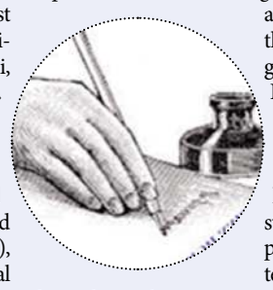
Where economics ends and electoral strategy begins

BUDGETS, at their most honest, are economic documents. At their most revealing, they are political texts written in the language of infrastructure, incentives and intent. Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman's ninth consecutive Budget appears to belong firmly to the latter category, offering a compelling illustration of how impending elections can subtly — and sometimes not so subtly — shape economic policy.

Consider the conspicuous attention paid to two poll-bound, non-BJP-ruled states: West Bengal and Tamil Nadu. Both go to Assembly elections in 2026 — Tamil Nadu likely between April and May, and West Bengal by early May. Both are governed by strong regional parties — the DMK and the Trinamool Congress, that remain outside the BJP's electoral fold. And both emerged from the Budget with marquee announcements that are difficult to dismiss as coincidence.

For West Bengal, the centrepiece is the proposed East–West Dedicated Freight Corridor connecting Dankuni, near Kolkata, to Surat. The announcement is strategically significant. Dankuni already serves as the eastern terminal of the Eastern Dedicated Freight Corridor (EDFC), giving Bengal a natural logistical advantage. Extending this connectivity westwards promises to enhance trade efficiency, reduce freight costs and integrate the state more deeply into national supply chains.



Equally eye-catching is the proposal for a Varanasi–Siliguri high-speed rail corridor. For North Bengal — long plagued by connectivity bottlenecks — such a link could be transformative, tying Siliguri more directly to the national capital via faster rail services. Yet the Budget leaves a crucial question unanswered: what exactly qualifies as "high-speed"? The absence of clarity on whether this refers to bullet train–grade infrastructure or upgraded semi–high-speed lines (130–180 kmph) injects ambiguity into an otherwise bold promise.

The freight corridor announcement, however, rests on firmer ground. Dedicated Freight Corridors are exclusive goods lines designed to move cargo faster, heavier and more reliably than conventional mixed-use tracks. India's two flagship DFCs — the Western (Dadri to JNPT) and the Eastern (Ludhiana to Dankuni) — are largely operational, with full end-to-end commissioning reportedly in its final stages. In this context, the proposed extension appears less speculative and more an acceleration of an existing vision.

Political reception in Kolkata, however, has been frosty. Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee dismissed the announcements as a "Humpty-Dumpty Budget", accusing the Centre of repackaging projects already in progress. Her sharp rhetoric underscores a broader political reality: infrastructure announcements, however grand, do not automatically translate into political goodwill, particularly when trust between the Centre and the states is strained.

Still, to reduce the Budget's implications for Bengal to transport corridors alone would be to miss the finer print. The upgrade of seven National Institutes of Pharmaceutical Education and Research (NIPERs), including the one at Panihati near Kolkata, could strengthen the state's pharmaceutical ecosystem. A new scheme to boost jute production directly benefits India's largest jute-producing state. The proposed revival of 200 legacy industrial clusters could also place Bengal's historic jute, textile and engineering hubs back on the growth map.

Tamil Nadu, meanwhile, walked away with its own electoral bouquet — a Rare Earths Corridor, high-speed rail proposals, cash crop incentives and renewed attention to a key archaeological site. The symmetry is hard to ignore.

Ultimately, the Budget reflects a delicate political calculus. It offers enough to signal intent, enough to suggest inclusivity, while leaving the real test to execution. Whether these promises crystallise into projects — and whether they translate into votes — remains uncertain. What is clear, however, is that as elections loom, economic blueprints often acquire a distinctly political contour.

How Budget 2026 puts content creators at the centre of India's growth story

From classrooms to creator labs, Sitharaman's big push for the Orange Economy

Vivek Shukla

UNION Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman presented the Union Budget for 2026–27 in the Lok Sabha, marking her ninth budget and a historic first in independent India, as it was delivered on a Sunday. The budget focuses on economic growth, capacity building and inclusive development under the vision of 'Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas'. Among its standout features is a strong push for the creative industries, often referred to as the 'Orange Economy', with several measures that directly benefit content creators.

