



In the frontline

Rahul Gandhi should have decided to contest from Rae Bareli much earlier

Congress leader Rahul Gandhi has entered the electoral fray in the Hindi heartland too, electing a prolonged suspense just in time to file his nomination on May 3, in Rae Bareli, Uttar Pradesh. His grandfather, grandmother, and mother were among those who represented this constituency, located around 80 km south-east of the State capital Lucknow. Mr. Gandhi had lost the adjoining Amethi constituency in 2019, even as he won Wayanad in Kerala. He is seeking re-election in Wayanad, and had to decide whether to contest at all from the Hindi heartland and, if so, whether it had to be Rae Bareli or Amethi. He chose Rae Bareli, which was won by his mother Sonia Gandhi in 2019, who is now a member of the Rajya Sabha. A family loyalist has been fielded in Amethi. Mr. Gandhi has been vocal about his liking for Wayanad, and waited for voting there before the candidacy in Rae Bareli was announced. This reeks of a scheme, perhaps unintended, but certainly avoidable. A forthright and early decision would have been more appropriate for his stature, and respectful towards the electorates. His sister, Priyanka Gandhi Vadra, who has emerged as an impactful campaigner for the Congress across the country, chose not to contest, while her husband Robert Vadra's embarrassing public demand for the party ticket has been overlooked by the party, and rightly so. Mr. Gandhi has declared that resisting the BJP's Hindutva politics and advancement of social justice are his life's mission. That battle is being fought primarily in the Hindi belt and the western region of the country. Electorally and ideologically, the BJP derives its strength from those regions. While the BJP is focused in its efforts to expand in the south, the Congress is confused in its strategy to regain its lost glory in the Hindi States. By deciding to contest from Kerala in 2019, Mr. Gandhi made a strategic mistake of seeking refuge in a comfort zone. He had the opportunity to correct it by returning to the tough battle in U.P. this time, but he kept vacillating. Though it has been not done in the best manner, his entry could enthuse the Opposition in U.P. The Congress is in an alliance with the Samajwadi Party (SP) in U.P., and the decision of SP chief Akhilesh Yadav to contest the election from Kannauj could also help the alliance. Considering the dominance of the BJP in the Hindi belt, the Congress faces an uphill task. In the event of winning both Wayanad and Rae Bareli, Mr. Gandhi must retain the latter and make it clear that he is in the ideological war with the BJP for the longer term.

Yearning for change

The opposition in Kashmir and Ladakh are united in their aims, not electorally

Jammu and Kashmir, and Ladakh, the Union Territories bifurcated from the legacy border State of J&K, are among the few States/UTs where polling is taking place across many phases. The constituencies in Jammu have already voted in the first and second phases while elections have been postponed from the third to the sixth phase in the Anantnag-Rajouri constituency. While the turnout in Udhampur (68.27%) and Jammu (72.22%) were encouraging and more or less in line with the participation figures of 2019, it would be an achievement for Indian democracy if voters turned out in good numbers in constituencies in the Kashmir Valley. The turnout figures for Srinagar (14.43%), Anantnag (8.49%) and Baramulla (34.6%) were among the lowest in the country. This was largely due to a sense of disillusionment among the electorate over the dissolution of the erstwhile State's Assembly. Since 2019, the Valley has been subject to persistent central rule that has led to phases of severe repression followed by attempts to rejig its polity and electoral map. The abrogation of special status for the erstwhile State and the continuance of J&K as a UT have not helped reverse the alienation. But the polls could provide a platform for the disenchanted electorate to air their grievances in the form of a decisive mandate. The enduring distrust between the Kashmiri polity and New Delhi also explains why the traditional parties in the former have sought to oppose the postponement of the polls in the Anantnag-Rajouri seat, ostensibly due to weather conditions. But the mainstream Kashmiri polity including the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) and the Jammu and Kashmir National Conference (NC) that came together with others to form the People's Alliance for Gupkar Declaration could not unite and contest as one in the Lok Sabha elections. The NC and PDP have revived their political hostilities in the Valley; the former is in alliance with the Congress as part of the INDIA bloc. As for the Bharatiya Janata Party, its triumphant talk of "unifying" the country by abrogating J&K's special status sounds hollow: it has limited its contest to the Hindu-majority Jammu and Buddhist-majority Ladakh. In Ladakh, the campaign led by activist Sonam Wangchuk has brought the question of Statehood and environmental concerns to the fore. But that has not been enough to rev up the Opposition. The Congress and NC could not come up with a consensus candidate for the Ladakh constituency that includes the Leh and Kargil areas, leading to the Congress fielding a candidate from Leh, while the Kargil units of both parties are supporting an independent from that area.

The nation is in the grip of the Lok Sabha elections. Political manifestos are in the news, not for their good content, but for what they don't contain. The Prime Minister's recent statement that the Congress wants to take away properties, including gold and mangalsutra, from the people and distribute it among members of the minority community reflects the quality of the narrative in the ongoing election. The Prime Minister, who is the leader of the world's largest democracy, and his advisors are expected to know the facts.

The contents of the two manifestos
The Congress in its manifesto titled 'Nyay Patra' has listed out the various issues facing the country and has declared its aims and objectives in dealing with them if voted to power. The manifesto covers diverse topics such as equity; religious and linguistic minorities; senior citizens, persons with disabilities, and LGBTQIA+; health; youth; education; sports, women's empowerment; farmers, workers; art, culture, and heritage; economy; taxation and tax reforms; and defending the Constitution.

Under the head 'wealth', the manifesto says, "Wealth and wealth creation are the goals of any business... The Congress is committed to rapid growth and generation of wealth. We have set a target of doubling the GDP in the next 10 years." Under 'welfare' it says, "Welfare of all is the goal of all work and the creation of wealth. Under a Congress government, the welfare of the poor will be the first charge on all government resources... The Nav Sankalp Economic Policy will aim to build a fair, just and equal-opportunity economy and bring prosperity to all sections of the people." Under 'equity', it says, "The people belonging to the SC, ST and OBC communities have not yet been able to catch up with the rest and are still left behind. While OBC, SC and ST constitute nearly 70 per cent of India's population, their representation in high-ranking professions, services and businesses is disproportionately low... Congress will conduct a nation-wide Socio-Economic and Caste Census to enumerate the castes and sub-castes and their socio-economic conditions. Based on the data, we will strengthen the agenda for affirmative action." Nowhere does it suggest that wealth will be taken from the people and redistributed to others. The Congress is not Robin Hood.

This manifesto echoes the Preamble of the Constitution which resolves "to constitute India into sovereign, socialist, secular, democratic republic and to secure to all its citizens: justice, social, economic and political; liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship; and equality of status and of opportunity. The Supreme Court has declared that the Preamble is the basic structure of the Constitution.

Article 39 of the Constitution, a Directive



Dushyant Dave

is Senior Advocate and former president of the Supreme Court Bar Association

If the Prime Minister ceases to be the role model, nothing will be left of our great democracy

Principle of State Policy, inter alia provides that, "the State shall, in particular, direct its policy towards securing that the citizens, men and women equally, have the right to an adequate means of livelihood; that the ownership and control of the material resources of the community are so distributed as best to subserve the common good; and that the operation of the economic system does not result in the concentration of wealth and means of production to the common detriment." Article 38 empowers the State "to secure a social order for the promotion of welfare of the people, and to "strive to minimise the inequalities in income, and endeavour to eliminate inequalities in status, facilities and opportunities". Article 46 provides for the promotion of educational and economic interests of the weaker section of the people and, in particular, of the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes.

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is aggressively pushing the agenda for a uniform civil code, which is also a Directive Principle, under Article 44. If this be so, the Prime Minister and the BJP should not have any reservations, much less objection, to the Congress manifesto. It is unfortunate that a serious document has been turned upside down to misguide the nation.

The BJP's manifesto, 'Sankalp Patra', begins with '10 years of good governance and Vikas'. Under the title Garib Pariwar Jan, it declares that "80+ crore citizens are receiving free rations since 2020 through PM Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana". It also says the party "empowered citizens by transferring ₹34 lakh crore directly to their accounts", "34+ crore citizens are receiving free health insurance of ₹5 lakh under Ayushman Bharat", and "4+ crore families now have pucca houses under the PM Awas Yojana and other initiatives". These declarations coupled with guarantees on other issues, including to continue to provide free rations for the next five years, reflect the BJP's commitment to the goals set out in the Preamble. Therefore, the Prime Minister and the BJP should be the last to accuse the Congress on its commitments in its manifestos.

No law to govern manifesto

In *S. Subramaniam Balaji v. Government of Tamil Nadu & Ors.* (2013), the Supreme Court had bemoaned the absence of a law to govern the contents of the election manifesto and directed the Election Commission of India (ECI) to frame guidelines in consultation with all recognised political parties. The ECI held a meeting on August 12, 2013, with various political parties on the formulation of guidelines on election manifestos. It then issued 'Instructions to political parties on manifestos' on April 24, 2015, outlining 'Guidelines on election manifestos', which says: "Although, the law is obvious that the promises in the election manifesto cannot be

construed as 'corrupt practice' under Section 123 of the RP (Representation of the People) Act, the reality cannot be ruled out that distribution of freebies of any kind, undoubtedly, influences all people. It states the root of free and fair elections to a large degree".

The Model Code of Conduct (MCC) issued by the ECI on March 16, 2024, expressly provides under the heading 'General Conduct' that "no party or candidate shall include in any activity which may aggravate existing differences or create mutual hatred or cause tension between different castes and communities, religious or linguistic". It also says "criticism of other political parties, when made, shall be confined to their policies and programme, past record and work. Parties and candidates shall refrain from criticism of all aspects of private life, not connected with the public activities of the leaders or workers of other parties. Criticism of other parties or their workers based on unverified allegations or distortion shall be avoided. And "there shall be no appeal to caste or communal feelings for securing votes." It prohibits activities which are "corrupt practices and offences under the election law".

In a series of judgments in 1996, the Supreme Court declared speeches of religious nature to influence voters as corrupt practices, such as statements by Bal Thackeray that "we are fighting this election for the protection of Hinduism. Therefore, we do not care for the votes of the Muslims. This country belongs to Hindus and will remain so". The Supreme Court in 2017 interpreted Section 123 of the Representation of People Act, 1951. Dr Justice Thakur, speaking for the Court, held, "An appeal in the name of religion, race, caste, community or language is impermissible under the Representation of the People Act, 1951 and would constitute a corrupt practice sufficient to annul the election in which such an appeal was made..." So interpreted, religion, race, caste, community or language would not be allowed to play any role in the electoral process and should an appeal be made on any of those considerations, the same would constitute a corrupt practice.

The Prime Minister's tirade against the Opposition and minority community only show that he has no positive issues to persuade them to vote for him. His statements clearly fall foul of the MCC and also amount to corrupt practice as declared by the Supreme Court. The Prime Minister must scrupulously adhere to the MCC in letter and spirit. If he ceases to be the role model, nothing will be left of our great democracy.

Yet, the malaise continues because of the weak rule of law. The holding of free and fair elections is the constitutional mandate of the ECI. It has miserably failed in its duty, only to prove that composition of the ECI as approved by the Supreme Court is defective.

It is time to operationalise the Indian Defence University

The Greek thinker Thucydides is said to have remarked that a nation which makes a distinction between its scholars and its warriors will have its thinking done by cowards and its fighting done by fools. It is no surprise that several nations have established 'defence universities' to promote academic rigour and enhance strategic thinking in their armed forces. In India's own neighbourhood, it is reported that Pakistan has created two universities for its armed forces, while China has three, although a report of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute lists more than 60 Chinese universities with military and security links. In this context, the absence of the long overdue Indian Defence University (IDU) is concerning.

Professional Military Education

While the nature of war remains constant, its changing character imposes a premium on military education and the academic preparation required to cope with current and future security challenges. The dynamic and chaotic character of warfare currently on display in Europe and West Asia means that military officers are expected to produce results in the face of nebulous initial information and rapidly changing circumstances. To meet complex challenges, officers are empowered through a well-constructed Professional Military Education (PME) continuum that augments their abilities to correspond with changing assignments and increasing responsibilities over long career spans.

The evolution of PME in the U.S. is of interest to us, since it has parallels with Indian theaterisation aims. While the Goldwater-Nichols Defense Reorganization Act, 1986 brought



Admiral Karambir Singh.

PVSM, AVSM, IN (Retd), was 24th Chief of the Naval Staff and is former chairman of the National Maritime Foundation, New Delhi. Views are personal

While the nature of war remains constant, its changing character imposes a premium on military education and the academic preparation required to cope with security challenges

wide-ranging structural reforms, the U.S. military's professionalism is perhaps owed in large measure to 'Ike' Skelton, whose report to the U.S. Congress significantly reformed military education in the U.S. armed forces. This report advised the Department of Defense to focus educational institutions on specified learning objectives, enhance the quality of both civilian and military faculty, establish a two-phased system for the education of joint officers, and form an Institute for National Strategic Studies at National Defense University, among other things.

Slow progress

The Indian armed forces, like others, need a broad-based education system, founded upon academic rigour. This realisation came soon after independence when, in 1967, the Chiefs of Staff Committee mooted the setting up of a Defence Services University. In 1982, a Study Group constituted by the COSC emphasised the need to set up an apex educational body for the armed forces in the form of an IDU.

Two decades later, in the wake of the Kargil conflict, a committee was established under the chairmanship of Dr K. Subrahmanyam to examine this issue. Based on its recommendations, in May 2010, 'in principle' approval was accorded for setting up of the IDU in Gurgaon. Despite some optimistic reportage in 2017-18, the progress on setting up of the IDU has been rather slow.

The several world-class training and education institutions run by India's armed forces constitute a rich and vast ecosystem of professional training. However, they lack an overarching integrated PME framework and a multi-disciplinary

approach to strategic thinking. Although the armed forces have affiliations with universities for degree courses, this is not the optimal solution. The IDU would remedy such shortcomings in India's PME system by providing a central institution of higher military learning through a well-qualified faculty with a mix of academicians along with serving and retired officers from the military and civil services. In effect, this would unite theory with practice.

The university's curriculum would vary among the various colleges and other institutions that would be governed by it. However, it would need to offer a variety of additional subjects relevant to national security and defence - both in sciences and humanities.

An idea whose time has come

The realisation of the IDU is long overdue. Some experts have suggested that after the establishment of the Rashtriya Raksha University (RRU) in Gujarat, there may not be a need for IDU. This argument is flawed, because comparing the IDU and RRU is like comparing apples and oranges. Neither does the RRU Act specify education related to 'defence' in its objectives, nor is its curriculum focused solely on military requirements for management of war and execution of plans.

The IDU as an idea has come and delays attached in its commissioning come at the cost of defence preparedness, strategic culture, and inter-service integration. The need of the hour is to operationalise the IDU at the earliest, so that the first building-blocks of joint warfighting can be put in place through a well-calibrated and futuristic military education curriculum.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

A silent ECI

It is a matter of deep concern that the communal vitriol in the election campaign has reached an all-time thanks to the Election Commission's silence ("Modi brings up Godhra train burning at poll rally in Bihar," May 6). The Prime Minister's recent remarks and Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath's reckless statement alleging that Congress will impose a tax similar to "Aurangzeb's

jizya tax" are some of the examples. Why is the EC not intervening in these matters? The people are turning increasingly sceptical about the ability of the EC to ensure a free and fair election.

