandhi, the panel elevated Gyanesh Kumar as the CEC and inducted Vivek Joshi as the third member, following the retirement of CEC Rajiv Kumar. The question is whether the Act of 2023 goes against a 2022 Constitution Bench verdict that put in place a committee comprising the Prime Minister, the LoP and the Chief Justice of India (CJI) to select the persons to helm the Election Commission of India (ECI). The Act, however, includes a Union Minister in the committee instead of the CJI. The government argues that the Court's panel was only an ad hoc measure until Parliament came forward with its own law, as required in the Constitution. The petitioners maintain that the thrust of the 2022 judgment is that the appointment process should be insulated from executive interference so that its functioning will be truly independent.

Whether the CJI should be part of the selection committee is debatable, but there is little doubt that the 2:1 majority vested in the executive renders any selection vulnerable to the criticism that those chosen in that manner would not be seen as independent. The BJP-led government has been making appointments in the midst of court hearings. The Court has been declining to interfere in time, leading to such appointments becoming a fait accompli. The government had appointed Arun Goel as an EC in 2022, in the middle of the Constitution Bench hearing, and two ECs in March 2024 in the run-up to the general election to replace Mr. Goel, who had resigned, and another EC who had retired. Few will disagree that the public perception of the ECI as a fearless and fiercely independent institution has been on the decline. If elections are to be seen as free and fair by the whole electorate and not merely followers of the winners, the Court should not delay this matter any further. It has to adjudicate the question of whether the procedure set out in the law falls short of the level of independence envisaged in the Constitution Bench verdict for members of the ECI.





# A planet on the edge: are Saturn's rings older than they look?

The Solar System is constantly bombarded by dark pieces of fine dust. Astronomers expected this dust to be omnipresent in Saturn's rings, but this is not the case, so they surmised the rings are 100 million years old. This was a simple explanation, but it had a catch: scientists did not know how the rings could have formed so recently

Unnati Ashar

**A** debate about the age of Saturn's resplendent rings has been raging for a few decades now, with no end in sight. A new study by researchers at the Institute of Science Tokyo and the Paris Institute of Planetary Physics has fresh spin to offer now that could recast the conversation.

Saturn's rings are an arresting sight even through modest telescopes. The planet is made mostly of hydrogen and helium, whereas the rings are billions of pieces of mostly bright-white water ice and rock. Some of these pieces are as small as a grain of salt; others are as big as a house.

Four spacecraft have visited Saturn thus far, all launched by NASA: Pioneer II and the twin Voyagers 1 and 2 flew by it while Cassini orbited Saturn from 2004 to 2017.

## Unusually clean

Cassini in particular found the rings to be squeaky clean, with very little dirt. This is unusual because everything in the Solar System, including the earth, is constantly bombarded by dark pieces of dust, each finer than a grain of sand. These particles are fragments of larger chunks of rock in space. Most of this debris burns up in the earth's atmosphere when they get too close and never reach the surface. Around Saturn, astronomers expected this dark dust to be omnipresent in the rings, but this is not the case.

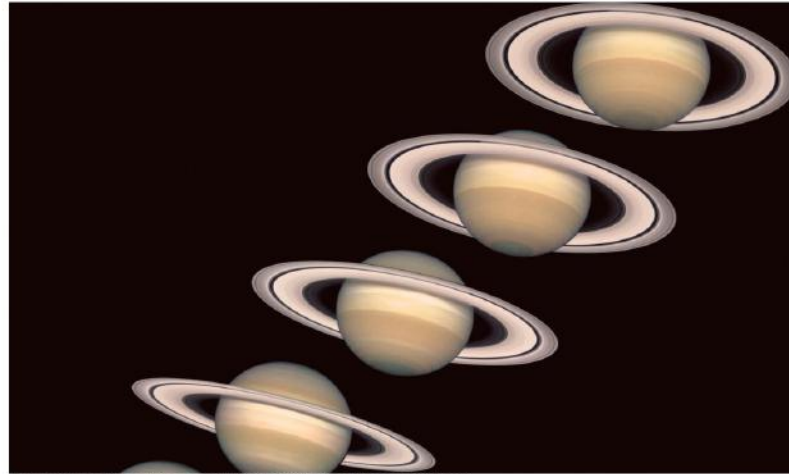
Based on this, scientists hypothesised that Saturn's rings are relatively new, only around 100 million years old – too young to have accumulated the dust. This was a simple explanation, which is good, but there is a catch: scientists do not know how the rings could have formed so recently.