The Orange Economy broadly covers animation, visual effects, gaming, comics (AVGC) and digital content creation.

Why the 'Orange Economy' matters and its place in the Budget

Globally, the 'Orange Economy' is expanding rapidly, and in India it is emerging as a major source of employment and cultural exports. In her budget speech, the Finance Minister noted that the AVGC sector alone will require nearly 20 lakh professionals by 2030. Recognising this potential, the government has proposed measures to energise the creative industries by equipping young people with future-ready digital skills.

Young scientist Shreyans Jain from Delhi-NCR believes the budget offers renewed hope to researchers and innovators. Many research projects had slowed due to limited government support, he says, but that is now changing. Jain, who is associated with Celestial Aerospace and works with IIT collaborators, is developing a balloon-assisted rocket launch system. In this technology, a large balloon carries a rocket to the upper atmosphere, where thinner air reduces resistance, saving fuel and increasing payload capacity by two to three times.

The budget describes the 'Orange Economy' as a "new engine for creative jobs", capable of driving services-led growth. While India has witnessed a surge in creative startups and digital careers, a persistent skills gap remains. The budget addresses this by proposing practical training infrastructure within educational institutions, ensuring that students are exposed to professional tools and techniques early on.

> The Union Budget provides indirect support to the creative sector, including a proposed Rs 10,000 crore fund for startups and incentives for municipal bonds aimed at improving urban infrastructure. These measures could help develop creative hubs in major cities

Key Announcement: Content Creator Labs

The most significant initiative is support for the Mumbai-based Indian Institute of Creative Technologies (IICT) to establish content creator labs. The Finance Minister announced that such labs will be set up in 15,000 secondary schools and 500 colleges across the country. These centres will train students in animation, visual effects, gaming and comics.

Why are these labs important?

Shreyans Jain points out that while many content creators today earn substantial incomes on platforms like YouTube and Instagram, access to professional training and equipment remains limited for most young Indians. These labs will bridge that gap by offering hands-on training in video production, editing, digital storytelling and extended reality (XR). Led by IICT, the initiative is expected to nurture grassroots talent and strengthen India's creative workforce, while also encouraging the development of original Indian intellectual property.

The budget also proposes setting up a new National Institute of Design and Development in the eastern region, further expanding opportunities for training in visual and creative design.

Digital Knowledge Grid: New Opportunities for Creators

Another notable announcement is the creation of a Digital Knowledge Grid to document India's historical, cultural and tourism assets. This open digital platform will generate new opportunities for historians, researchers and content creators to develop videos, documentaries and educational content rooted in India's heritage.

For creators who often struggle to access authentic source material, the grid promises reliable, high-quality data. It is also expected to boost tourism, with a pilot programme to upskill 10,000 tourist guides across 20 iconic destinations, opening further avenues for content monetisation.

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Indirect Support and the Road Ahead

The budget also provides indirect support to the creative sector, including a proposed Rs 10,000 crore fund for startups and incentives for municipal bonds aimed at improving urban infrastructure. These measures could help develop creative hubs in major cities. According to Prof. Prabhanshu Ojha of Delhi University, the budget encourages content creators through education, skilling and job creation. Initiatives such as creator labs and the Digital Knowledge Grid, he says, mark an important step towards making India a global creative powerhouse. With its strong youth focus, Budget 2026 reinforces the vision of a "Viksit Bharat".

(The author is Delhi-based senior journalist and writer. He is author of Gandhi's Delhi which has brought to the forth many hidden facts about Mahatma Gandhi)

Trump administration's WHO exit reshapes global health politics

Funding cuts, loss of expertise and eroding US leadership mark a turning point in international health governance

Jordan Miller

THE US departure from the World Health Organisation became official in late January 2026, according to the Trump administration a year after President Donald Trump signed an executive order on inauguration day of his second term, declaring that he was doing so. He first stated his intention to do so during his first term in 2020, early in the COVID-19 pandemic. The US severing its ties with the WHO will cause ripple effects that linger for years to come, with widespread implications for public health. The Conversation asked Jordan Miller, a public health professor at Arizona State University, to explain what the US departure means in the short and long term.

Why is the US leaving the WHO?