J. Anantha Padmanabhan
Tiruchi

Knowing is important

The Supreme Court has said candidates are not barred from contesting in more than one constituency in one poll simultaneously,

and has chosen to leave the matter to Parliament. There have been many instances of leaders contesting from more than one seat. However, the question arises if it is incumbent on the candidate to declare to their electorates of their intention to contest from more than one constituency before the polls. Voters may may not like to vote for a candidate who is contesting from more than one seat as that candidate may even choose to give up that seat

later. The Wayanad electorate did not know about Rahul Gandhi's decision when they voted, which was material to their own decision-making.

Gopalaswamy J.
Chennai

Women's safety

Hats off to the RLD national spokesperson ("RLD spokesperson quits party over BJP's ticket to Brij Bhushan's son," May 5). BJP leaders who preach about women's safety should have

been cautious while nominating candidates. It is also shocking that the party allied with the JDS despite knowing about Prajwal Revanna's exploits, despite receiving warnings about the sex abuse videos.

N. Mahadevan
Chennai

The Prime Minister has not said a word about Prajwal Revanna. Earlier, he did not say anything about the Manipuri women who were paraded naked. India has a

long way to go in ensuring women's safety.

Kshirasagara Balaji Rao

Hyderabad



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The battle for water in Bengaluru

PMJAY did not reduce patients' health expenses: Chhattisgarh study

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

The decline in the market valuation of six of the top 10 firms

68,417 in ₹ crore. While Reliance Industries and Bharti Airtel took the biggest hit, Tata Consultancy Services (TCS), HDFC Bank, ICICI Bank and SBI emerged as the gainers. PTI

Number of companies incorporated in India in 2023-24

1.85 in lakh. The collective paid up capital for 2023-24 was ₹30,927.40 crore, according to the Corporate Affairs ministry. About 71% of companies were in the services sector, 23% in the industrial segment and 6% in agriculture. PTI

Share of normative coal stocks in thermal power plants

68 in percentage. As many as 184 thermal power plants with a total generation capacity of 211 GW have 47.78 million tonnes of coal stocks against the normative level of 70.55 million tonnes, as per the Central Electricity Authority. PTI

Southern Brazil hit with worst flood in decades

80 years. Heavy rains in Rio Grande do Sul killed 39 people, with 68 still missing, the state civil defence agency said. Flooding has surpassed levels seen during a historic 1941 deluge, according to the Brazilian Geological Service. AP

The increase in outstanding home loan in last two fiscals

10 in ₹ lakh crore. Credit outstanding to the housing sector rose to a record ₹27.23 lakh crore in March 2024, according to RBI's data on 'Sectoral Deployment of Bank Credit'. PTI

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An overview of Sudan's civil war

A closer look at the history of Sudan reveals that the country suffers from a long-standing identity crisis that has fuelled numerous rebellions. The inability of successive governments to articulate a shared vision has resulted in the unfair distribution of wealth and resources

WORLD INSIGHT

Hamdy A. Hassan

The current civil war in Sudan goes beyond a simple power struggle between two generals. It reflects a deep-rooted crisis within the country's governing structure that's been present since it gained independence from the British in 1956.

Since independence, the Sudanese have experienced 35 coups and attempted coups, more than any other African country. In the country's southern region a 56-year rebellion eventually led to the creation of South Sudan in 2011. A Darfurian uprising in 2003 was sparked by accusations that the central government was discriminating against the region's non-Arab population. It led to ethnic killings and continues to simmer.

Delving into the history of Sudan, which I have done for more than three decades, reveals that the country suffers from a long-standing identity crisis that has fuelled the numerous rebellions. The inability, or perhaps unwillingness, of successive governments to manage the country's diversity and articulate a shared vision has resulted in unfair distribution of wealth and resources.

Sudan has a population of 49 million. It comprises 19 major ethnic groups and about 597 ethnic sub-groups speaking hundreds of languages and dialects. Sudanese Arabs make up the largest single ethnic group at about 70% of the population. Political and economic power and resources are concentrated in the country's centre (for example, Khartoum).

Achieving peace in Sudan requires a focus on the concerns of marginalised populations in conflict zones and deprived regions. These include Darfur, South Kordofan and the Nuba Mountains. It also requires addressing the root causes of armed violence. Among them are issues of marginalisation, the relationship between religion and state, governance, resource sharing, land, social justice and equality at the national level.

The early years of independence

The Sudanese government that came to power in 1956 insisted on an Arab and Islamic identity. The state was based on the principles of Mahdism, an Islamic Sufi order established in the 1880s. It wasn't representative of diverse communities and sought to subject them to the will of the Mahdist state. It demanded a degree of compliance that many were unwilling to provide. Resistance against Mahdism was widespread.

In 1989, a new government seized control of the state under the rule of the National Islamic Front. This was an alliance between army officers and the Muslim Brotherhood, a fringe outfit that grew into a powerful political organisation. This coup brought to power Omar al-Bashir, who was supported by Islamist leader Hassan al-Turabi. Their government also endeavoured to establish an Islamic state.

The government set up an internal security apparatus, which arrested and tortured dissenters. In 1991, the regime introduced a new penal code to impose an Islamisation agenda, and created the "People's Police".

Two further developments would create the conditions for the war that continues to rage today. The first was the al-Bashir regime's decision in 2003 to enlist Janjaweed militias to quell an insurgency in Darfur. Second, the Islamist regime used this new militia to keep the elite in the Sudanese army away from



In flight: Sudanese refugees who fled the violence in the Darfur region, near the border between Sudan and Chad in Goungour, Chad on May 8, 2023. REUTERS

conflict zones in the periphery.

In 2013, al-Bashir formally designated these tribal militias as the Rapid Support Forces through a presidential decree. This affiliated them with the national security and intelligence services. In 2017, Sudan's parliament ratified the Rapid Support Forces Law. This formally incorporated the militias into the government's military apparatus under the direct command of the president. The minister of defence was tasked with overseeing the Sudanese Armed Forces. Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, alias Hemedti, was appointed by al-Bashir to lead the Rapid Support Forces. This enabled his power and influence to grow. It was to inform the dramatic and tragic events in Sudan in the coming decade.

After protests in 2018 swept through Sudan's major cities – driven by grievances around poverty, corruption and unemployment – the military intervened in April 2019. They removed al-Bashir from power and declared a state of emergency.

Despite establishing a transitional military government, demonstrations persisted demanding civilian leadership. With mediation from the African Union, an agreement on power-sharing was reached in August 2019. It resulted in a military-civilian transitional administration. Still, challenges persisted, including a failed coup attempt in September 2021. A month later, Sudan's top general, Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, led another coup, derailing the country's democratic transition.

The months leading up to the war in April 2023 were marked by civilian protests that were violently repressed, and tensions between army and Rapid Support Forces leaders.

Forging a militia-dominated state

The Rapid Support Forces emerged as a counterbalance to the armed forces. It strategically deployed thousands of battle-hardened fighters to the country's biggest cities, volatile border regions and economic hubs like gold mines. Concurrently, Russia forged ties with the Rapid Support Forces through the Wagner Group to secure access to Sudanese gold. Three conditions coalesced to foster the emergence of a militia-dominated state, with the Rapid Support Forces at its helm:

- 1) Civil strife in Darfur in 2003 presented an opportune moment. While the army focused on quelling rebellion in south Sudan, the suppression of the Darfurian uprising in the west was left to paramilitary forces.
- 2) Support from the Sudanese government enabled the self-styled militia to access financial resources and weaponry. It could then develop commercial ventures to attain and sustain autonomy from the state.
- 3) Ideologically, Hemedti portrayed the Rapid Support Forces as a militia representing marginalised Arabs from Sudan's rural and border regions.

The unravelling

In Sudan's evolving democratic transition,

Hemedti's rise to the vice presidency of the Sovereignty Council in 2021 was crucial, overseeing the path to elections. Disbanding the Rapid Support Forces or sidelining Hemedti risked sparking unrest, given the outfit's size and business interests.

Militia dominance over the state can prompt belated responses from the military, potentially making conflict worse. Initially, Hemedti refrained from seizing power by force. He aligned his troops as allies of the army, which also had substantial economic ventures.

But the October 2021 military coup halted Sudan's democratic progress. Amid repression and economic decline, the Rapid Support Forces expanded its influence through business ventures and engagements.

The army's attempt to integrate these forces backfired, leading to armed confrontations and the Rapid Support Forces' seizure of critical areas.

What next

Sudan requires a collaborative effort from the international community to aid reconstruction. It needs to establish a transparent, civilian-led government that represents the Sudanese populace and hears their voices in decision-making processes. Urgent action is needed to reconstruct Sudan's post-colonial state as one that includes and safeguards the rights of all.

Hamdy A. Hassan is Professor at Zayed University. This article has been republished from The Conversation.

THE GIST

Sudan comprises of 19 major ethnic groups and about 597 ethnic sub-groups. Since independence, the Sudanese have experienced 35 coups and attempted coups, more than any other African country.

The Sudanese government that came to power in 1956 insisted on an Arab and Islamic identity. The state was based on the principles of Mahdism.

Sudan requires a collaborative effort from the international community to aid reconstruction. It needs to establish a transparent, civilian-led government that represents the Sudanese populace and hears their voices in decision-making processes.

During the 2019 general elections, the BJP and the Congress collectively spent an astronomical sum of over ₹20 billion. This underscores the impact of the absence of spending caps on political parties. It is, therefore, imperative to reassess India's political funding framework to ensure the integrity and transparency of elections

In the colourful mosaic of Indian democracy lies a fundamental question that strikes at the core of our democratic ethos: the issue of electoral expenditure. In the 2019 general elections alone, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Congress collectively spent an astronomical sum of over ₹20 billion. While the Representation of the People Act, 1951 (RPA) meticulously outlines expenditure limits for individual candidates, a glaring gap remains – the absence of comparable restrictions on political party spending (Table 1) and third-party spenders/campaigners (Table 4). This discrepancy has not only opened the floodgates for unchecked expenditure by parties but has also paved the way for a skewed electoral landscape, where financial muscle trumps meritocracy.

The researchers of CSDS-Lokniti analysed the expenditure reports submitted by various political parties during the Karnataka and Tripura State Assembly elections in 2023. In Karnataka, the study scrutinised the spending of three national parties, the BJP, the Congress, and the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), alongside three State parties which are the Janata Dal (Secular) (JD(S)), the Samajwadi Party (SP), and the Communist Party of India (CPI). Similarly, in Tripura, the study examined the expenditure reports of three national-level parties, the BJP, the Congress and the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M), and three State parties, the All India Trinamool Congress (AITC), the Communist Party of India (CPI), and the Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP).

The States for this study were selected based on the availability of expenditure reports for the 2023 Assembly elections, released by the Election Commission (EC). Furthermore, national and State parties that had incurred the highest expenditure in a State were chosen, provided they had released their segregated expenditure reports. The study, thus, highlights the significance of regulating expenditure across all key stakeholders to ensure a level playing field in the electoral arena.

Expenditure limits are vital for ensuring fair elections and preventing a financial arms race. According to International IDEA, 65 countries around the world, including the U.S., the U.K., Canada, and Brazil, have a cap on election expenditure of political parties. This framework serves as a stark contrast to the scenario in India, where the absence of such caps has led to a lopsided expenditure landscape. In Karnataka, for example, the combined spending of the two national parties, the Congress and BJP, has surged to over 500% higher than that of the two State parties, JD(U) and SP combined. Similarly, in Tripura, national parties outspend their regional counterparts by over 200% (Table 1).

This glaring discrepancy underscores the impact of the absence of spending caps, effectively skewing the playing field in favour of deep-pocketed political giants. The exorbitant sums poured into campaigns tilts the scale of competition,

A quiz on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the sub-four-minute mile run on May 6 by Roger Bannister

QUESTION 1
At which location did Bannister achieve this incredible feat and what was the occasion for the race?

QUESTION 2
Name the two other runners (with same first name) alongside Bannister involved for the AAA in the record-breaking feat.

QUESTION 3
What was the barrier-breaking time retuned by Bannister that has gone into athletics folklore?

QUESTION 4
To what incredible feat that happened nearly a year ago did Bannister compare his triumph, writing “...it was a barrier that seemed to defy all attempts to break it — an, irksome reminder that man’s striving might be in vain”?

QUESTION 5
Which Olympic champion was the commentator on Radio BBC for the historic run?

QUESTION 6
Roger Bannister trained to be a doctor. What was his specialisation?

The researchers of CSDS-Lokniti analysed the expenditure reports submitted by the BJP and Congress during the Karnataka and Tripura State Assembly elections in 2023. Their expenditure reports for the 2023 Assembly elections were released by the Election Commission.

Table 2: Expenses incurred for various aspects of the campaigning process out of the total expenditure set aside for party propaganda in State assembly elections

States (s)	Party	Expense on media ads	Expense on publicity materials	Expense on public meetings/ rallies etc
Karnataka	BJP (₹14,900 lakh)	₹7,800 lakh (52%)	₹800 lakh (5%)	₹1,600 lakh (11%)
	Congress (₹8,900 lakh)	₹4,900 lakh (55%)	₹90 lakh (1%)	₹500 lakh (6%)
	AAP (₹533 lakh)	₹176 lakh (33%)	₹97 lakh (18%)	₹10 lakh (2%)
	JD(S) (₹2,800 lakh)	₹2,400 lakh (86%)	NIL	₹20 lakh (1%)
	SP* (0 Lakhs)	NIL	NIL	NIL
	CPI (₹182 lakh)	NIL	₹0.8 lakh (0.4%)	NIL
	BJP (₹1,800 lakh)	₹400 lakh (22%)	₹300 lakh (17%)	₹100 lakh (6%)
Tripura	Congress (₹100 lakh)	₹33 lakh (33%)	₹15 lakh (15%)	NIL
	CPI-M (₹156 lakh)	₹6 lakh (4%)	₹53 lakh (34%)	₹50 lakh (32%)
	AITC (₹335 lakh)	₹87 lakh (26%)	₹4 lakh (1%)	NIL
	CPI (₹21 lakh)	NIL	₹0.7 lakh (3%)	₹0.07 lakh (0.3%)
	RSP (₹4 lakh)	₹0.08 lakh (2%)	₹2 lakh (67%)	₹1 lakh (25%)

Note: all figures are rounded off
*the party has spent all the amount on heads like rent, wages etc.
Source: Expenditure reports submitted by the parties to the EC

Note- all figures are rounded off. Also, the amount not included in the table was spent on heads like travel expenses etc./ NIL signifies that no amount was spent
 *the party has spent all the amount on heads like rent, wages, etc.
 Source: Expenditure reports submitted by the parties to the EC.

