

OUR OPINION, THEIR OPINION

“The goal of social justice and all round development can’t be achieved through ideas but actions.”
Mchiel Alber

Retail inflation down

Giving some good signals off and on and thereby showing some hopes retail inflation rate has again gone down. India's retail inflation, as measured by the Consumer Price Index (CPI), and wholesale inflation, as seen in the Wholesale Price Index (WPI), have fallen to record levels, beyond projections of the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) and other agencies. Retail inflation slipped to 1.54% in September, the lowest since June 2017, while wholesale inflation declined to 0.13% on a year-on-year basis, and down from 0.52% in August. For the second time in this fiscal year, the retail inflation rate was below the RBI's target zone of 2-4%. This fall has been traced to a decline in food prices, including those of vegetables and pulses, despite an increase in the prices of vegetable oil. The consumer food price index fell by over 2%, also accounting for the lower rural inflation in relation to urban inflation. It should be noted that while retail inflation hit record lows, there was no similar fall in core inflation, which is inflation without taking into consideration the prices of goods such as food items, fuel, and others with volatile prices. Core inflation represents a longer trend - it rose from 4.2% in August to 4.6% in September and has stayed above 4% for eight consecutive months. The spurt in core inflation has been partly on account of the recent increase in gold prices. But the rise is considerable even if gold is excluded from the mix. This should be a matter of concern because it may be indicative of an active long-term trend of inflation. The rise, indeed, should be a factor to be considered for the longer term, but the softening of retail inflation also presents opportunities for the RBI and other policymakers to make useful interventions in the economy. Retail inflation could find still lower levels when the GST cuts come into full force. The September inflation rate has only partially captured the price cuts resulting from the GST restructuring. Since retail inflation has stayed below the RBI's medium-term target of 4% for seven straight months, the apex bank is likely to make another cut in interest rates in its December meeting. The RBI said in its last meeting that inflation was likely to moderate further in the current fiscal year because of the GST rate cuts and a favourable outlook on food prices. While the high festival demand in the current month does not give a comprehensive picture of the scenario, it is almost certain that the RBI will prioritise growth over inflation in the coming months.

AI is hollowing out higher education

While AI industry claims its models can think, reason, and learn, their supposed achievements rest on marketing hype and stolen intellectual labour. In reality, AI erodes academic freedom, weakens critical reading, and subordinates one to corporate interest

Modern AI technologies severely impede humans' ability to learn and retain skills, while also making it nearly impossible for academics and other experts to cultivate and disseminate knowledge. Many scholars, including us, have highlighted the threat posed by techno-solutionism in education: Rather than expanding our intellectual horizons, these technologies undermine the very conditions that allow us to think for ourselves.

The corporations profiting from AI – including Microsoft, OpenAI, Nvidia, and ASML – have a vested interest in maintaining the current hype. Their oligopolistic control over both hardware and software depends on the exaggerated claim that cognitive labour can be fully outsourced to their models.

In reality, the apparent achievements of these systems rest on the wholesale theft of humans' intellectual labour. Most notably, large language models (LLMs) have been trained by scraping books and scholarly works without the authors' or publishers' consent, fragmenting and remixing them into patchwork plagiarism packaged as human-like responses.

According to the AI industry's narrative, all human creativity, innovation, and knowledge are essentially automatable, rendering people obsolete. Even advocates of “human-centred AI” assume this to be true.

Yet studies in automation and cognitive science, together with the long history of AI boom-and-bust cycles, demonstrate that sweeping claims of near-total automation are exaggerated, self-defeating, and toxic. Automation – even when it works – must operate at a much lower level than these companies suggest to succeed without eroding the skills and agency of human operators.

Ultimately, the collective strat-

egy of AI companies threatens to deskill precisely those people who are essential for society to function. What value, after all, is there in automating art, thinking, or reading – especially in educational and academic settings? None. On the contrary, automation of knowledge and culture by private companies is a worrying prospect – conjuring dystopian and outright fascist scenarios.