The Trump administration says it's unfair that the US contributes more than other nations and cites this as the main reason for leaving. The White House's official announcement gives the example of China, which, despite having a population three times the size of the US, contributes 90 per cent less than the US does to the WHO. The Trump administration has also claimed that the WHO's response to the COVID-19 pandemic was botched and that it lacked accountability and transparency. The WHO has pushed back on these claims, defending its pandemic response, which recommended masking and physical distancing. The US does provide a disproportionate amount of funding to the WHO. In 2023, for example, US contributions almost tripled those of the European Commission and were roughly 50 per cent more than the second-highest donor, Germany. But health experts point out that preventing and responding quickly to public health challenges is far less expensive than dealing with those problems once they've taken root and spread. However, the withdrawal process is complicated, despite the US assertion that it is final.

Most countries do not have the ability to withdraw, as that is the way the original agreement to join the WHO was designed. But the US inserted a clause into its agreement with the WHO when it agreed to join, stipulating that the US would have the ability to withdraw, as long as it provided a one-year notice and paid all remaining dues. Though the US gave its notice when Trump took office a year ago, it still owes the WHO about USD 260 million in fees for 2024-25. There are complicated questions of international law that remain.

> The US has been the largest single funder of the WHO, with contributions in the hundreds of millions of dollars annually over the past decade, so its withdrawal will have immediate operational impacts, limiting the WHO's ability to continue established programs. As a result of losing such a significant share of its funding, the WHO announced in a recent memo to staff that it plans to cut roughly 2,300 jobs a quarter of its workforce by summer 2026

What does the US withdrawal from the WHO mean in the short term?

In short, the US withdrawal weakens public health abroad and at home. The WHO's priorities include stopping the spread of infectious diseases, stemming antimicrobial resistance, mitigating natural disasters, providing medication and health services to those who need them, and even preventing chronic diseases. So public health challenges, such as infectious diseases, have to be approached at scale because experience shows that coordination across borders is important for success. The US has been the largest single funder of the WHO, with contributions in the hundreds of millions of dollars annually over the past decade, so its withdrawal will have immediate operational impacts, limiting the WHO's ability to continue established programs. As a result of losing such a significant share of its funding, the WHO announced in a recent memo to staff that it plans to cut roughly 2,300 jobs a quarter of its workforce by summer 2026. It also plans to downsize 10 of its divisions to four. In addition to a long history of funding, US experts have worked closely with the WHO to address public health challenges. Successes stemming from this partnership include effectively responding to several Ebola outbreaks, addressing mpox around the world and the Marburg virus outbreak in Rwanda and Ethiopia. Both the Marburg and Ebola viruses have a 50 per cent fatality rate, on average, so containing these diseases before they reached pandemic-level spread was critically important. The Infectious Diseases Society of America issued a statement in January 2026 describing the move as "a shortsighted and misguided abandonment of our global health commitments," noting that "global cooperation and communication are critical to keep our own citizens protected because germs do not respect borders."

What are the longer-term impacts of US withdrawal? By withdrawing from the WHO, the US will no longer participate in the organisation's Global Influenza Surveillance and Response System, which has been in operation since 1952. This will seriously compromise the US's ability to plan and manufacture vaccines to match the predicted flu strains for each coming year. Annual flu vaccines for the US and globally are developed a year in advance using data that is collected around the world and then analysed by an international team of experts to predict which strains are likely to be most widespread in the next year.

The WHO convenes expert panels twice per year and then makes recommendations on which flu strains to include in each year's vaccine manufacturing formulation. While manufacturers will likely still be able to obtain information regarding the WHO's conclusions, the US will not contribute data in the same way, and American experts will no longer have a role in the process of data analysis. This could lead to problematic differences between WHO recommendations and those coming from US authorities. The Centres for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that each year in the US, millions of people get the flu, hundreds of thousands of Americans are hospitalised, and tens of thousands die as a result of influenza.

Diminishing the country's ability to prepare in advance through flu shots will likely mean more hospitalisations and more deaths as a result of the flu. This is just one example of many of how the US's departure will affect the country's readiness to respond to disease threats. Additionally, the reputational damage done by the US departure cannot be overstated. The US has developed its position as an international leader in public health over many decades as the largest developer and implementer of global health programs. I believe surrendering this position will diminish the United States' ability to influence public health strategies internationally, and that is important because global health affects health in the US It will also make it harder to shape a multinational response in the event of another public health crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic. Public health and policy experts predict that China will use this opportunity to strengthen its position and its global influence, stepping into the power vacuum the US creates by withdrawing.