The party which they support	Platform	Publisher	Amount spent*
BJP	Meta	Ulta Chashma	₹108 lakh
		NaMO Nayakan- Narendra Modi Fans	₹4,697 lakh
	Google	Adsense Technologies Pvt. Ltd.	₹0.89 lakh
		O3M Directional Marketing Private Limited	₹6.9 lakh
Congress	Meta	Congress Hai Na	₹0.3 lakh
		Congress Sarkar Bharosa Barkarar	₹0.13 lakh
	Google	Designboxed Innovations Pvt. Ltd.	₹129 lakh
AITC	Meta	Trinamoole Nabo Jowar	₹37 lakh
	Google	IPAC	₹716 lakh

Note- No third-party campaigners among the top-50 spenders were found for the other parties analysed in the study (SP, JD(S), CPI, AAP, RSP, and CPI-M)

*The amount spent on ads by the publisher and calculated from January 29 to April 27, 2024 (90 days).

disadvantaging independent or less financially endowed candidates.

Both national and State-level parties allocated a significant portion of their “general party propaganda” budget to media advertisements, surpassing expenses for rallies and other activities (Table 2). This observation underscores the pressing need for reforms to ensure fair access to media platforms.

The stark contrast in media advertising expenditure leads one to examine the role of digital platforms like Google and Meta (formerly Facebook) in the ongoing Lok Sabha elections. Big spenders, primarily national parties, are allocating disproportionately higher budgets to ads on these digital platforms. This was highlighted in a recent study of the CSDS-Lokniti (*The Hindu* dated April 18, 2024). In contrast, State parties were found to have a negligible presence in terms of advertisements on these platforms through their official party handles. (Table 3). This observation again highlights the need to regulate the overall

spending of political parties ensuring that political actors compete based on the strength of their ideas rather than the depth of their pockets.

Third-party or non-party campaigners refer to individuals or groups participating in campaign activities during elections, without being formally registered as political parties or candidates. However, in the Indian electoral laws, the term hasn't been clearly defined. While the issue of regulating the expenditure of political parties is widely discussed and debated, regulation of third-party involvement is often overlooked. The unchecked expenditure and the nature of content posted by third-party campaigners raises serious issues around the lack of transparency and accountability of such actors. (Table 4). Now that the electoral bond scheme is scrapped, the lack of regulation of third-party expenditure during elections could result in a rise of

quid pro quo arrangements and could also lead to an influx of unaccounted money into the electoral process.

Through our study, we found several third-party campaigners on Google and Meta platforms spending substantial sums of money to influence voters for or against a political party (Table 4).

In alignment with global practices, the EC's 'Proposed Electoral Reforms' report¹ in 2016, advocated for the introduction of expenditure ceilings for political parties in India. However, garnering unanimous support for this proposal proved challenging, highlighting resistance from certain political factions.

Similarly, embracing strategies from countries like Australia and the U.K. could offer valuable insights and present tangible models worth considering for India regarding the regulation of third-party involvement. While the former requires formal registration and disclosure requirements for third parties,

the U.K. imposes differentiated limits on targeted spending, spending in each constituency, and spending on U.K.-wide campaigns, at certain elections. This is also essential for increasing transparency and accountability, curbing the unregulated flow of money, preventing quid pro quo arrangements, and checking the influx of black money into the electoral process.

Reassessing India's political funding framework is imperative to ensure the integrity and transparency of elections. Introducing expenditure ceilings for political parties represents a crucial step towards upholding these fundamental principles.

By embracing these measures, India can aspire to international standards of electoral integrity, instilling greater confidence and trust among its citizens in the democratic process.

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Positive signals

Fed's cautious but dovish tone, good news for India

If markets were expecting the latest US Federal Open Market Committee (FOMC) meeting to offer clear direction on when policy rates would be cut and by how much, they were in for a disappointment. After announcing the target funds rate would remain at 5.25-5.5 per cent for now, the FOMC merely said that it would ‘not be appropriate’ to reduce rates until it gained greater confidence that inflation was moving ‘sustainably’ towards 2 per cent.

But reading between the lines, the statement had dovish undertones. It talked of the Fed’s ‘dual goals’ of achieving maximum employment with a 2 per cent inflation rate. There was no hint that rate hikes were on the table. The markets were apprehensive about a hawkish pivot, after recent data showed US consumer price inflation rising from 3.1 per cent to 3.5 per cent between January and March 2024. But data released after this event also buttressed the view that the US Fed will be on an easing path from here. US GDP for Q1 2024 expanded by just 1.6 per cent, while non-farm payrolls for April showed a weakening job market.

Projections on macro variables from the FOMC members — which are more keenly watched than the policy statement — showed them making no change to their interest rate forecast for 2024 at 4.6 per cent. But the 2025 forecast was moved up to 3.9 per cent from 3.6 per cent, suggesting shallower cuts. They also turned more optimistic about the US economy, forecasting GDP growth at 2.1 per cent and 2 per cent in 2024 and 2025, significantly up from 1.4 per cent and 1.8 per cent earlier. Should these numbers come good, the US could well escape the hard-landing feared after rate hikes of over 500 basis points. This should be good news for the global economy and financial markets, including India’s, which have always caught a cold when the US sneezed.

Another important policy announcement which is positive for markets, is the Fed’s decision to slow the pace at which it has been shrinking its balance sheet. After ratcheting up its balance sheet to \$9 trillion during Covid to pump-prime the economy, the Fed has been trying to reduce this bond stockpile since June 2022 in a quantitative tightening (QT) exercise. The withdrawal of this large quantum of liquidity had the potential to cause significant turbulence not only in the US, but also in global financial markets.

With the balance sheet at \$7.4 trillion, the Fed has now announced its intent to slow down its monthly QT from \$95 billion to \$35 billion. This effectively allows the US stimulus that has propped up asset markets to remain in place for longer. But it also fans fears about what the long-term end-game will be. In the past year, the Reserve Bank of India has been able to delink its monetary policy decisions from US Fed moves due to robust domestic prospects. But a slower pace of QT will mean that it will continue to have its task cut out in managing volatile foreign flows.

POCKET

RAVIKANTH



LINE& LENGTH.

TCA SRINIVASA RAGHAVAN

In a little over 30 days from now we will have a new government. Most people expect the NDA led by the BJP to form it. But elections can spring surprises.

Regardless of which set of political parties forms the next government, as far as the economy is concerned, it will have to fashion a new approach. India has actually done this every 12-15 years or so in the past.

Thus in the first 15 years from 1952 to 1967 it focused on investment-led growth. Then it stopped because it ran out of money. That caused a lot of hardship.

So from 1971 to 1985 it focused on distribution via a whole host of welfare measures. That slowed down growth.

By 1984 these policies had run their course, and the new government that came to power in December that year reverted to private investment-led growth. It financed the expenditure via deficit financing.

The crucial mistake it made then, however, was to not open up the Indian economy to external competition and markets, which is what China was doing. This error was corrected in 1991.

These policies were diligently followed for the next two decades and worked wonders for expanding output. But after 2014 a new set of policies has made the economy less open. This has resulted in India not attaining its potential output levels.

The proof of this lies in the negative change in occupational structure. Fewer people are working in the formal sector than ought to be for an economy of India’s size.

It’s these policies that the next government will have to rethink. The short point is that the Indian economy needs a sharp kick in its pants. Protectionism has made it complacent.

THE SAVINGS RATE
India saves far less in financial assets than it can. Even after allowing for problems of classification, and the



stout defences being mounted by the government, the fact remains: without a much higher savings rate, say, around 40 per cent, investment will fall short of the required levels. This is not rocket science.

But instead of encouraging savings in financial assets successive governments have treated them very badly. That’s why it must be an absolute priority of the next government to design policies — and more importantly, practices — that don’t penalise savers.

This ‘gotcha’ practice has resulted in people hiding their savings and/or not fully declaring their incomes. The thing, however, is governments can’t tell people to be self-employed, as this one has been urging and then

If the government taxes the income derived from savings, people will tend to hide their money and put them in investments that fetch them higher return

punish them for being so. But this is exactly what has been happening since the infamous budget of 1957.

If someone saves some money and derives some income from that saving, the government taxes it at the same rate as normal income. This being so why would people not put their money where the government can’t see it and get a higher return?

What is truly remarkable is that despite such active discouragement by the government people manage to save around 20 per cent. Imagine what would happen if incomes from savings were fully exempted from tax.

The short point is this: Indians without government pensions place a high premium on converting a portion of their current incomes into a stream of future incomes. Why place so many roadblocks before them?

INVESTMENT HOLDS THE KEY
All governments know this but all politicians choose to disregard what they know. When was the last time you heard a politician talk about investment?

No, what the government makes is

not investment. It incurs expenditure. The two are not the same because spending taxpayers money without returns isn’t investment. It is mere expenditure.

Savings and returns both require positive returns and India has stifled returns for 60 years now. Returns should be based on economic and commercial efficiency, not what the bureaucracy thinks they should be.

This is critically important because thanks to the Left virus, successive Indian governments have chosen to conflate high returns with undeserved profits.

What we have had, therefore, is a consensus that if governments take away half your income via a combination of direct and indirect taxes, it is okay.

Well, it’s not because this Mughal rate of extraction makes the rulers very well off and others poor. It also deters savings and thus investment and hence growth.

And here’s the paradox. The BJP wants to remove all symbols of Mughal rule. But it is happy to retain its worst aspect: high taxes. Chanakya would have disapproved strongly.

Digital public infrastructure – a remarkable journey

The country’s success with multi-language support and collaborative platforms holds valuable lessons for others

Monika
Badrinarayanan Gopalakrishnan

In this age of rapid technological advancement, India has embarked on a remarkable journey of deploying Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) which has reshaped the nation’s socio-economic landscape.

India boasts the highest number of digital transactions, surpassing even the combined figures of the US, China, and Europe. The digital economy is booming, projected to reach a staggering \$1 trillion by 2025. This growth is fuelled by a massive internet user base, with over 759 million Indians actively connected, with a significant portion residing in rural areas. The ambitious Aadhaar programme, a digital ID system, has enrolled nearly 1.3 billion citizens, facilitating efficient delivery of welfare services, financial transactions, and access to government schemes.

Similarly, the Unified Payments Interface (UPI) is witnessing exponential growth, expected to reach a billion transactions daily by 2026. Broadband connectivity has also seen a significant leap, reaching over 93 per cent of Indian villages. These milestones reflect India’s unwavering commitment to building a digitally empowered and inclusive society.

The government’s programmes like the National Optical Fibre Network (NOFN), Digital India, National Broadband Mission, and National Data Centre Policy have laid the groundwork for a robust digital infrastructure.

The Bharat Net Project, with its

ambitious goal of connecting villages through high-speed internet, serves as a prime example. Additionally, the government’s commitment is evident in establishing Wi-Fi hotspots in public spaces and fostering domestic production of telecom equipment through Production Linked Incentive schemes.

Beyond connectivity, the government’s has undertaken monumental steps to advance DPI. The Jan Dhan-Aadhaar-Mobile (JAM) trinity has resulted in millions of new bank accounts and streamlined direct benefit transfers, eliminating leakages and ensuring targeted delivery of welfare programmes.

Initiatives like Ayushman Bharat Mission and Unified Logistics Interface Platform (ULIP) are transforming healthcare and logistics sectors respectively. Innovative solutions such as digilockers and authentication frameworks empower citizens with secure storage and access to vital documents. Digital platforms like ONDC are further empowering small businesses by providing a global marketplace.

MULTI-PRONGED SUCCESS
The emergence of DPI has ushered in an era of e-governance, with citizens gaining online access to a wide range of government services.

Portals like the National e-Governance Plan (NeGP) offer a one-stop platform for everything from birth certificates to land records.

This digitalization has streamlined processes, reduced bureaucracy, and



enhanced transparency.

India’s DPI initiatives, often referred to as the India Stack, have been instrumental in boosting productivity, improving efficiency, and generating employment opportunities. A robust digital infrastructure fosters global connectivity, financial inclusion, and innovation.

It serves as a springboard for entrepreneurs and businesses.

DPI is also transforming education through e-learning and healthcare through telemedicine, paving the way for a more equitable and accessible future.

The true power of DPI was evident during crises. Initiatives like the Garib Kalyan Yojana, which utilised digital banking infrastructure for direct benefit transfers, ensured swift and transparent delivery of financial assistance to millions during the pandemic. Digital platforms also facilitated access to vital

information, healthcare services, and emergency assistance, leaving no one behind.

GLOBAL REACH
Looking ahead, India has immense potential to lead the global conversation on DPI development.

The country’s success with multi-language support, collaborative platforms, and real-time data analysis holds valuable lessons for others. India can serve as a role model for developing nations, promoting multilateral dialogue to establish universal standards and fostering sustainable financing models for global DPI development.

However, India’s journey is not without challenges. The digital divide persists, and ensuring equitable access to technology and internet connectivity remains a priority.

Concerns regarding accountability and data protection also require careful consideration. Despite these adversities, the transformation brought about by India’s Digital Public Infrastructure is commendable.

From empowering citizens with digital identities to providing connectivity in the remotest villages, the nation has embraced technology as a catalyst for change. Nevertheless, the journey has only started. With unwavering determination and well-planned efforts, India is ready to take the lead in the global digital revolution.

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● BELOW THE LINE



Kejriwal's bail buzz
As the Delhi Lok Sabha elections heat up, the buzz in political circles is about the Supreme Court’s hint at possibly granting interim bail to Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal. Kejriwal, who has been

cooling his heels in Tihar Jail since April 1 over a liquor policy case, might just find himself back in the political arena at the most opportune moment.

The apex court’s indication that it may consider bail just as campaigning intensifies has created ripples through the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP). This potential development could be the shot in the arm AAP desperately needs, energising its campaign and possibly altering the electoral dynamics in their favour.

With the hearing set for May 7, all eyes are on the Supreme Court to see if it allows Kejriwal to lead his party’s election campaign.

Goenka rings an alarm
In a throwback to the stock-scams

ridden ’90s, Harsh Goenka, RPG Group’s chairman, has sounded the alarm on potential foul play in the booming Indian stock markets, especially targeting Kolkata.

Goenka’s alert on social media pointed fingers at promoters and brokers — specifically noting a Gujarati-Marwari connection — accusing them of inflating profits and conspiring to jack up stock prices to lofty but unsustainable heights. With recent plummeting indices, Goenka’s warnings carry a sense of urgency, urging the SEBI and the Finance Ministry to step in pronto. Investors, remember the painful lessons of the Harshad Mehta and Ketan Parekh sagas?

Investor uncertainty
In the mysterious world of stock

markets, Friday’s crash left many scratching their heads. Despite a positive global backdrop and reassuring GST data, the markets took a nosedive, stirring up a cauldron of speculation and whispers in financial corridors.

Insiders say this unexpected jolt might be more about political winds than economic storms. Could this be a pre-emptive strike by the markets against political instability? While the connection between politics and market performance is as old as the markets themselves, this kind of investor nervousness underscores how even a mere hint of uncertainty can trigger waves of volatility.

As the election season unfolds, all

eyes will be on how these political undercurrents shape the economic narrative.

#PlayTrue Campaign
The timing was perfect. The National Anti-Doping Agency’s (NADA) held #PlayTrue campaign from April 15-30 aimed at fostering awareness about the importance of clean sport in India.