## Rings out of time

In these last 100 million years, the Solar System has been pretty calm.

"In the very early stages of the formation of our solar system, around four billion years ago, the system was chaotic and unstable," Ryuki Hyodo, from the Institute of Science Tokyo, Chief Science Officer at Tokyo-based company SpaceData Inc., and a coauthor of the new study, said. "Therefore, there is a greater chance of a big, dynamical event happening then that could form Saturn's rings."

"Crater size distribution is used to constrain the age of solid bodies in the solar system," Sean Hsu, a research scientist at the University of Colorado Boulder who was not involved in the



A view of Saturn's rings over time was captured by the Hubble Space Telescope in 2001. NASA

study, added. "For Saturn's rings, age determination is even more difficult – there are no craters, and the collisional nature of ring particles erases most of its history. Depending on which measurements you choose, it is not too surprising that people end up with very different age estimates."

"In my view, the 'blind men and an elephant' is not a bad metaphor here."

## Keep them out

In the new analysis, Hyodo's computer models showed that when dust particles collided with ice in Saturn's rings, they evaporated and dispersed into hundreds of even smaller flecks, which Cassini had also observed.

The models showed that these particles then smash into Saturn itself, beat the planet's gravitational pull, or are dragged into the planet's raging atmosphere. In other words, the pearly shine of Saturn's rings is not thanks to them being young but because they have a way to eject such foreign bodies that enter their delicate world. In sum, there's no reason for older rings to be darker (or vice versa).

In fact, the rings could be as old as the Solar System, according to Hyodo.

"The basic assumption in the debate about the age of the Saturnian rings centres around the water ice composition of the ring particles," Wing-Huen Ip, who studies the origins of the Solar System and

## NASA launched the Clipper mission to study Jupiter's moon Europa, which is dynamically linked to Jupiter and contains a subsurface ocean, in October 2024

the formation of planets at the National Central University, Taiwan, and who was not a part of the new study, said. "We actually can't be 100% sure that this is true."

"Such an estimate is indeed questionable, because we do not know what the ring composition was when it formed," Hsu said. The new findings were published in the journal *Nature Geoscience* in December 2024.

**Europa, Enceladus, and beyond**  
Determining when Saturn got its signature rings isn't just a matter of curiosity. "The interest in probing the age of Saturn's rings is beyond the rings themselves – it is about the implications, and there are many," Hsu said. "Enceladus, the geologically active moon of Saturn, is a top-priority target to study habitability and astrobiology due to active plume activity from its subsurface ocean. The evolution of Saturn's rings has fundamental impacts on the evolution of Enceladus and other icy moons of Saturn, as they're dynamically coupled."

## THE GIST

According to researchers, determining the age of Saturn's rings is difficult – there are no craters, and the collisional nature of ring particles erases most of its history. It is not surprising that people end up with different estimates.

Computer models show that when dust collides with ice in Saturn's rings, they evaporate and are dispersed. So the pearly shine of the rings is not thanks to them being young. There is no reason for older rings to be darker. In fact, they could be as old as the Solar System.

Determining the age of Saturn's rings is 'about the implications.' Enceladus, Saturn's moon, is a top-priority target to study habitability due to plume activity. The evolution of the rings has impacts on the evolution of Enceladus and other moons of Saturn.

In the mid-2000s, Cassini found plumes abundant in water molecules leaking from Enceladus's southern hemisphere. It also recorded evidence of cryovolcanoes, icy promontories spewing hydrogen, salt crystals, water vapour and ice, and volatile compounds like ammonia. The vapour condenses into solid flakes, not unlike snow on the earth, and drifts into one of Saturn's rings.

In 2014, NASA scientists reported finding evidence of a 10-km-thick ocean of liquid water under Enceladus's south pole region in Cassini data. Ip believes investigating how icy grains from the plumes of Enceladus affect the ring's composition could play a major role in determining the ring's age.

In related news, NASA launched the Clipper mission to study Jupiter's moon Europa, which is similarly dynamically linked to Jupiter and contains a subsurface ocean as well, in October 2024.

The new study could also help explain why the Solar System's four gas giants have such diverse ring systems. Either they were different by birth or diverged as they grew. The dynamics unveiled in the study could infuse fresh insight into this debate. "We may propose to send a spacecraft to Saturn's rings to study them in more detail," Hyodo said.