(The writer is a Teaching Professor and Program Director for the Population Health at the Arizona State University, United States)

Astronomers crack the case of baffling slow radio bursts

Observations of a long-lived space signal point to an unexpected source: a white dwarf–companion star pair

COSMIC radio pulses repeating every few minutes or hours, known as long-period transients, have puzzled astronomers since their discovery in 2022. Our new study, published in Nature Astronomy today, might finally add some clarity. Radio astronomers are very familiar with pulsars, a type of rapidly rotating neutron star. To us watching the skies from Earth, these objects appear to pulse because powerful radio beams from their poles sweep our telescopes much like a cosmic lighthouse.

The slowest pulsars rotate in just a few seconds this is known as their period. But in recent years, long-period transients have been discovered as well. These have periods from 18 minutes to more than six hours. From everything we know about neutron stars, they shouldn't be able to produce radio waves while spinning this slowly. So, is there something wrong with physics? Well, neutron stars aren't the only compact stellar remnant on the block, so maybe they're not the stars of this story after all. Our new paper presents evidence that the longest-lived long-period transient, GPM J1839-10, is actually a white dwarf star. It's producing powerful radio beams with the help of a stellar companion, implying others may be doing the same.

Enter white dwarf pulsars

Like neutron stars, white dwarfs are the remnants of dead stars. They're about the size of Earth, but with an entire Sun's worth of mass packed in. No isolated white dwarf has been observed to emit radio pulses. But they have the necessary ingredients to do so when paired with an M-type dwarf (a regular star about half the Sun's mass) in a close two-star system known as a binary. In fact, we know such rapidly spinning "white dwarf pulsars" exist because we've observed them the first was confirmed in 2016. Which raises the question: could long-period transients be the slower cousins of white dwarf pulsars? More than ten long-period transients have been discovered to date, but they're so far away and embedded so deeply in our galaxy that it's been difficult to tell what they are. Only in 2025 were two long-period transients conclusively identified as white dwarf-dwarf binaries. This was quite unexpected. However, it left astronomers with more questions. Even if some long-period transients are white dwarf-dwarf binaries, do they radiate in the same way as the faster white dwarf pulsars? And are the long-period transients only visible at radio wavelengths, doomed to be a mystery forever? What we needed is a model that works for both, and a long-period transient with enough high-quality data to test it on.

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A uniquely long-lived example

In 2023, we discovered GPM J1839-10, a long-period transient with a 21-minute period. It was the second-ever such discovery, but unlike its predecessor or those found since, it is uniquely long-lived. Pulses were found in archival data going back as far as 1988, but only some of the times that they should have been detected. As it's 15,000 light-years away, we can only see it in radio waves. So we dug deeper into this seemingly random, intermittent signal to learn more. We watched GPM J1839-10 in a series dubbed "round-the-world" observations. These used three telescopes, each passing the source to the next as Earth rotated: the Australian SKA Pathfinder or ASKAP, the MeerKAT radio telescope in South Africa, and the Karl G. Jansky Very Large Array in the United States. The intermittent signal turned out not be random at all. The pulses arrive in groups of four or five, and the groups come in pairs separated by two hours. The entire pattern repeats every nine hours. Such a stable pattern strongly implies the signal is coming from a binary system of two bodies orbiting each other every nine hours. And knowing the period also helps us work out their masses, which all adds up to being a white dwarf-dwarf binary. Checking back, not only were the archival detections consistent with the same pattern, but we were able to use the combined data to refine the orbital period to a precision of just 0.2 seconds.

A heartbeat pattern

Radio data alone tells us GPM J1839-10 is definitely a binary system. What's more, the peculiar heartbeat of its pulses gives clues to its nature in a way that's only possible from looking at radio signals. Inspired by a previous study on a white dwarf pulsar, we modelled GPM J1839-10 as a white dwarf generating a radio beam as its magnetic pole sweeps through its companion's stellar wind.

(The writers are associated with Curtin University, Perth, Australia)