The campaign is aligned with the vision of the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA). The campaign served as a crucial event for athletes and stakeholders to collaborate, exchange insights, and strategies towards establishing a resilient anti-doping framework in anticipation of the Paris 2024 Olympics.

Our Bureaus

Encouraging investment

New rules aim to improve NRI participation

In its latest board meeting, the Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi) took steps to improve non-resident Indian (NRI) and overseas citizen of India (OCI) access to Indian equity assets via the foreign portfolio investment (FPI) route. The regulator has hiked the limit of NRI/OCI commitments to the FPI corpus to 100 per cent, provided know-your-customer (KYC) norms are fulfilled and the investments come through the International Financial Services Centre (IFSC). This should enable greater NRI participation in Indian equity while offering transparency. Until now, NRIs could own an aggregate 50 per cent of the corpus of an FPI. Individuals could not hold more than 25 per cent. This was due to concerns about potential round-tripping. But as a result of these restrictions, NRIs are estimated to have contributed only a minuscule ₹6,700 crore of the approximately ₹47 trillion worth of Indian equity owned by FPIs. This is certainly low since India receives inward remittances of nearly \$100 billion every year.

Under the new relaxed limits, individual NRIs and OCIs may directly invest up to 100 per cent of the FPI corpus, or they may do so indirectly, investing through firms or vehicles that are majority-controlled by NRIs and OCIs. However, the FPIs should provide the permanent account number (PAN) and other KYC details of every investor to depositories. If PAN and KYC are not furnished, the enhanced limits can still apply but only to FPIs where the investment manager is an asset management company of a Sebi-registered mutual fund, and sponsored by a Reserve Bank of India-regulated bank, or its IFSC-based subsidiary or branch. This retains a measure of regulatory surveillance. Stricter disclosure rules apply to FPIs with significant holdings in a single Indian group or large overall holdings in Indian equities. Funds with over 33 per cent of their equity assets under management in one Indian group company need to provide detailed investor information and there is a cap of 35 per cent total investment in a given group.

Similar detailed disclosures will be required if the fund, along with its investor group, holds a total of more than ₹25,000 crore in Indian equities. This is to guard against a scenario where promoters invest clandestinely in their own group companies, using overseas vehicles to breach the limit of 75 per cent shareholding. By simplifying regulations for NRIs and raising the limits, while boosting transparency, these changes are expected to increase foreign investment and improve NRI and OCI commitment to Indian equity. But NRIs do invest considerably more via Indian mutual funds than through the FPI route and new KYC norms may present a hurdle. In FY24 (until February 24) NRIs had invested \$12 billion equivalent via Indian mutual funds.

But the new KYC norms from Sebi, which demand compulsory Aadhaar verification, are a barrier for NRIs and OCIs. Many NRIs, including those who are already invested in MFs, don't possess Aadhaar. Even those who have Aadhaar may not be able to validate their status if they don't have active Indian mobile numbers. While the intention of the regulator is to increase transparency, it must also consider practical difficulties that investors might face in fulfilling its requirements. Tapping the savings of Indians living abroad can provide a stable source of financing and improve India's growth prospects.

Last-mile challenges

US inflation is altering expectations

Assessing the trajectory of inflation has become increasingly challenging. The US Federal Reserve, along with several other central banks in both advanced and developing economies, for instance, believed that the increase in consumer prices in the aftermath of the pandemic was transitory in nature. However, sustained high inflation rates eventually forced them to adjust, which led to a sharp and coordinated increase in policy rates across most parts of the world in 2022, resulting in a significant tightening of global financial conditions. Higher interest rates did have an impact and inflation rates gradually came down. This led to optimism in financial markets that the Fed will soon start reducing the policy rate. Even the Fed's own projections — released after the March meeting of the Federal Open Market Committee (FOMC) — indicated that it was on course to reduce the federal funds rate by 75 basis points in 2024.

However, an uptick in the inflation rate to 3.5 per cent in March compared to 3.2 per cent in the previous month has again raised questions regarding how soon it will align with the Fed's medium-term target of 2 per cent. Fed Chairman Jerome Powell indicated last week after the FOMC meeting that the policy interest rate would likely remain higher for longer. He added the data thus far this year had not given confidence. Mr Powell also noted the Fed's next move was unlikely to be an increase in interest rates, which led to a short relief rally in financial markets. To be fair, most market participants do not expect the Fed to increase the policy rate, but the last-mile disinflation could become tricky and require adjustments in market expectations. Yields on 10-year US government bonds have increased by about 30 basis points since March end. The renewed expectations of higher for longer will have implications for the US and the rest of the world.

The US economy has shown much greater resilience in recent years than anticipated by most analysts. The International Monetary Fund, for example, recently revised its US growth projection for the current year by 60 basis points. But restrictive monetary policy for an extended period can start affecting output, with implications for global growth. Higher US interest rates for a longer period would also induce volatility in international currency markets. The Japanese central bank, for example, intervened at least twice last week to support the yen after it fell to a 34-year low. Several currencies, particularly in the developing world, are likely to face more pressure.

What would this mean for India? Pressure on US and global growth would affect output in India through the trade channel. However, on the currency front, India is relatively well placed, reflected by the stability of the rupee in the recent period. The rupee has depreciated about 2 per cent against the dollar over the past year. While higher for longer increases risks for capital flows, it may not lead to large outflows, given India's growth outlook and relative interest rates. Potential shifts in expectations should also not affect monetary policy decisions. The Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) expects the inflation rate to average 4.5 per cent this financial year, which will be above the target of 4 per cent. Given better than expected growth outcomes, there is no pressing need for the MPC to reduce the policy rate soon.

Socially construct the right AI

...and achieve societal benefit, not harm



ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

The rush of headlines spelling gloom and doom in employment because of artificial intelligence (AI) seems to have gained speed recently: "Within a year, India's call centres will lose most of their business thanks to AI," says one headline, quoting the head of one of India's largest software services companies. Oh god! I thought, the call centre industry employs more than 300,000 Indians, mostly under 30, unmarried, college-educated, and consisting of both men and women. If they lose their jobs, it will be calamitous. Then came a statement from Goldman Sachs saying that more than 300 million white-collar jobs could be lost soon with the rise of AI. And then came an International Monetary Fund blog officially stating that 40 per cent of all jobs worldwide will be lost to AI soon.

Seeing all these gloom-inducing headlines makes one wonder whether employers are embracing AI for this very reason: To help them make more profits by cutting down employee headcounts by getting computer programmes to substitute for them. The reason I am starting to question the direction AI is currently encouraged to develop, namely that of achieving headcount reduction, is because a new line of thinking called "Social Construction of Technology" (SCOT) has started making a strong case that the direction and speed of technological innovation is not self-driven but driven by social forces.

Here is an example of how social forces shaped the evolution of an object that we are all familiar with, the bicycle. The earliest version of the bicycle appeared in the early 1800s in Europe and had no pedals. Users

had to move forward by pushing their feet against the ground. In the 1860s, pedals and cranks were added to the front wheel of bicycles, and this design significantly improved efficiency and speed. And it was a replacement for horseback riding. By the late 19th century, the wheels were made equally sized and a chain drive connecting the pedals to the rear wheel was created, making the bicycle have better stability and comfort. This was called the "safety bicycle" and gained widespread adoption, particularly among women, who

saw bicycle riding as a sign of modernity, and it allowed them to travel to work. This saw the US Army replace their horse-based regiments with bicycle-based ones. Then, in the 20th century things like pneumatic tyres, use of light-weight material like aluminium, and better braking systems led to the bicycle that we know of today. Adoption became even more widespread with the emerging health and fitness movement. And today, the bicycle is seen as a clean and eco-friendly mode of transportation.

This study of the evolution of the bicycle has led many scholars to come together under the SCOT movement to study and understand how different technologies have evolved under the influence of social forces. (For the interested, there is a book with a collection of articles describing these efforts called *The Social Construction of Technological Systems*, edited by Wiebe Bijker, et al).

The recent hoopla about ChatGPT and its likes tries to attribute almost magical qualities to such AI technology. However, ChatGPT itself is quite humble in its answers. For example, I posed this question last



AJIT BALAKRISHNAN

Why foreign financial firms have quit

Among the many arrogant quips and replies given by foreign banks immediately following the securities scam of 1992 was: "If you keep your front door unlocked, you are likely to be burgled." This comment came from a cowboy banker from Citibank. He was justifying how foreign banks had hoodwinked Indian public-sector banks (PSBs) in the opaque government-securities market to make obscene profits. While their treasury operations were unknown outside the small, shadowy world of the Indian debt market, Citibank too was a dominant retail financial services brand in the early 1990s, setting the pace for retail finance — from credit cards to consumer loans. ICICI Bank was still a development-finance institution, Kotak Mahindra Bank and Axis Bank did not exist, and HDFC Bank, set up in 1994, was headed by a former Citibanker.

Some 30 years later, in March 2023, the same Citi sold its retail business to Axis Bank and exited the Indian retail banking business. It was not an isolated case. Over the years, the presence of foreign banks in India has been reduced to nothing. The largest foreign bank in India is Standard Chartered Bank, which has only 100 branches in 42 cities. HSBC has just 26 branches. The 38-odd other foreign banks operating in India have an insignificant presence. HDFC Bank alone has more than 8,000 branches. The biggest global banks like JP Morgan Chase, Bank of America, Mitsubishi UFJ, and BNP Paribas are either not present in India or have nothing much on the ground. The top banks in India are State Bank of India, Axis Bank, ICICI Bank, HDFC Bank, and Kotak Mahindra Bank.

It is a similar story in mutual funds. Among the top 10 mutual funds, there are a few foreign joint-venture partners, but they have little role. Most funds are entirely Indian-owned. The only foreign asset management company among the top 10 is Nippon India.

The largest US mutual funds are not in India. Morgan Stanley and Fidelity have walked out of India and Templeton is struggling to grow. The story is slightly different in insurance, where many foreign companies are joint-venture partners because the business is a bit technical. But these too are controlled by Indian management. Life Insurance Corporation of India, a government of India company, still rules the life cover business.

All this is a far cry from the early 1990s, when circumspect Indian policymakers attempted to strike a balance between domestic interests, on the one hand, and the diplomatic push of US trade representatives, on the other, to smooth the entry of US foreign financial into India. Reams of media columns were written on how an aspirational middle class of India (estimated at 200 million at that time) prospering through economic liberalisation, would need retail loans, insurance, and — thanks to India's high savings rate — investment products like mutual funds. And, who better to sell these to Indians than US companies, which claimed to have the best products and investment expertise? Multiple rounds of discussion at the World Trade Organization focused on

opening emerging markets to services from developed nations (read Wall Street); left-leaning politicians and academics howled about the possibility of neo-colonialism, brought about by neo-liberalism. What happened was exactly the opposite.

In 1993-94, when six private mutual funds were licensed, many of them had foreign partners. Subsequently, more foreign mutual funds entered India, but hardly any of them survived in their original form. The string of early and later entrants that have exited include Pioneer, BlackRock, Alliance Capital, Sun F&C, Morgan Stanley, Jardine Fleming, JP Morgan, and Goldman Sachs. In contrast, the survival rate



IRRATIONAL CHOICE

DEBASHIS BASU

week: "What is the latest version of Python?" ... and I got this answer: "As of my last update in January 2022, the latest stable version of Python was 3.10. However, since then, newer versions may have been released. You can check the official Python website or the Python Package Index (PyPI) for the most current version" ... owning up to the facts that (a) its knowledge is dependent on when it was last updated (says that was two-odd years ago!), and (b) that it's a search engine.

One clear plus point about ChatGPT and its ilk (Google's Gemini, to name one other) is that their creators have made great progress in taking our human conversational input (and not just a keyword or two entered into a "search box") and giving results back in a friendly conversational style. So, is it this human conversational style that makes folks happily accept such answers as "artificial intelligence"? In other words, the programmers who put it together have deliberately "socially constructed" their software service to use a conversational style to make them human-like. This is an evolution from the "punched card" of the 1970s, then large "keyboards", the mouse, and the touch screen appeared, then a conversational style of input and output but still via the keyboard, and now seems to be heading in the direction of voice-input and soon voice output in a language of your choice.

This brings us to the topic of which direction we should now socially construct AI: To replace clerical/bureaucratic labour (as computers have for the past few decades been trained to do) or create genuine "value added" to businesses? When Jeff Bezos, founder and head of Amazon, was asked this question recently (please note he refers to AI as machine learning, a more pragmatic view), his answer was: "I would say a lot of the value that we're getting from machine learning is happening beneath the surface. It is things like improved search results, improved product recommendations for customers, improved forecasting for inventory management ..."

And this has led to continued high growth for Amazon and its employee count, not reduction of employees!

Maybe our government authorities, as part of the effort to socially construct the right AI/machine learning tools, should issue a warning to businesses in that sphere as America's Federal Trade Commission recently did: "Are you exaggerating what your AI product can do?" the Commission asks, warning businesses that such claims could be charged as "deceptive" if they lack scientific evidence, or only apply to extremely specific users and case conditions. Companies are also strongly encouraged to refrain from presenting AI as a means to potentially justify higher product costs or labour decisions and take extreme risk-assessment precautions before rolling out products to the public.

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Behind bars with Palestinians



BOOK REVIEW

ROBYN CRESWELL

The story of Palestine cannot be told smoothly, the critic Edward Said observes in *After the Last Sky*, a meditation on the complexities of being Palestinian. "Palestinian life is scattered, discontinuous, marked by the artificial and imposed arrangements of interrupted or confined space," he writes. "No straight line leads from home to birthplace to school to maturity, all events are accidents, all progress is a digression, all residence is exile."

My Brother, My Land is a memoir of discontinuities, interruptions and confinements. The story belongs to Sireen Sawalha, a Palestinian woman who recounts the short and troubled life of her younger brother, Iyad, a high-ranking member of the militant group Islamic Jihad. Sawalha's family

narratives are relayed to us by the anthropologist Sami Hermez, who weaves them into their historical context.

In early chapters, Sawalha, born in 1966, tells the story of her hard-scrabble childhood in the village of Kufr Ra'i, northwest of Nablus. In 1967, Sawalha's mother, Mayda, was travelling with three young daughters in Jordan when war broke out between Israel and its Arab neighbours. While thousands of Palestinians fled what is now the West Bank, Mayda returned to Kufr Ra'i, where she secured the family home and its small fruit orchard. In Sawalha's accounts of the olive and plum harvests, the picking of za'atar and the never-ending cycle of chores, she evokes a largely vanished world of rural Palestine before its encirclement by the infrastructure of occupation.

These are the book's most vivid pages. But it is the story of Iyad, the sixth of Mayda's 13 children, which takes up most of the book. Born in 1974, Iyad had no experience of life before occupation. As a teenager, he witnessed the deaths of two schoolmates, killed by Israeli soldiers for throwing rocks during the first intifada. Soon after, he joined the paramilitary

group Fahd al-Aswad (the Black Panthers) to take arms against the Israeli military.

In 1991, he was involved in the execution of four young men, supposed traitors. Hermez isn't conclusive about the extent of Iyad's participation, but notes that he came to regret his role. Iyad was captured, interrogated and sentenced to 215 years in prison.