(Unnati Ashar is a freelance science journalist. unnati\_a@gmail.com)

# Centre revamps websites, creates multilingual AI hub for better scheme outreach

**The Hindu Bureau**

NEW DELHI

The Union government has begun revamping its official websites and is working on an artificial intelligence hub to distribute information on government initiatives. The Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) released a Digital Brand Identity Manual on Tuesday, seeking to create a standard design language for government websites.

The initiative, to “harmonise the government’s digital footprint”, was encouraged by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who asked Ministry Secretaries to improve their websites at a recent meeting, according to MeitY Secretary S. Krishnan. As digital platforms emerge as a “first



The revamp aims to ‘harmonise digital footprint’ and create a cohesive brand.

point of contact”, the new manual says that “a cohesive and compelling brand presence is essential to engage with the national and global audiences effectively”.

## **Multilingual AI hub**

The Information and Broadcasting Ministry, meanwhile, is developing

an AI hub to enable effective and efficient dissemination of information on various government initiatives. “The platform will also have the facility for multilingual translation of contents for an effective outreach to the masses across the country,” said a senior government official. The hub has not yet been formally inaugurated.

Other initiatives include: Digital India Bhashini, a language translation platform; BharatGen, the world’s first government-funded multimodal large language model (LLM) initiative launched in 2024; the Sarvam-1 AI LLM; Chitrallekha, an open-source video transcreation platform; and the multilingual AI system Everest 1.0, which caters to various Indian languages.

# India prepares to submit updated greenhouse gas inventory to UN

**Jacob Koshy**  
NEW DELHI

India is in the final stages of preparing its first ever Biannual Transparency Report (BTR), part of its commitment as a signatory to the 2015 Paris Agreement on climate change, Environment Ministry officials told *The Hindu*.

This report will be India's official position on its greenhouse gas emissions inventory, key sectors and sources, and steps taken to improve energy efficiency use, as well as the transition to renewable energy sources and the availability of required resources.

While India has been periodically submitting such information in the form of 'national communications' and 'Biannual Update Reports' (BUR), the BTR is a document that will be subject to technical re-



The Biannual Transparency Report is part of a commitment made at COP-21, but countries started submitting it only by 2024. FILE PHOTO

view by independent, non-Indian, UNFCCC-accredited experts. The UNFCCC, or the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, is the core agreement on which rest commitments by countries to take climate action.

Historically, only developed countries have been required to submit BTRs. The reports are part of the commitment made by all signatories at the

UNFCCC's 21st Conference of Parties (COP), held in Paris in 2015, in a bid to increase transparency.

However, it was only at the 2024 COP in Baku that countries actually began submitting BTRs that adhered to the prescribed format. While all countries were to have submitted their BTRs by December 2024, several – including India – failed to meet that deadline.

“The main feature of the upcoming BTR submission is that it will have data up to 2022. In the BUR, the data submitted reflected the emissions inventory of 2020. The other aspect is that this will be reviewed by an external set of experts,” a Ministry official, who declined to be identified, told *The Hindu*.

In its latest BUR, India reported that in 2020, its total GHG emissions fell 7.93% from 2019. “One of the factors was a reduction in energy consumption due to COVID-19 induced lockdowns. The forthcoming BTR is likely to show an increase in total emissions, just as is the trend in other countries. India's share of emissions, however, continues to be 4% to 5% of the globe and, in per-capita terms, less than a third of global per-capita emissions,” the official added.



# Slight dip in unemployment rate in urban areas: survey

The rate of unemployment for persons of age 15 and above is at 6.4% for the period of October to December 2024, says the Periodic Labour Force Survey; Gujarat has the lowest rate at 3%

**A.M. Jigesh**  
NEW DELHI

**T**he unemployment rate in urban areas of the country was 6.4% for the period of October to December in 2024 for persons of age 15 and above, says the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) released by the Statistics and Programme Implementation Ministry here on Tuesday.

For men, the unemployment rate was 5.8%, and for women, 8.1%.

In 2023, during the corresponding quarter, the unemployment rate for the cohort was 6.5%, while in the July-to-September 2024 quarter, it was 6.4%. The female unemployment rate last year was 8.6%.