The deskilling, denigration, and displacement of teachers and scholars have historically been central to fascist takeovers, since educators serve as bulwarks against propaganda, anti-intellectualism, and illiteracy. Today, AI advocates do not merely assume automation is necessary; they aggressively proselytise their faith, thereby paving the way for techno-fascism.

Academics exist, in part, to speak truth to power, which requires their independence from government and corporate influence. The United States today demonstrates the consequences of hollowing out academic freedom, critical thinking, and impartiality, as President Donald Trump's administration and Big Tech companies collaborate to undermine academic institutions' ability to sustain the kind of scientific work that exposes AI's false promises.

Worse still, the techno-fascist assault on universities increasingly comes from within. In recent years, the AI industry has captured university administrations, co-opted faculty unions, and even enlisted individual teachers and researchers to promote its tools to colleagues and students. Far from offering genuine solutions, these technologies exacerbate social injustices and corrode the ecosystem of human knowledge.

In a recent position paper, we challenged the claims advanced by the AI industry. While corporations urge us to embrace – and

even celebrate – their imagined, supposedly inevitable tech-driven future, academics and their allies must take a principled stand and defend universities and scholarly institutions by barring toxic, addictive technologies from classrooms.

The industry counts on us forgetting that we have been here before. Universities have long been used to whitewash harmful products, and AI itself has been repeatedly repackaged through various hype cycles. In fact, the term “artificial intelligence,” coined in 1955, has always been more a marketing phrase than a taxonomic classification.

To sustain the latest iteration of the AI con, the industry relies on anthropomorphic sleight of hand – claiming that models “think,” “reason,” and “learn” to suggest cognitive abilities they demonstrably lack and may never develop. This rhetorical trick not only exaggerates the products' capabilities but also dehumanises people by falsely humanising machines, which is why many educators and students have begun to reject AI.

In response, the AI industry has lobbied government agencies to mandate the use of its products, claiming that without them, students will be unprepared for the job market. What is actually needed is the opposite: scholars with expertise in AI-related fields must have the freedom to critique these technologies, while those in other fields must be able to teach without interference by companies seeking to cash in. Industry agendas – whether the industry is tobacco, petroleum, pharmaceuticals, or tech – rarely align with human welfare or disinterested research, especially when left unchecked and unregulated. Instead, their interests are maximising profit and market power. The AI industry is no different, and educators should repudiate its false promises.

BY-OLIVIA GUEST

Trump's Gaza peace plan: A bit of the old, a bit of the new – and the same stumbling blocks

The latest US-sponsored peace plan for the Middle East was unveiled at the White House on September 29, 2025, and immediately accepted by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

The proposal, which US President Donald Trump said marked a “historic” moment that was “very close” to ending the two-year-old war in Gaza, will now go to Hamas. The Palestinian group said it was reviewing the document, having had it delivered by Egyptian and Qatari mediators.

Should it be accepted, hostilities would end “immediately,” according to the plan. But given that all previous US-backed attempts have to date failed, there is reason for scepticism. The Conversation turned to Asher Kaufman, an expert on the modern Middle East and professor of peace studies at the University of Notre Dame, to explain what is different about this plan – and how it might fare.

What are the main points of the new plan? The plan outlined by Trump in the presence of Netanyahu consists of 20 points. If accepted by Israel and Hamas, it would see the full withdrawal of Israel Defense Forces from the Gaza Strip in three stages.

The first stage would be dependent on the release of the remaining 48 hostages taken during the October 7, 2023, attack in Israel by Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, 20 of whom are believed to be alive. At the same time, Israel would release 250 Palestinians serving life in prison, as well as 1,700 Gazans arrested after October 7.

This stage would also see humanitarian aid flow immediately to the desperate population in Gaza.

Stage two would see Gaza governed by a temporary transitional body consisting of a technocratic, apolitical committee composed of Palestinians and international members.

The committee would be overseen by a “board of peace” headed by Trump and other heads of state, including former UK Prime Minister Tony Blair. This board would also oversee the reconstruction of the Gaza Strip and its economic development.

Hamas' members would be given amnesty if they laid down their arms, but would also have to agree – along with other members of militant Palestinian factions – to not have any role in the governance of Gaza.