Seven years after his arrest, he was released as part of the diplomatic measures taken in the wake of the Oslo Accords. In prison, Iyad encountered the teachings of Islamic Jihad. He planned a number of suicide bombing operations in Israel, one of which killed 13 soldiers and several civilians on a public bus. In 2002, Iyad was killed in Jenin by Israeli soldiers, who broke into his hide-out.

At its best, *My Brother, My Land* captures the tragic stuntedness of Iyad's

life and the sordidness of the occupation. But Hermez often struggles to inhabit his subject. His fascination with Iyad occasionally lapses into uncritical admiration. Hermez describes a desire to "follow the path of Che Guevara," to connect his writerly work to the liberation of Palestine. "Romantic thoughts," he admits. "But then there is no resistance without romance."



MY BROTHER, MY LAND: A Story From Palestine
Author: Sami Hermez with Sireen Sawalha
Publisher: Redwood Press
Pages: 296
Price: \$26.99

There are times one wishes for less romance. The backbone of Hermez's book is the Sawalha women. It is Mayda who returns to Kufr Ra'i and protects the family home (when Israeli forces demolish it, Iyad tells his sister, "God will build you a palace in heaven"). It is the

women who raise the children, take care of the elderly and organise trips to prison. Perhaps there is nothing particularly romantic about such activities, but there would be no resistance without them.

Nasser Abu Srour's memoir, *The Tale of a Wall*, echoes the story of Iyad in a disquieting fashion. Born in 1969 in a refugee camp near Bethlehem, he was sentenced to life in prison in 1993 after confessing — apparently under torture — to involvement in the killing of an Israeli intelligence officer.

Abu Srour's book is a disquisition on the toll of prolonged confinement as well as his methods of surviving it. "Don't set your roots too deep in any world you inhabit," he advises. "In prison," he writes, "you are your liberation."

Another liberation comes through reading. Abu Srour earned a master's degree in political science while in prison and he scatters references to Kierkegaard, Kant and Derrida throughout the book. His ironic style owes something to the bitter comedies of

the Israeli-Palestinian politician and writer Emile Habibi. His flights of lyricism, capably rendered into English by Luke Leafgren, turn each scene of prison life into a kind of prose poem — "rooms and courtyards so narrow that the sun grew tired of being confined within them and moved quickly on" — that recalls the memoirs of the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish.

At times, the fancy prose style seems like an evasion. Abu Srour offers few details about his arrest, interrogation or court case. It is only the book's back cover that mentions the killing of the Israeli agent. This conspicuous silence is debilitating to the memoir, since the reader can never quite trust Abu Srour's version of events or account of his motives.

Reading both memoirs, I thought of Darwish's short poem "No Walls to the Cell," whose title describes so many sites of Palestinian life, from exile to the refugee camps to Gaza. It is sobering — and frightening — to imagine what stories will emerge from the current invasion, which has turned the prisons of Palestinian existence into slaughterhouses.

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OPINION

The
Hindustan Times
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{ OUR TAKE }

Onion exports:
The poll factor

Farm policy adhocism hurts farmers. Farmers need to voice their concerns in political terms

The Union government has removed the six-month-long ban on onion exports, albeit with the qualification of a minimum export price. That the decision has come just before polling in the onion producing regions of Maharashtra is reason enough to read it with an added layer of political rather than just economic intent.

The pattern in the ban and its removal is not limited to onions. Food items account for 39% of India’s consumer inflation basket and have been the biggest factor for inflation not meeting the RBI’s target of 4% in the recent past. Given most of India’s food inflation problem is related to climate-inflicted supply shocks rather than demand-driven rallies, the government has been intervening in food markets to manage inflation pressures. These interventions have often taken the form of banning exports, thereby diverting export-driven production for domestic markets.

Is this a prudent strategy to follow in food markets? Free market dogmatists often criticise it on the ideological ground of the government undermining free trade. But no pragmatic government will allow measures that can trigger an inflation problem in the domestic economy. The majority of Indians are net buyers rather than sellers of food. However, farmers, as a class, draw the short end of the straw in both extremes in the market. When prices crash, the government does not come to their rescue. But when they rise, government interventions do not allow them to make any supernormal profits. The worsening climate crisis will make these extreme events the norm rather than the exception for farmers. Clearly, it’s not a fair world for the farmers.

What can be done to remove this in-built policy bias? Unless farmers as a class, across crops and regions, accept reforms and also demand a fair deal from the government, things won’t change. Farmers’ organisations and the Opposition should introspect why this has not happened. Have they been open to change? Are they making the right demands of governments? And are political parties and governments willing to tolerate some food inflation in the interest of the farmers? These are uncomfortable but pertinent questions that need to be asked — not those about utopian free trade or guaranteed minimum support prices.

Vemula report misses
trees for the forest

The Congress government in Telangana has said the 2016 Rohith Vemula suicide case would be reinvestigated following the controversy over the closure report filed by the state police. This is not surprising since this was no simple suicide case but a politically-charged and layered matter that foregrounded a host of issues including caste discrimination, institutional insensitivity and bias inside the campus. Among the accused were senior leaders of the BJP, including the Secunderabad MP Bandaru Dattatreya and then minister for education Smriti Irani. The Congress, which has promised a Rohith Vemula law to fight caste discrimination, surely could not be seen as endorsing a report that absolves all the accused, and, worse, accuses the dead student and his family of claiming Dalit status by fraudulent means.

The probe report is remarkable for its insensitive approach to the caste question in the Rohith Vemula case. It has collated evidence to claim that Vemula, a PhD scholar at the Central University of Hyderabad, was not a Dalit since his father belonged to an OBC community. It ignores the social context in which Vemula grew up: His mother, Radhika, was a Dalit who grew up in a non-Dalit household and, following the failure of her marriage, as a single mother, brought up her children in a Dalit environment. When the law is mindful of the social context in which caste identities are formed, it is appalling that there should be a debate about Vemula’s caste. The probe suggests that the challenge to his caste identity was a trigger for suicide.

The report shows remarkable ignorance about how caste operates in institutional settings. It glosses over the enormous pressure Vemula faced from the university authorities and, instead, suggests he was “disappointed and unhappy over his childhood”, “unhappy with the organisations with which he worked” and “seemed to be under severe depression and disappointment”. Such facile and devious conclusions undermine the probe’s claim of fairness and diligence.

Mending the forests,
putting out the fires

The Himalayan forest fires are preventable. A joint action front of the State and local communities, with short- and long-term solutions is what is needed

The general elections are on in the country: Uttarakhand voted on April 19. However, the summer fires threatening the mountain state did not make it to the campaign. Neither has the political class cared to notice that there has been a drought in the state for the last many months. The bureaucracy in Dehradun and the district headquarters are equally blind to the situation. Preparations to fight forest fires need to begin in November-December and the forces must be alert until the monsoon arrives in the hills in late June. The forests have been dry since late September last year, and fires reported as early as December. They became a challenge in mid-April. That’s when the forest department and the civil administration became alert and active. The National and State Disaster Response Forces, the Indo-Tibetan Border Police, and the Army were told to take charge. Helicopters were dispatched and more firemen were deployed. At least two people have died in the fires. Even though the forest department has released regular statements on the fires, the full picture hasn’t yet emerged.

The media is talking about fires in Nainital, without keeping in mind that Nainital is a hill station and a district, too. Even as it was said that the blaze would be brought under control in two days, the flames had already consumed acres of forests. At some places, including parts of Nainital cantonment, Air Force Area, High Court Colony, the fire had entered the oak (broadleaf) forests too. What is the extent of loss of flora and fauna so far? This question has faded into the background. The ecological costs can never be calculated: Only the loss of timber is considered. Now the concern is how the remaining forests can be saved till the rains arrive.

Forests cover as much as 64.7% (or 3.47 million hectares) of Uttarakhand’s 53,483 square km area. Of this, 42% is under dense forests. Protected areas form nearly 15% of the state’s land and 23% of the total forest cover. According to forest scholar, the late JS Mehta, 31% of Uttarakhand’s total forest area (10,621 sq km) is covered by pine, and 9.5% by oak or broadleaf tree species (3,178 sq km). Mixed forests cover 7,354 sq km and commercial plantations or lesser productive forests cover 5,000 sq km. The ban on green felling above 1,000 metres has benefited pine trees the most, as it is hardy, fast-growing and avoided by animals. On the other hand, pine needles decompose very slowly and feed forest fires. The absence of timely pruning or rotational cutting has meant that pine has started entering the sal forests at the foothills and the broad-

leaf forests at even higher altitudes. There is only one way forward: Taking preventive measures on time. Our forests catch fire at the ground level, not at the canopy level as in California or at the bush level like in Australia. Hence, fire prevention work needs to begin early. In November itself, disaster management teams should start working in every district. Various departments should contribute to the efforts: People’s representatives, women’s groups, students, teachers, National Service Scheme volunteers, and the National Cadet Corps, all should take part.

Fire control lines (at least 10 metres wide) inside the forests and along the roads must be made and kept clean to eliminate the possibility of fires. Satellite information and mapping should be used. Only an aware society and a responsible administration can put such data to use.

Pine needles need to be removed. These can be used to generate electricity and fuel (Avani, a voluntary organisation, and some others have successfully started doing this). The broadleaf forests should be expanded and water conservation pits (or *chaal-khaad*) must be created. Pine is not without its uses: Pine-wood is good for making homes, cooking fuel, and for use in funeral pyres. It is also a key raw material for many industries. The mantra should be: Use pine, but don’t allow it to encroach on oak territory. Let it stay in its native area. It will grow again after the fire. But the renewal of broadleaf forests is tougher.

The climate crisis is a reality that



Shekhar Pathak



Villagers are being blamed for the fires, but a villager doing this would be an exception. Rather, villagers have been putting out fires for centuries

must be dealt with. The Himalaya experiences diverse weather conditions, as evident from the landslides in Arunachal Pradesh, the fires in Nepal, Uttarakhand, and Himachal Pradesh, and snow in some parts of Kashmir and the higher reaches, all at the same time. Disaster plans well before the onset of floods, fires, and drought are needed. We have failed on this count.

Over the last century, there have been innumerable forest fires. In the pre-Independence era, at the time of the Jungle Satyagraha, villagers set fire to the pine forests but put out fires in the oak forests. There have been fires in 1995, 2005, 2009, 2012, 2014, 2019 and 2023. Floods in 2013 and rains last year helped to control fires. Some people see a cycle of two to six years in the onset of forest fires. But, over the last two decades, it has become an annual tragedy. Between 2005 and 2015, more than 5,000 hectares have been lost in Kumaon alone.

Villagers are being blamed for the fires, but a villager setting fire to the forest would be an exception. Rather, villagers have been putting out forest fires for centuries. Their existence is intimately connected to the forests. Displacement, out-migration, and the inability to obtain their forest rights might have depressed them. But, people continue to sacrifice their lives to save forests. In May 2009, in Gangwada village of Pauri district, the fire spread from the

government forest to the panchayat forest. Children, women, and men, all tried to put out the fires. Eight lives were lost while politicians and administrators got busy with by-elections.

Experts say that forest and land mafia, departments, and organisations involved in false plantations have a greater interest in setting fire to forests. It covers their crimes, just like landslides cover the crimes of the public works department and floods those of the dam-builders. The major triggers for forest fires are drought, the spread of pine, the policy of distancing villagers from the forests, and the lack of timely fire control mechanisms. The shrinking of the forest bureaucracy to the confines of Dehradun is unfortunate, too.

Symbolically, the wells of the politicians, administrators, and forest department do not have the waters of wisdom, commitment, strategy and love for the forests. The day the wells of society run dry, the forests will be destroyed. MI-17 choppers are not the solution. Timely preparation and forming a joint front of the government, community and civil society, which includes independent science, is the only way forward.

Shekhar Pathak, author of *Chipko Movement: A People’s History*, taught at Kumaon University and is now associated with Pahar Foundation. The views expressed are personal

{ STRAIGHTFORWARD }

Shashi Shekhar



Gandhis and the battle
for Rae Bareli, Amethi

I had said earlier that *shehzada* will lose Wayanad and start looking for a second seat. His supporters were saying he would come to Amethi. But *shehzada* was so scared of Amethi that he fled to Rae Bareli. These people tell everyone ‘*daro mat*’. I tell them, *arre daro mat, bhaago mat* (don’t be scared, don’t flee)”, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said at an election rally, tongue in cheek, and added, “I had also said that their top leader will run away; she ran away, she left Uttar Pradesh and contested the elections from Rajasthan.”

The Congress party itself gave Modi the opportunity to make fun of Sonia and Rahul. Since late Thursday, there have been hints that Rahul could be contesting in Rae Bareli and Kishori Lal Sharma, also known as KL Sharma, in Amethi. Sharma is the secretary of the All India Congress Committee and has spent the last 30 years “working” in the Rae Bareli and Amethi constituencies on behalf of the family.

For those who are unaware of his background, he is originally from Punjab, but as a permanent representative of the family, he maintains strong links with the workers of both parliamentary constituencies. According to the Congress, Sharma is the most suitable candidate for Amethi and will defeat Smriti Irani.

Is this possible? Nothing is impossible in a democracy. If Raj Narain could defeat Indira Gandhi in 1977 and Irani could clean bowl Rahul in 2019, it is best not to say anything till the results are announced. However, there is a significant contrast in the “face value” of Irani and Sharma — Sharma works in the background, whereas the latter is aggressive

in her politics. This fight does not appear to be even at the moment.

But why did the Gandhis abandon Amethi?

Perhaps Congress leaders thought that if Priyanka and Rahul fought elections from neighbouring constituencies, allegations of nepotism would only grow against them. If they win, the siblings will feel at ease in the House, but the Opposition and critics would have the opportunity to draw comparisons. The Gandhi family is alert to this. Their roles are clearly delineated. This is why symptoms of family disharmony appeared only once—when Maneka Gandhi left 1, Safdarjung Road following the death of Sanjay Gandhi. Since then, Maneka and son Varun have taken distinct political routes from Rahul and the family.

Congress leaders are aware that leaving Amethi may send the wrong message, which is why they claim that the Gandhi family’s relationship with Rae Bareli is decades older than what it was with Amethi. Feroze Gandhi won from Rae Bareli in 1952, then Indira, followed by Sonia, and after she assumed a less active role in day-to-day politics, Rahul stepped in to carry on the legacy. Prominent Congress leaders and his entire family gathered to support Rahul’s nomination. Workers from the Samajwadi Party joined him in a show of solidarity.

There’s also the question of how much the Congress will benefit if Rahul wins. The party is contesting on 17 seats in Uttar Pradesh (UP), but do you remember the names of even five of its candidates? The Congress is already in a dire situation in the state. Priyanka was the party’s general secretary in charge of the state during the last assembly elections. The Congress fought a total of 398 seats, but how many did it win? Only two.

Rahul may encounter another problem in the coming days. He promised in Wayanad that people there were his family and that he would not ditch them. But today in Rae Bareli, he is battling for legacy. If he wins both the seats, which one will he abandon? If he leaves Kerala, he will be disregarding those who helped him win in adversity. The same would happen if he leaves Rae Bareli.