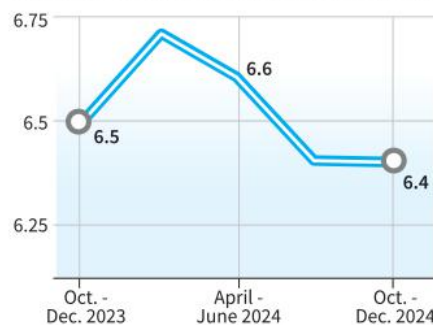
## Himachal tops the list

Among the States, Himachal Pradesh had the highest unemployment rate of 10.4% and Gujarat the lowest 3%. The female unemployment rate too was the highest in Himachal Pradesh at 24%. The lowest was 1.3% in Delhi.

The PLFS defines unemployment rate as the percentage of unemployed

## Faint glimmer

The chart shows the unemployment rate (in %) in urban areas for persons of age 15 years and above



**Seeking prospects:** Job seekers participating in a job mela in Hyderabad. NAGARA GOPAL

Source: MOSPI

persons in the labour force in current weekly status (CWS) – the number of persons either employed or unemployed on an average in a week.

The Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR), the percentage of population in the labour force, was 39.6% for people of all ages. It was 39.2% in the corresponding quarter last year. The LFPR for women has increased by 0.1 percentage point to 20% from last year's 19.9%. However, the LFPR decreased from last quarter's figure of 20.3%.

The lowest LFPR for all people and for women was in Bihar at 30.7% and 9.9%,

respectively. The PLFS was done among 1,70,487 people in 45,074 households.

## Increase in WPR

The Worker Population Ratio (WPR) in urban areas among persons of age 15 and above has increased from 46.6% during October to December of 2023, to 47.2% in October to December in 2024.

The WPR for males of age 15 and above for urban areas increased from 69.8% in October to December of 2023 to 70.9% during October to December in 2024.

The workers are classified into three broad categories according to their

status in employment such as self-employed, regular wage/salaried employee and casual labour.

Within the category of self-employed, two sub-categories have been made as own account worker and employer combined together and unpaid helper in household enterprises.

In these categories, 39.9% were self-employed, 49.4% were regular employees and 10.7% were casual labourers. As much as 5.5% of the workers were in agriculture sector, 31.8% in the secondary sector, including mining, and 62.7% in the tertiary sector that includes service sectors.

# Iran FM, Houthi envoy discuss Nimisha case

A day after meeting Jaishankar, Iran's Araghchi says he discussed a legal way out with Abdul Salam for the former-nurse on death row in Yemen; 37-year-old Nimisha Priya from Kerala was convicted in 2020 for killing her Yemeni business partner; her family is campaigning for clemency

**Suhasini Haidar**  
MUSCAT

**A** day after meeting External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar in Muscat, Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi on Monday said he had made an appeal on behalf of Nimisha Priya, the Indian nurse on death row in Yemen, with a senior Houthi envoy.

In an interview to *The Hindu* here, Mr. Araghchi, who met Mr. Jaishankar on the sidelines of the Indian Ocean Conference in Muscat on Sunday, said he subsequently met Mohammed Abdul Salam, special envoy of Ansar Allah, also known as the Houthi group that controls significant parts of Yemen.

"We are hopeful. I just

spoke to Mr. Abdul Salam, the Ansar Allah envoy, who is here in Muscat. I told him about this case, and he assured me that he will try to find a way forward," Mr. Araghchi said.

According to reports in the Houthi-run Al-Masirah TV, Mr. Araghchi and Mr. Abdul Salam met in Muscat on Monday for official talks to discuss "recent regional developments, including the enforcement of the Gaza ceasefire".

#### 'Assaulted for years'

The 37-year old Ms. Priya, a former nurse from Kerala, was convicted in 2020 for killing her Yemeni business partner, Talal Abdo Mahdi, in 2017.

Her family launched an international campaign for clemency for Ms. Priya,



**Way forward:** External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar with Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi in Muscat on Sunday. ANI

who said that she had been assaulted and abused by Mahdi for years. Ms. Priya's family and other groups also collected contributions towards reparations or "blood money" which could allow her to be pardoned by the family

of the man killed according to the Islamic legal system.

After she was sentenced to death by the Supreme Court in Yemen's capital Sana'a this year, the External Affairs Ministry said the Indian government "is providing all possible assis-

tance in the case". "The matter regarding any consideration towards the release of Ms. Nimisha Priya is between the family of the deceased and Ms. Nimisha Priya's family," the Ministry said in response to a question by MP John Brittas in the Rajya Sabha.

The response led to accusations by civil society organisations in Kerala that the government had "washed its hands off the matter".