A new military body to be called the International Stabilization Force would be established and deployed in the Gaza Strip. The plan calls for it to be composed of Arab and international partners.

Only then would the Israeli military withdraw completely from Gaza, at which point the post-war Gaza plan would turn to economic redevelopment.

How does this differ from past US-backed plans? The portions of the plan that include Israeli withdrawal, the release of hostages in exchange for Palestinian prisoners, and the provision of mass humanitarian aid to Gaza are similar to past agreements, including the last one that collapsed after Israel violated its terms in March 2025.

But there are new parts. These include the creation of the board of peace and the International Stabilization Force.

The former gives concrete structure to Trump's older ideas to develop the Gaza Strip as a real estate venture; the latter provides a framework for an international military force that would police the strip for the foreseeable future.

The plan also mentions a long-term horizon for self-determination and the establishment of a Palestinian state – a point not raised in previous proposals, which mainly focused on ending the war in Gaza but neglected to include a longer-term pathway to statehood.

What would post-Gaza look like under this plan? Trump sees the Gaza Strip as a real estate development opportunity – he has said as much in the past, and again talked on September 29 of the opportunities of the coastline of Gaza. As such, his “vision of peace” is designed mainly through an economic-development lens.

The plan envisions a reconstructed strip supported principally by regional players that could stabilise the region and provide in the short term humanitarian relief and in the long term economic opportunities to Gazans.

The Trump administration and Israel hope to have not only a Hamas-free Gaza but a depoliticized Gazan population in its entirety. With no role for Hamas, who will represent Palestinians in Gaza? It is not clear from the plan who will represent Palestinians. But reading between the lines, one can see the possibility of a revamped version of the Palestinian Authority, the body that nominally governs parts of the West Bank, that could take the role of “Palestinian technocrats.” Point nine of the plan suggests that the Palestinian Authority could have a role in the future of Gaza after the Palestinian Authority “has completed its reform programme,” but it does not say what this reform programme entails.

Transforming India's sanitation landscape in just a decade

The Father of the Nation – Mahatma Gandhi who got India its political freedom, was far ahead of his time when he said, ‘Sanitation is more important than independence’. For Gandhi, a truly free India was not just politically independent but also socially awakened, where hygiene and dignity walked hand in hand. Unfortunately, these timeless and powerful words of wisdom by Gandhi were consigned to oblivion by the successive governments in the entire history of independent India, leaving his vision of a clean and healthy nation unfulfilled for decades.

The true essence of these words found resonance when Prime Minister Narendra Modi paid a fitting tribute to Mahatma Gandhi on his 145th birth anniversary by launching the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (Clean India Mission) on 2nd October 2014 which is the largest national behavioral change sanitation program in the world that positioned PM Modi as the true champion of the people-driven sustainable development.

SBM Ushers in a New Era of Governance and Civic Responsibility

Proper sanitation and hygiene are vital not only for health but also for dignity. The Indus Valley Civilization recognized this, integrating advanced sewage and drainage systems into their towns—an ancient wisdom largely lost over time. For decades, India carried a global image of spiritual richness but poor public hygiene, with littered roads, open defecation and lack of awareness on hygiene. Cleanliness was seen as solely the government's responsibility, while citizens overlooked its impact on health

and quality of life.

Carrying forward Mahatma Gandhi's legacy, PM Modi, in just 11 years, transformed India's sanitation landscape through Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (SBA), transforming cleanliness into a deeply ingrained national lifestyle. Never in the history of independent India has cleanliness and hygiene have been placed at the forefront of governance, reflecting a transformative shift in national priorities.

The large-scale construction of toilets has provided employment to over 1.25 crore people, while 5,000 clean-tech start-ups reflect growing opportunities for youth. SBA also emphasizes solid waste management, recycling, and reducing plastic use, making sanitation both a social duty and an economic driver.

Bharat's Sanitation Revolution: From Half the Population Defecating in the Open to a 100% ODF Nation in Less than a Decade

Until 2014, even after 67 years of independence, approximately 100 million (10 Crore) rural and about 10 million (1 crore) urban households in India were without a sanitary toilet and more than 564 million (56.4 Crore) people which accounted for around half the population, still practiced open defecation.