Another fact worth noting here is that in Kannauj, Akhilesh Yadav fielded his nephew Tej Pratap Yadav. I’m not sure why, but his thinking changed within two days, and he entered the electoral fray. Did he realise that the Gandhis were about to bid goodbye to Amethi this time? Even if both Rahul and Akhilesh are declared winners, Akhilesh Yadav will continue to be UP’s most visible representative in the Lok Sabha. This will boost his political profile. We must remember that Mayawati had once made excellent use of her Lok Sabha membership.

A cautionary note: In the realm of politics, the voter’s choice reigns supreme. If the Congress secures power through its alliance, all these conjectures will cease. History often overlooks the flaws of the victors. Do you anticipate a similar outcome this time?

Shashi Shekhar is editor-in-chief, *Hindustan Times*. The views expressed are personal

{ TEDROS A GHEBREYESUS } DIRECTOR GENERAL, WHO



I appreciate that it has been a difficult and sometimes painful process ... I have a simple request: Please get this done

To member-nations, in the context of the upcoming negotiations over a global accord on handling pandemics



The promise, and the
fallibility, of forensics

On March 20, Anokhilal walked out of an Indore jail as a free man, having spent almost 11 years on death row. He was convicted and sentenced to death twice for the same offence — the rape and murder of a nine-year-old girl — before being exonerated by the Khandwa Sessions Court (Madhya Pradesh) in the third trial. After the completion of the first trial within 13 days, his case was remanded for retrial twice, by the Supreme Court in 2019 and thereafter, by the Madhya Pradesh High Court in 2023. The very deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA, or a person’s genetic signature) evidence used to find him guilty twice ultimately turned out to be his saviour. Anokhilal’s tragic journey speaks to the urgent need to subject forensic evidence to more critical scrutiny in individual cases.

Forensics comprises different disciplines, but not all of them meet the requisite thresholds of accuracy and precision to qualify as a “science”. Empirical studies show that the long-standing pattern of matching forensic evidence like fingerprints, ballistics, and bite mark evidence are incapable of unique identification, and are highly prone to error and bias. In contrast, forensic applications of scientific disciplines like DNA profiling, toxicology, chemical analysis, and digital forensics which are backed by rigorous research, do not present similar concerns with their foundational validity.

DNA profiling offers unparalleled individualisation and incorporates checks for greater objectivity and verification of results. However, it has inherent limitations and is susceptible to error. It can’t determine how and when the DNA was deposited. DNA is highly susceptible to contamination and may be deposited on an item either through direct or indirect transfer. DNA mixtures (samples with DNA from more than one individual), common in criminal cases, are more difficult to analyse than single-source DNA profiles. Various factors affect the complexity of DNA mixtures, and the more complex a mixture, the greater the uncertainty surrounding its interpretation. Errors can occur at all stages of DNA profiling, and rigorous compliance with protocols is essential.

Anokhilal’s case underscores the problems with blind acceptance of DNA evidence. It was not until the third trial that the DNA expert was examined as a witness after obtaining the underlying laboratory documentation. It took repeated attempts to ensure proper appreciation of a key piece of evidence — a basic tenet in

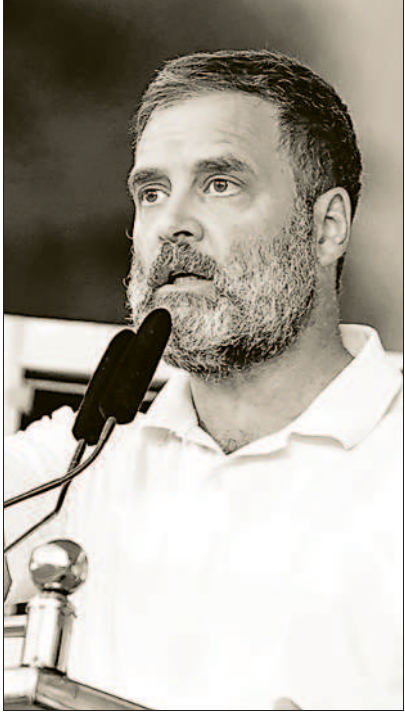
any criminal trial. While the science behind DNA profiling is foundationally valid, it does not mean that its practice in every case, by every “expert”, in every lab will be correct.

In this case, the DNA report concluded that the unknown hair strands found in the deceased’s fist, the DNA on her fingernails, and the DNA from one of the unknown stains on her pyjama, belonged to Anokhilal. The report also concluded that the deceased’s DNA was present in the DNA mixture on Anokhilal’s underwear. Based on these findings along with the circumstantial evidence that the deceased was last seen alive in Anokhilal’s company before her body was found 36 hours later, the court concluded he was guilty.

After a detailed cross-examination of the DNA expert in the third trial, it emerged that, firstly, the male DNA found in the vaginal and anal samples excluded Anokhilal as the source of the DNA. Secondly, there were discrepancies between the composition of the DNA detected in the samples and what was stated in the DNA report. Thirdly, the court recognised the possibility of tampering due to serious gaps in the collection and storage of samples in police custody and while they were at the lab. The chain of custody concerns with the unknown hair strands seized from the fist of the deceased were most significant. The prosecution claimed that these hair strands belonged to Anokhilal but the sample was never sealed or deposited in the police *mal-khana* (evidence room) and the quantity and description of the hair strands received for DNA examination were different from the one that was seized initially.

This case presents an important lesson for our criminal justice system — forensic science is a realm where the line between truth and error can be perilously thin. If the gold standard of forensic science, DNA profiling, is prone to faulty application, then other disciplines which lack foundational validity, warrant far greater scrutiny. Anokhilal’s ordeal must serve as an impetus for more accountability and rigorous monitoring of our forensic practice — to be borne by lab regulators, forensic practitioners, and legal actors alike.

Shreya Rastogi is director, Death Penalty Litigation and Forensics at Project 39A, NLU Delhi. She argued Anokhilal’s case before the Khandwa Sessions Court during the third trial. The views expressed are personal



Congress leaders are aware that leaving Amethi may send the wrong message



The Constitution unites all of us as free citizens

Both BJP and Congress accuse each other of trying to bend India's rulebook. Is this a moment of triumph for 'We the People'? After all, its basics don't just unite us, they assure us stability

The Indian Constitution—or the *Samvidhan* in Hindi—has rarely if ever been a campaign spearhead for national elections. This time, though, poll speeches have brought it up with a frequency that may suggest a deep divide over it. The irony: Both archrivals in the country's electoral fray, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Congress, have accused each other of planning to twist it for partisan ends. The issue at stake is affirmative action. The BJP has picked up the Congress slogan of proportional quotas (for jobs and education) to allege its rival will re-allot existing provisions to religious minorities in violation of the statute's caste criterion. In contrast, the Congress-led opposition has used perceptions of BJP comfort with an ancient caste hierarchy to fan lower-caste fears of reservations being dropped at upper-caste behest. Half-truths being weaponized for attacks on straw-men are politics as usual. What's true is that this year's electoral result will probably pivot on the votes of Other Backward Classes (OBCs), as it did in 2014 and 2019. Quota-endowed OBCs constitute the bulk of India, evidently. Moreover, the BJP's vote-share gains can be attributed largely to OBC favour and the opposition's hopes rest broadly on reversing that trend. This is identity politics as usual. The silver lining, however, is this: With poll-rally rhetoric on both sides broadly in support of the Constitution, 2024 marks a signal moment of stability in how 'We the People' have chosen to govern ourselves. Or is it too early to tell? As the Left has pointed out, the BJP's core ideology is framed by its mentor, an organization whose post-1947 record includes a critique of the Constitution for its neglect of ancient Hindu texts such as the

Manu Smriti. The ruling party's 'Modi make-over,' though, has included an agenda of caste inclusion that not only aligns with electoral incentives, but also conveys political evolution away on this matter. Notably, Prime Minister Narendra Modi spoke of the Constitution as a "holy book" when he came to power nearly 10 years ago. That said, it is equally true that the document makes no claim to perfection, has been much amended, and—like all drafts—can and should be subject to debate and the force of reason. As Amartya Sen has shown, rationality and freedom are two sides of the same coin, and the rulebook we adopted captures the spirit of freedom won in peace. It's a sign of fraught politics that even a personal view articulated by the PM's economic advisory council chief arguing that a case exists to "embrace a new Constitution," as Bibek Debroy did in *Mint*, was mistaken by some BJP critics as an omen of sorts. As a confident country with windows open to all, we must never make such topics taboo. Wisdom demands clarity on what cannot change and what can—or should. The Judiciary has outlined a 'basic structure' of the Constitution that keeps us bonded as citizens. Wisely, it includes the Rights to Equality under Article 14 and to Life and Liberty under Article 21. As the glue of our bond, these must always be upheld. On this, a consensus is clearly rational among free people. Encoded as a basic aspect of justice, it satisfies this test: If we were, somehow, all to be reborn as someone else at random (like a wheel of fortune), what rules would we adopt? The rulebook's other basics also serve the aim of Indian unity. These need salience as public ideals endorsed fully by all parties before we take up what to amend. The universal promises of our Republic assure us stability.

MY VIEW | MODERN TIMES

How do noble proposals like an inheritance tax arise?

MANU JOSEPH



is a journalist, novelist, and the creator of the Netflix series, 'Decoupled'

Sam Pitroda was one of the most famous men in India in the 1980s. As the seer of Indian telecom, he was responsible for millions of long-distance calls by Indians getting through. He was perhaps too suave to win an election, yet he was among the most powerful men in India because Rajiv Gandhi took his advice very seriously. A few days ago, Pitroda said that India should adopt an inheritance tax and that the wealth of the rich should be redistributed. It was a very 1980s moment from a star of the 1980s. The BJP portrayed his statement as part of the Congress manifesto, which is not true. What Pitroda said should have been one of the most unimportant statements about the future of India, but because of who he once was and because general elections are going on, it received disproportionate interest. Even so, India's poor should have loved what he said. After all, what he said was that when the rich die, some of their money should be taken away from their kin and given to the poor. Yet, the BJP amplified his

message as though this was a nation filled with billionaires; the Congress said he was speaking on his own and distanced itself from his views. Many young men and women who appeared to be from modest backgrounds went to a Congress office to protest against the idea of the inheritance tax and "wealth redistribution."

What is useful about the controversy is the rare peek it offers us into how humane ideas arise. There is something about the way Pitroda said it, and the fact that he even said it, that tells us how such ideas may have come about in other countries. (India, too, had an estate tax, but it was abolished by the Rajiv Gandhi government in 1985.)

How does society bring in reforms when powerful people stand to lose from change? You can say that change happens because good people bring about good things. You can say that Pitroda wants an inheritance tax because he is better than most of us and wants to change the destinies of the poor. This could be true, but what if something else is going on?

If reform is not brought about by the uncontrollable good of good people, then what causes it? Why do good things happen? The reformation of a society can be explained without giving too much credit to

reformers and the naïveté of imagining that some human beings are more noble than others, and that the good guys somehow win some battles. Society changes for the better when the second rung of social power takes on the most powerful. This is usually done in the name of the poor, for a moral cause.

The other reason society changes is that children do not want to be their parents. Sometimes this includes children of rich parents with exaggerated contempt for some qualities of their parents that leads them to do what their parents would never do, especially virtuous things. But mostly, change occurs because of the first reason: Because the second rung, the aristocracy, gets tired of the royalty of their time. What could hurt royalty more than society taking away half of what these royals planned to bequeath to their genetic offspring?

Pitroda was probably never a billionaire, but he was part of the elite of a time when class and sophistication alone could take you

high up social peaks. In a changing world, a very different sort of people now occupy those peaks. Even India's new capitalists look different from his time.

What would you do if you were him and wanted to take on the new elite? You would start by doing something that would upset them. Maybe you would suggest that their children should not get to inherit their fortunes freely. They should pay a price for their luck.

Often, policy activism is a war of millionaires against billionaires. This was the origin of that celebrated document, the Magna Carta, from where modern democracy probably emerged. To fix the king, the barons of England had to say modern things. That the king would not punish a person until guilt is proven, or that the state will not usurp the land of its people, and that in peacetime England would protect merchants as they plied their trade. Even the French Revolution was not as simple as the poor revolting against the elite—it was a

risky uprising of aristocrats against their bosses in the name of social reform. India's freedom movement itself was, among other things, a kind of class struggle between the top two classes of the time, the British and the local elite.

There is a sort of inequality that looks bad in statistics. For instance, when you look at the top 1% and how much of a nation's wealth they own. But there is another sort of inequality that never shows up in our statistics, which is far less natural but more poisonous. It does not feature billionaires. It is the imbalance that favours the upper middle class on every turf where they compete with those who are poorer than them.

Billionaires and their children are not in competition with the rest of society. Except for the roads perhaps, there is no resource, no aspect of life that they are forced to share with other classes. But if you consider millionaires or the country's vast upper middle-class, they do compete with the rest of society in entrance exams, business startups, cinema, literature and the arts. And they have an unfair head-start created not only by ancestral wealth, but more effectively by social contacts. Seen this way, billionaires have a far smaller role in inequality than the upper middle-class.



NITIN PAI is co-founder and director of The Takshashila Institution, an independent centre for research and education in public policy.

I spent the mid-2000s arguing why Indian foreign policy must make a decisive shift towards the United States. The shadow of the Cold War had not yet dissolved and memories of US support for Pakistan's proxy war were still alive in the minds of the country's strategic establishment. The Vajpayee government had initiated a shift in thinking after the 1998 nuclear tests and prime minister Manmohan Singh was pushing for a major breakthrough in the form of a nuclear deal. Many in New Delhi—from cabinet ministers to young officers—had misgivings about the relationship and argued that partnering with a superpower would undermine India's strategic autonomy. With the exception of the formidable K. Subrahmanyam, very few were comfortable making the realist argument that a closer alliance with the United States was in India's interest.

Towards the end of the George W. Bush presidency, it became fashionable in Washington—and helpful to Barack Obama's election campaign—to talk about the decline of American power. Fareed Zakaria wrote a book about the post-American world in 2008. This played very well in New Delhi, both because the predicted shift in the global balance of power towards Asia was good news, but also because it buttressed the old claim that the US was on its way down. Time and again, I found myself in

a minority pointing out that declinism was a favourite American pastime for decades and Americans have been lamenting the decline of their country for over 200 years.

I gave three reasons why fears of America's terminal decline were exaggerated. First, the American political system is designed to recover from serious mistakes that its leaders (like all others) tend to make. Second, its higher education ecosystem is outstanding. And third, it has long been the magnet for the world's most talented and enterprising people. As long as the US held on to these advantages, I argued, it will remain the world's dominant power.

In the past 15 years, it is shocking how the US has inflicted serious damage on all three pillars of its strength. No, I still do not think you should short the US, but the harm it has inflicted on itself is perhaps unprecedented. Unless its self-correcting mechanism kicks in soon enough, a decline is possible. Even after the 2008 global financial crisis, I never thought I'd write this sentence.