#### Diplomatic efforts

Mr. Araghchi's comments indicate that diplomatic efforts are still ongoing in the case, particularly given Iran's considerable influence over the Houthi group in Yemen.

In January, *The Hindu* had reported that a senior

Iranian official visiting Delhi had also assured support from Tehran to India's case.

Mr. Araghchi, however, said that the case would not be resolved unless an alternative legal argument could be presented before the courts.

"It is purely a legal case, and has nothing to do with politics," the Iranian Foreign Minister said. "It is a case about a crime which the lady [Ms. Priya] has unfortunately committed. So they are trying to find a way.... to another legal way out to address this issue and prevent her execution," he added.

Ms. Priya is reportedly being held at the Central Prison in Sana'a.

(With inputs from Kallol Bhattacharjee)



# India, Qatar elevate ties to strategic partnership

Modi, visiting Emir of Qatar discuss possibility of a bilateral FTA, and West Asian developments; both sides sign double taxation avoidance pact, agree to deepen relations in trade and security; the two sides resolved to double trade; the visit also presented a challenge, as Purnendu Tiwary, an ex-Indian Navy commander, remains in Qatari custody

**Kallol Bhattacharjee**  
NEW DELHI

Qatar, a major energy supplier to India, on Tuesday signed an agreement to elevate India-Qatar relationship to the level of a strategic partnership, officials here said.

The Ministry of External Affairs announced that Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the visiting Emir, Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al-Thani, discussed multiple issues, including the ongoing Israel-Palestine conflict in the Gaza Strip. Both sides are also exploring the possibility of finalising a Free Trade Agreement (FTA).

"Strategic partnership elevates the present state of bilateral relation to the strategic level. We are look-

ing at deepening cooperation in the fields of trade, investment, energy, security as well as in the regional and international fora," said Arun Kumar Chatterjee, Secretary (CPV&OIA), while briefing the media following the bilateral discussion. The two sides also signed a double taxation avoidance treaty.

"India and GCC are negotiating about having an FTA. Both India and Qatar are [also] exploring the signing of a FTA in the future," said Mr. Chatterjee, announcing that India is considering going ahead with a bilateral FTA with Qatar as discussion for an India-GCC FTA continues.

The Indian side also said that the strategic partnership would have a security component, though a clear timeline for such a process



**Warmer ties:** Narendra Modi with the Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al-Thani, in New Delhi on Tuesday. SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

was not articulated.

#### **Bilateral trade**

A total of 38 Qatari entities representing retail, finance, and energy sector participated in the deliberations where the two sides

resolved to double bilateral trade to \$28 billion.

The visit also presented a challenge for both sides, as Purnendu Tiwary, an ex-Indian Navy commander, remains in Qatari custody, even though seven other

detainees from the same 2022 case were repatriated in February 2024. "His matter still remains sub-judice in the local courts," said Mr. Chatterjee elaborating on the condition of Commander Tiwary. The Hindu had reported on Monday that the seven former Indian navy officials who returned in February 2024 has written to the Qatari authorities seek repatriation of Commander Tiwary.

Mr. Chatterjee informed that the Indian diaspora is the largest working force in Qatar and that at present around 600 Indians are in Qatari prisons. "About 85 Indians have received such pardons during 2024," he said, highlighting that Qatar has the provision of granting pardon.

India already has now

signed strategic partnerships with Kuwait, Oman, United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia within the Gulf Cooperation Council member states.

The official also confirmed that the situation in the West Asian region featured in the official talks saying, "both sides conveyed their mutual positions on Israel-Hamas issue. India conveyed its own position, the Qatari side conveyed their own position."

The visit of the Qatari Emir has drawn attention as it is being held just two days prior to the five Arab states summit in the Saudi capital Riyadh which will take up the new proposals from the United States following the arrival of President Donald Trump. Mr. Trump's proposal that the

Palestinians of the region should be shifted out to neighbouring countries like Egypt and Jordan has drawn attention. India has not so far made its position on this new approach. MEA officials also avoided giving a clear answer to this approach which has drawn criticism as it would tantamount to ethnic cleansing.

India supports two-state solution in bringing an end to the Israel-Palestinian crisis and had welcomed the ceasefire that currently holds that was announced shortly before the swearing-in ceremony of President Trump on January 20.

The Qatari side also participated in a Joint Business Forum which drew participation of top business entities of Qatari and Indian sides.