After SBA launch, India has marked a revolutionary milestone in its sanitation journey by becoming 100 percent Open Defecation Free both in urban and rural areas in less than a decade. As per official record of government over 12 crore toilets have been constructed across the country till September 2025, that has not only provided access to sanitation facilities but also saved

millions of lives in the process.

During COVID-19, SBM's impact became evident; its emphasis on toilets, handwashing, and waste management helped curb infections, manage biomedical waste, and safeguard communities, demonstrating that cleanliness had become a core part of the national mindset.

Women at the Heart of India's Sanitation Revolution: Ensuring Health, Safety and Dignity

Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM) has enhanced women's hygiene, health, safety, and dignity. Previously, the lack of toilets forced women, especially in rural areas, to defecate in the open, exposing them to health risks, indignity, and physical danger. A 2020 study found that 96% of rural women were satisfied with household toilets, citing improved safety, privacy for menstrual hygiene, convenience, and reduced health risks.

SBM has also addressed gender disparities through gender-specific latrines in schools, public spaces and roads, boosting girls' school enrolment and overall health standards. Women are not just beneficiaries but agents of change—programs like Rani Mistris trained women as masons, providing skills, confidence, and leadership roles. Many now hold positions in local governance, demonstrating that empowering women strengthens entire communities.

From Diarrhoea to Dignity: Swachh Bharat Mission Saves 3 Lakh Children's Lives

For children who are the future of our nation and strongest advocates for change, having access to clean and safe toilets is not just a convenience but it infact leaves an impact on their health and their

future.

An open defecation-free (ODF) environment reduces diarrhoea—a leading cause of death among children under five and lowers malnutrition. According to the World Health Report, nearly 3 lakh children have been saved from sanitation-related diseases, significantly reducing child mortality and improving quality of life. Studies by the International Food Policy Research Institute, University of California and Ohio State University estimate that SBM saves 60,000–70,000 children annually.

Global Recognition

Today, SBM has become a global benchmark for public health, recognized by the United Nations as the largest and most successful sanitation program, contributing to the SDGs. A UNICEF survey found that a family investing in a toilet saves 50,000 annually. For leading this transformation, PM Modi received the Global Goalkeeper Award (2019) from the Gates Foundation. SBM has inspired international initiatives like Nigeria's Clean Nigeria Campaign and influenced global sanitation policies through the four Ps—political leadership, public financing, partnerships, and people's participation—highlighted at the Mahatma Gandhi International Sanitation Convention 2018.

Pilgrimage as Model of Sustainability

The 2025 Amarnath Yatra became a model of sustainability under SBM Urban 2.0, implementing a zero-landfill, plastic-free system and managing 11.67 metric tons of daily waste with 1,300 SafaiMitras. Eco-friendly bags replaced single-use plastics,

sanitation was upgraded with 1,600 mobile toilets and full faecal sludge treatment, and over 70,000 pilgrims took the Green Pledge, setting a new benchmark for zero-waste pilgrimages.

Suggestions

Integrate Cleanliness into School Education: Schools can act as catalysts of change; teach children the importance of handwashing, toilet use and waste management, they will take this knowledge home, influencing families and communities, driving lasting behavioral change.

Cleanliness Social Internships for Youth: Engage young people in public hygiene initiatives to foster responsibility and community awareness.

Social Service as Punishment to Sanitation violators: Take cue from overseas nations who penalize offenders littering their surroundings and combine fines with community service for offenders.

Fix Accountability of Food Establishments: Maintain cleanliness in the surrounding 50 meters of kitchens and dining areas.

Following the dictum of ‘Cleanliness is next to Godliness’, the SBM has emerged as a global model for public health while advancing the UN SDG goals.

Through behavioral change, leadership, and community participation, SBM is building a cleaner, safer, healthier, and prosperous India, fulfilling Gandhi's vision of Swachh Bharat and paving the way to realize Viksit Bharat by 2047.

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