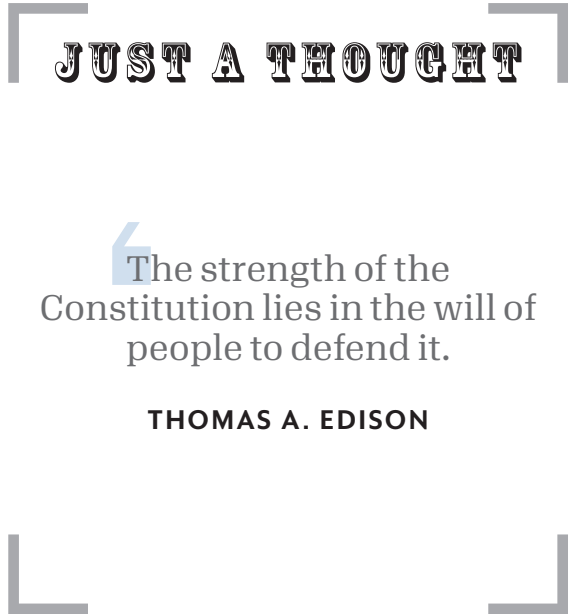
Consider the first of my three reasons: political resilience. Frequent elections, presidential term limits, policy adversarialism and institutional strength created the conditions for the American system to change policies once it was clear they had failed. All political leaders and governments err, but not all systems can acknowledge errors and change direction. Mao Zedong and his policies are still not officially seen as wrong in China, but the mistakes made by the US from Dwight Eisenhower to Joe Biden are not only discussed threadbare, but correctives are applied. Yet, in the past decade, extreme partisanship has wrecked its self-correcting mechanisms. The US Supreme Court has reduced itself from being a credible arbiter to just another player. The US Congress seems dysfunctional. The country is set for a highly controversial presidential election this year. There is, of course, a lot of

resilience in the system at all levels, but it is under greater strain today than it has been in decades.

The US university system is still the world's best, but it is caught in deep crises of its own. The ongoing campus protests expose the contradictions and dubious policies that the American university has come to embrace in the past decade. For years, a creeping climate of fear enveloped campuses as professors could be punished for falling foul of political correctness codes. Big donors and alumni groups became powerful. They abridged academic freedom, the single most important thing in education. As Timur Kuran wrote on X, "US universities should never have abandoned institutional neutrality. And they should never have allowed DEI to morph into a system that promotes identity politics. Sooner or later, these missteps would come to haunt them. That day has arrived." Students have noticed the gap between US ideals and policy. The pro-Palestinian protests could jolt the university ecosystem to rethink the path it is on, but I cannot say for sure.

America still attracts good immigrants, despite controversies over how to deal with illegal immigration. The ability to acquire high-quality human capital without spending a cent is an advantage few of its rivals possess.

The best analysis of the rise and fall of great powers is still Paul Kennedy's 1988 book, which the assemblage of experts in Washington seems to have forgotten. He showed that powers rise with economic growth and decline due to military overstretch. While the constituents of US dynamism are beginning to flash amber, it finds itself embroiled in the Russia-Ukraine and Israel-Palestine wars. Taiwan is an iceberg that lies somewhere ahead. With the Biden administration losing moral stature and undermining the rules-based world order, the US will have to rely even more on hard power in pursuit of its goals. This risks the overstretch that Kennedy warned of.



They usually emerge from a class struggle between the top two slabs of a country's pyramid



THERE MAY BE TIMES WHEN WE ARE POWERLESS TO PREVENT INJUSTICE, BUT THERE MUST NEVER BE A TIME WHEN WE FAIL TO PROTEST. — ELIE WIESEL

The IndianEXPRESS

FOUNDED BY

RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

LOOK EAST

Delhi must be proactive in dealing with turmoil in Myanmar. Fencing borders isn't an adequate defence

LAST WEEK, MYANMAR'S army claimed success in retaking Myawaddy, a critical node in the bustling trade route with its eastern neighbour, Thailand. The anti-government coalition of the ethnic armed groups and the pro-democracy fighters had created a flutter in the region by entering Myawaddy in mid-April and ousting the troops from the army base there. The real winner in the see-saw battle now appears to be the notorious Border Guard Force (BGF) in the region, formally aligned with the military government in Yangon, but with great autonomy on the ground. The BGF is reportedly playing both sides in order to expand its own regional dominance. It also presides over a massive regional criminal network that operates gambling casinos, drug trade, and illegal trafficking on the Thai border. The battle for Myawaddy captures the larger story of the breakdown of the state in Myanmar.

Since its independence, Myanmar never enjoyed sustained control over all its territory. The conflict between the majority Bamars and several ethnic minority groups has left the state's control over its frontiers shaky. But the situation has never been as grim as it is today. Since the unpopular and ineffective 2021 coup, the army has lost control over much of the troubled nation as the pro-democracy Bamar groups joined hands with the ethnic armed groups to end army rule. The country's frontiers have always drawn trans-border networks of illegal groups. That attraction has grown now. As the threat from the collapsing authority of the Myanmarese state envelops the rest of the region, the intervention of external powers has become acute. While the main regional forum ASEAN has been unable to deal with the challenges, the great powers are stepping in. In the name of stabilising its frontier with Myanmar, China has inserted itself deeper into the nation's internal affairs. The US supports the country's pro-democracy movement and has given nearly \$500 million assistance under the Burma Act of 2021. Some of this includes non-lethal military support.

Despite its profound impact on India's internal and external security, there has been little debate in Delhi on how to deal with the Myanmar crisis. The time has come for the Indian government to rethink its earlier policy bias in favour of Myanmar's army which is no longer in a position to secure India's interests. Delhi must now begin a dialogue with Myanmar's National Unity Government comprising the democratic opposition and the ethnic armed groups. While it should engage with the Army, of course, New Delhi must also open channels of communication with the local forces in control of the regions across the 1,600-km long land border with Myanmar. Playing defence by fencing the border with Myanmar is utterly inadequate in coping with the challenge on India's eastern frontier.

CAMPUS AND CAMP

US university protests could have been moment to teach and learn. Police action, maximalist slogans call for introspection

THE DETENTION OF over 2,000 students across universities in the US and the presence of armed riot police on campuses marks a leadership failure in some of the most prestigious institutions of higher education in the world. This failure is administrative, pedagogical and more broadly, philosophical. It involves shifting answers to complex questions around free expression and security, "cancelling" and nuance, outrage and engagement. Comparisons have been made between the current protests and those in 1968. They ignore one crucial difference: In the '60s, students formed a compact with broader society in which sections of the privileged stood with the discriminated to demand racial equality, alongside questioning the Vietnam War. The current protest, till now, seems to draw a line between the larger society, politics and the campus.

The images of the ongoing, horrific brutality by Israel's defence forces in Gaza in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks by Hamas on October 7 will move most people emotionally — and in many cases, even politically. The passionate response from students is thus understandable and predictable. That said, the pro-Gaza "encampments" — which began with Columbia University in New York and have since spread across the country and beyond — have also been marked by maximalist slogans and demands. America's free speech laws are almost absolute, allowing for what many would even consider hate speech. Campuses — like private workplaces — however, have their own rules regarding offence, racism, xenophobic statements and calls to violence. In situations such as the current one, university administrations have to negotiate a balance between the campus as a space for expression on the one hand and order and safety on the other. They have failed so far. The most important question that arises in the wake of the turmoil is this: Why have the most international, cosmopolitan spaces, with vast intellectual resources, floundered in creating avenues for genuine debate between competing ideas?

The inability of most institutions to effectively facilitate a conversation is being seen by many as a result of a culture of their own making. The much-discussed "cancel culture" has, at least in part, eschewed nuance for moral certainty and signalled to many that taking offence can be the basis of a political grand narrative. The "encampments" could have been a moment to teach and learn. To understand why some conflicts and victims grab more attention than others — whether in Ukraine, Palestine, Yemen or Afghanistan. And, to debate the complex nature of how multinational corporations function and how universities are funded. The US universities will, in all likelihood, emerge from this with some lessons and continue to attract students from around the world. But the moment a university has to call in the police must be one of reckoning and self-examination.

The Maharashtra challenge



GIRISH KUBER

Differences with allies, poor candidate selection have made BJP's task in the state difficult

IF NUMBERS TELL a story, Maharashtra's political landscape has thrown up an exciting one. Since the elections were announced, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has made a dozen visits to the state, and will likely make another half a dozen, if not more, till May 20 — the fifth and the last phase of polling in Maharashtra. Add to this an equal number of visits in the 12 months leading up to the election announcement. Yet, as the state's third phase polling gets underway on May 7, Maharashtra remains as enigmatic as ever for the BJP.

The gravity of the challenge in Maharashtra this time can be understood if seen in the light of the number of rallies — five — that the PM addressed in Maharashtra during the 2019 Lok Sabha elections. There seems to be such nervousness in the BJP that the PM, in a rare instance, has presented himself twice in one district. All these facts hint at one thing: The BJP leadership's belief that the state could turn out to be its Achilles' heel and that it is too important to be left for the local hotchpotch alliance to manage. This has resulted in the PM and Home Minister Amit Shah virtually taking charge of the BJP's campaign. In doing so, the PM's actions also indicate, although indirectly, how little faith the party's central leadership has in the tripartite government in Mumbai. Interestingly, there are quite a few reasons why the BJP leadership's actions cannot be called unjustified.

First and foremost is the inability of the BJP, the Eknath Shinde-led Shiv Sena and Ajit Pawar-led NCP combine in presenting itself as a cohesive political force. The three-party alliance stumbled at every step and could barely finalise seat sharing within the stipulated time. In some cases, candidates were announced as the nomination deadline was coming to an end. Although the BJP tried to put up a brave front even after this, the deep divisions in the alliance were exposed. Not that the Opposition alliance of Congress, the Sharad Pawar-led NCP and Uddhav

Beyond all the noise about '400 paar' and giving Modi a third term lies another battle that will be fought soon after the Lok Sabha elections are over: The Maharashtra assembly elections, slated for October. The BJP has to mop up as many seats as possible in the general elections, failing which it could lose its bargaining power in the state polls.

Thackeray's Shiv Sena was any better. But compared to the BJP's ambitions of "400 paar", there is little at stake on the other side.

Another reason is the selection of candidates. The BJP, when it was in the opposition in Maharashtra, made a hue and cry about "corrupt" leaders from Thackeray's Shiv Sena and Pawar's NCP. Over half a dozen of these leaders were under investigation by the central agencies, with some also being raided. Soon these leaders found salvation in the BJP — almost all of them are in the fray either from the BJP or from its alliance partners, giving credence to the "washing machine" allegation. The state BJP leadership is facing tough questions from its own cadres, who find it difficult to seek votes on behalf of candidates whose rightful place, according to them a few months ago, was in jail. The BJP needs national leaders to iron out differences at the local level, thus adding another layer of pressure on the Modi-Shah duo.

The third reason is the underwhelming performance of the younger Pawar in taking on Pawar Senior. The BJP, it seems, miscalculated on two counts: Ajit Pawar's strength and Sharad Pawar's tenacity. Ajit, by now, has been reduced to a "one-constituency leader" — Baramati — from where his wife Sunetra is contesting, while Pawar Sr has been on the move across the state, firing up the cadres and the Opposition. The fear of losing Baramati has pinned Ajit so badly that he even missed PM Modi's rallies in constituencies where his supporters are in the fray. Ajit's desperation to wrest Baramati from his uncle has also had a fair share in adding to Modi-Shah's pressure in the state.

Another point that cannot be missed is the BJP's apparent aversion to taking on its partner-turned-challenger, Thackeray's Sena. In politics, it is easier to fight a traditional rival than a friend-turned-foe because at some point, while in power, both were familiar with each others' underbelly. This explains the BJP's seeming reluctance to challenge Uddhav's men in the ring. Even though it is contesting as

many as 28 seats, the BJP has limited direct fight with Thackeray's Shiv Sena to four constituencies. There's also a possibility that the BJP may be finding it a bit difficult to hit Uddhav's candidates with the Hindutva hammer as they too have painted themselves in saffron. So it's comparatively much easier for the BJP to slam the "original" secular sinners, Congress and NCP. But here too, the BJP's hobnobbing with Ajit Pawar as well as the infamous early morning swearing-in of November 2019 comes in its way and limits how far the state leadership can go. And again the solution is the same: Bring in Modi-Shah.

Beyond all the noise about "400 paar" and giving Modi a third term lies another battle that will be fought soon after the Lok Sabha elections are over: The Maharashtra assembly elections, slated for October. The BJP has to mop up as many seats as possible in the general elections, failing which it could lose its bargaining power in the state polls. The BJP's peak in the 288-member house was 122 seats, which was around 23 short of a simple majority. As things stand, the party is far from reaching its potential, thanks to its addiction to the game of defections. In the ongoing Parliamentary elections if, as projected, the Opposition combine manages to restrict the BJP and its alliance partners to 30 or so against its current tally of 42 in Maharashtra, well over 100 assembly seats would open up, thus making the game evenly poised. For the BJP, with Shinde and Ajit Pawar in tow, this would not be a comfortable position from which to contest the assembly elections.

This makes the ongoing election more challenging for the BJP than the Opposition which has hardly anything to lose. After all, in any battle it is always tougher for the one who enters the fight with a crown on his head than the one who is trying to snatch it. And in the case of Maharashtra, the BJP is wearing two, which is what forces Modi to return to the state again and again.

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OUR FLOWERY FANTASY

Feel-good appeal of 'Laapataa Ladies' lies in urban imagination of Indian villages



SUMANA ROY

NATURALLY TRAINED to be a sniffer dog, of the kind that likes to spot codes, the semiotician in me was slightly thrilled to discover that something was happening beneath the obvious plot in *Laapataa Ladies*. Right after the two newly-wed brides are lost on the train, the mistake discovered only when a bride lifts her veil to reveal her face, and her husband, in a state of shock, says that this is not his Phool, I begin to notice the pattern. Deepak's bride's name is "Phool", flower. The bride who's mistakenly been brought to this village says that her name is "Pushpa" — that means flower as well. Her husband's name, she says, is "Pankaj", meaning lotus.

Phool, young, innocent of the ways of the world, is unable to remember the name of her husband's village. It's named after a flower, she says. Her new companions at the railway station supply her with names of flowers from time to time. "Gulab, Champa, Chameli, Matiya, Kaner, Dhatua?" asks Chhotu helpfully. No, Phool shakes her head; neither "Parijat" nor "Nalini"; not "Mogra" either. "You've turned us all into bees," Manju Mai, the woman who sells tea and bread *pakoras*, tells Phool playfully. We eventually discover that the name of the village is Suryamukhi. It seems appropriate, even if it comes only as an afterthought, that Deepak's village should be named sunflower — Deepak, meaning lamp, a source of light. To remain alive, Phool — flower — would need this source of light, even if it's not the sun. The bus that gets Deepak and Jaya to Suryamukhi village is called 'Pushpa Travels'; Jaya praises the lotus stem dish made by Deepak's mother. These cues and clues about

plant life are smuggled into the film even though they might not be directly related to the film's "meaning" or experience.

I found myself thinking frequently of a Mahasweta Devi story as I watched the film. It's called "Seed". Unlike *Laapataa Ladies*, which is set in the fictional state of Nirmal Pradesh — "nirmal" means pure and clean — Mahasweta Devi's story is set in a violent time and space, in Kuruda village, around the time of the Emergency, where landlords could kill farm workers without worrying about punishment. Mahasweta Devi's village is harsh and brutal, casteist and hostile. The little "politics" we are given in *Laapataa Ladies* is how names of villages change with changes in governments: Indirapur to Atalnagar to Mayaganj; how similar the village is to a woman, whose name is changed after her marriage.

It is possible that it was Jaya's passion for "organic farming" that set off the comparison with Mahasweta Devi's story in my mind. "Organic farming" is an imagined vocation for Jaya — it's also a feel-good phrase and upper-class aspiration for the urban audience of Kiran Rao's film, one that allows us to feel correct, equitable, and nurturing of the planet and ourselves. In Mahasweta Devi's story, Dulan Ganju's land, not allowed to be farmed for years because the landlord Lachman Singh has buried corpses of the men that he's killed there, begins to show signs of fertility: The dead "Karan and Bulaki are now those putush bushes and aloe plants". Even Dulan's son Dhatua, who protests against the landlord, is buried there.

After managing to kill the landlord, Dulan

plants paddy on the land: "I won't let you be just aloe and putush. I'll turn you into paddy, Dhatua ... When the seedlings appear... Lachman, Makhan or Ramlagan's fertiliser-fed seedlings are nothing in comparison... Tall, strong, healthy plants." It was of this manner of "organic farming" I found myself thinking of as I watched *Laapataa Ladies*, where the only killings that are mentioned are a wife who has died by suicide and insects that are killing the crops.

The flower-like sweetness of the film (Phool adds rose petals to her *kalakand* in a barely functional kitchen; the police inspector's name is Manohar, meaning "lovable"), with its handbook feminism that has made it endearing to all of us, is made possible not because it's a "comedy", but because it's a fantasy, an Aamir Khan Productions version of the utopian Indian village imagined by those who have never lived in a village. ("When I would see these villages from a train, I'd wonder about what happens there," Rao said in an interview for Netflix), where patriarchy can be defeated with as much cinematic ease as winning a game of cricket helps a village get rid of land tax in *Lagaan*.

I do not remember a single mention of any flower in Mahasweta Devi's story. Dulan's son will never be found — he is under the soil, his rotting flesh and bones now manure for the paddy plants. "Dhatua, I've turned you all into seed," says Dulan, the farmer-father. Organic farming indeed.

Roy, a poet and writer, is associate professor of creative writing, Ashoka University. Views are personal



MAY 6, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

CONG GOVT IN MIZORAM

A FOUR-MEMBER Congress (I) ministry, led by Lal Thanhawla, was installed in Mizoram. This is the first ministry the Congress (I) has formed on its own in the Union Territory. The Lt Governor, H S Dubey, administered the oath of office to Lal Thanhawla and his three colleagues.

JAPAN'S AID TO INDIA

THE PRIME MINISTER of Japan, Yasuhiro Nakasone, said in New Delhi that his country would offer India a larger yen credit than last year. The credit would cover fertiliser and gas pipeline projects and thermal power plants.

Nakasone also announced that Japan had agreed to provide grant-in-aid for education and equipment to Delhi University.

EEC BLAMES INDIA

THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC Community has virtually blamed India for the stagnation in its exports to EEC markets. This happened when the leader of the 20-member EEC delegation, Ivor Richard, responded to the remarks of the Commerce Minister, V P Singh, at the third session of the Indo-EEC joint commission. He said that Indian exports had slipped even though there was no change in the conditions of access to Indian goods in the EEC markets.

PRANAB ON DEMOCRACY

UNION FINANCE MINISTER Pranab Mukherjee said in Calcutta that though the country had a well established system of parliamentary democracy, there was no harm in having a debate at the national level on the feasibility of a presidential form of government. Mukherjee, however, did not favour the idea of regional democracy and denounced the existing regional parties. Mukherjee said that unlike its neighbours in south and Southeast Asia and other third world countries, where the failure of parliamentary democracy had brought in trial military or dictatorships India has a successful experiment with the parliamentary system.

FREEZE FRAME

E P UNNY



THE IDEAS PAGE

The hard truth

Petrol trade will always be volatile. Lesson for oil import-dependent India is clear — do not overread the market



OVER THE BARREL
BY VIKRAM S MEHTA

I HAVE BEEN involved with the petroleum industry for over four decades. I do not recollect a more combustible, contrarian and confusing complex of forces bearing on it than those today.

It has never been easy to call the timing and rate of change of oil prices. This is because they are influenced by the non-fundamentals of geopolitics, exchange rates, speculators and the predilections of corporate and political leaders. The direction of change has, however, been easier to foretell because it was driven by the fundamentals of demand and supply. Now, these fundamentals have also been tossed into the cauldron. As a result, policymakers in import-dependent countries like India face a challenge: How to manage and mitigate the consequential uncertainties?

A tour d'horizon of the international petroleum market is revealing.

Venezuela has the largest reserves of oil in the world. The US has reimposed sanctions on the country for breach of the government's commitment to hold "free and fair elections". It has done so with a self-interested twist. The US company, Chevron, has been allowed to continue the joint venture with the national oil company in Venezuela, PDVSA, and to sell crude oil to refineries in the US. The reason is, in part, to keep a lid on US petrol prices and, in part, to protect US commercial interests. President Joe Biden wants to burnish his democratic credentials and safeguard his electoral prospects.

Production of shale oil and gas is surging. The US is the largest producer of petroleum liquids in the world and the biggest exporter of LNG. It has also allocated more money than any other government (approximately \$400 billion, through the misnamed Inflation Reduction Act) to reduce carbon emissions. This presents a dilemma. At some point, the economics of fossils may have to give way to the politics of clean energy.

The US also continues to back the Ukrainian war effort — and for good reason. Unprovoked aggression should be resisted. It should be noted, however, that the conflict has boosted the profits of US petroleum companies. They have (predominantly) filled the vacuum created by the sanctions on exports of Russian gas and petroleum products into Europe. Here, the principles of global security clash with corporate commercial interests.

Russia's petroleum industry has been degraded by sanctions, drone attacks, financial constraints and poor technology. Yet, it is generating sufficient revenue to finance its war machine. China and India have replaced Europe as their major overseas markets. Last month, these two countries absorbed 62 per cent of Russia's crude oil exports. *Prima facie*, this would suggest the bark of Western sanctions is stronger than its bite. And delib-



CR Sasikumar

erately so. Were Russian oil taken off the market, the price would ratchet up sharply and hurt the electoral prospects of leaders facing elections this year. The point is, here too, there is no walking a straight line.

The Middle East is facing a witch's brew of warfare, racism and radicalism but also houses 55 per cent of the world's petroleum reserves. It was convulsed on October 7 when Hamas attacked Israel and Israel retaliated with genocidal ferocity. The conflict entered a new phase on April 13 when Iran launched 300 plus missiles against Israel directly rather than through its proxies (Hamas, Houthis, Hezbollah). The impact was minimal. All the missiles were destroyed before they reached their intended target. That did not lower the inevitability of an Israeli response. The world was on edge. The question was how and when, not whether. In the end, perhaps because of international pressure, the retaliation was relatively muted. As of the time of writing, it appears all parties have walked back from the brink of a regional conflagration. The sword of Damocles, however, continues to hover over the region. One misstep could result in the closure of the Straits of Hormuz through 30 per cent of internationally traded oil passes.

The international petroleum majors have recently declared solid profits, all because of higher production (and price) of oil and gas. Consequently, the bulk of their investable capital is directed towards fossil fuels. But they must reconcile this investment strategy with their net zero carbon emission targets.

Western sanctions on Venezuela, Iran and Russia have fragmented the petroleum market. Trading relations are predominantly regional, not global. The US is the major supplier of LNG and products in Europe; Russia is now the largest supplier of crude to India. Iran exports predominantly to China, who

Western sanctions on Venezuela, Iran and Russia have fragmented the petroleum market. Trading relations are predominantly regional, not global. The US is the major supplier of LNG and products in Europe; Russia is now the largest supplier of crude to India. Iran exports predominantly to China, who care little about Western sanctions (It earned approx \$35 billion in 2023 despite the sanctions). The fragmentation will most likely deepen as European demand falters, China (and to a lesser extent, India) switches from coal to gas and Middle East gas producers concentrate on increasing their market share in Asia. Qatar, for instance, will double its LNG capacity from 77 mt pa to 142 mt pa by 2030.

The AI industry will need enormous amounts of electricity for its data centres, cloud storage facilities and crypto mining. Renewables will not be able to meet this requirement. People like Bill Gates and Sundar Pichai are, however, committed to net carbon-zero emissions. As such, they will face a conundrum. Should they slow down their growth plans or turn to gas-based power generation for their requirements?

The tour reveals that governments and industry (in particular, oil companies and AI) are on the horns of multiple dilemmas. It suggests that aside from geopolitics, exchange rates and Wall Street speculation, analysts should consider net zero carbon emission commitments and the AI industry's demand for electricity as two additional non-fundamental factors that will bear on the international oil market. The tour also reaffirms the hard truth: the petroleum market will be volatile.

The lesson for oil import-dependent India is clear: Do not overread the market. Instead, hedge against volatility. Build up strategic oil reserves, increase the share of natural gas in the energy basket, invest in smart infrastructure, intensify R&D on clean energy, encourage public-private partnerships and scale up renewables.

The writer is chairman and distinguished fellow, Centre for Social and Economic Progress

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"The election that this country [The UK] needs right now is not another Tory leadership struggle. It is a general election, and it needs it as soon as possible."
— THE GUARDIAN

Lights, camera, India

From its inception, Indian cinema has had a deep relationship with the Cannes Film Festival. Recent recognition and collaborations reaffirm that



CHAITANYA K PRASAD

FOR INDIANS, THE Cannes Film Festival, once a far-removed event, has become familiar terrain. In 1946, *Neecha Nagar* by Chetan Anand won the Grand Prix, making it the first Indian film to gain this recognition.

Since its inception, the audience and jury at Cannes have embraced Indian cinema for its depth and artistry. With the Film Heritage Foundation presenting, for the third consecutive year at Cannes, Shyam Benegal's *Manthan* and the recent nomination of Payal Kapadia's *All We Imagine as Light*, India's standing in the global cinematic landscape is being reaffirmed.

Since the 1950s, Indian cinema has adorned the Cannes red carpet. Satyajit Ray's *Pathar Panchali* earned the Best Human Document award in 1956. But India's legacy at Cannes extends beyond individual triumphs. From Satyajit Ray's golden era to contemporary avant-garde narratives, Indian filmmakers consistently showcase innovation and diversity. Notable amongst these are Mrinal Sen's *Kharij*, which won the Special Jury Prize in 1983, Mira Nair's *Salaam Bombay!* which was awarded the Caméra d'Or in 1988, and Shaji N Karun's *Piravi*, which received the Caméra d'Or — Mention Spéciale in 1989. In 1999, Murali Nair's *Marana Simhasanam (Throne of Death)* added to India's success at Cannes, too.

Indian cinema, much like Indian cuisine, offers a tapestry of flavours, from heartwarming dramas to exhilarating spectacles and spicy twists, drawing international audiences with its kaleidoscope of cultures and emotions. The Indian Pavilion at Cannes has been a symbol and story of the country's evolving film industry. It has become one of the hubs of the festival where stakeholders discuss and debate the Indian filmmaking landscape.

Previously, a diverse array of Indian films — from Ritesh Batra's poignant *The Lunchbox* to Sanjay Leela Bhansali's opulent *Devdas* — set India apart from its global contemporaries at the festival. R Madhavan's *Rocketry: The Nambi Effect* and Ashutosh Gowariker's epic, *Lagaan*, have cultivated a deeper appreciation of Indian cinema's diversity in filmmaking.

The 66th and 75th editions of the Festival were significant for India, coinciding with monumental milestones in the nation's cultural and historical journey. To commemorate 100 years of Indian cinema, India was the Official Guest Country at the 66th edition. This reinforced its soft power and overarching influence on Cannes. The Shershah of Hindi cinema, Amitabh Bachchan, and his *The Great Gatsby* co-star Leonardo DiCaprio declared the official kickoff of the 66th edition. Bachchan addressing the global audience in his mother tongue Hindi was a proud moment. The first Incredible India Exhibition was also organ-

ised to promote India as a filming destination, a joint venture by the Ministry of Tourism and the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting. For the first time, the stakeholders at Cannes got a bird's eye view of the potential of filmmaking in India.

India also celebrated 75 years of diplomatic ties with France, which coincided with the 75th anniversary of the Cannes. India was felicitated as the Official Country of Honour at the 2022 Cannes Marché du Film. On the occasion, Prime Minister Narendra Modi reinforced the potential of India to become a global content hub.

The Ministry of Information and Broadcasting has played a critical role in enhancing the soft power reach of India at Cannes. It actively manages India's outreach efforts, ensuring a strong presence for the country's film industry. Interestingly, the International Film Festival of India (IFFI) seems to be a lucky charm for foreign films vying for international acclaim. Several films that have been screened at IFFI have gone on to win Oscars, including *American Beauty* (1999) and *Life is Beautiful* (1997), *Life of Pi* (2012), *Parasite* (2019), and *The Power of The Dog* (2021). Additionally, notable films presented at Cannes are shown as a special package at IFFI, proving a distinct eye for great stories. Whether a springboard for Indian films or a launchpad for Oscar contenders, both Cannes and IFFI have established a *jugalbandi* in weaving together the best of cinema across the globe.

The Indian film fraternity has also been a part of the esteemed Cannes jury, enriching the prestigious event with their expertise. Filmmaker Mrinal Sen paved the way in 1982. Renowned directors like Mira Nair and Shekhar Kapur offered unique perspectives, while actresses including Aishwarya Rai Bachchan, Sharmila Tagore, Vidya Balan, and most recently, Deepika Padukone, contributed to the selection of top international films at the 75th edition.

According to a 2024 Media and Entertainment report, "Reinvent", published by Ernst & Young, the Indian film industry's global influence is undeniable, with 339 Indian films released across 38 countries in 2023 alone. Indian productions have notably surpassed the \$100 million mark at the international box office, propelled by increasing collaborations with international studios. Indian cinema's presence at prestigious film festivals underscores its artistic merit and global appeal while streaming platforms have facilitated widespread distribution. With diverse genres and languages, including regional cinema, catering to varied audiences, Indian talent is also making waves in Hollywood and beyond.

Further, film tourism, driven by iconic locations featured in Indian films, contributes significantly to India's tourism sector. These factors highlight the industry's dynamic evolution and enduring impact on the world stage. India's soft power will always remain a critical aspect of world cinema being showcased at Cannes even in its 77th edition. The journey has been an expression of the creativity and excellence built into India's creative DNA.

The writer is former additional DG, DFF and festival director, IFFI. Views are personal. Inputs from Zoya Ahmad and Vaishnavie Srinivasan



ALAKH N SHARMA AND RAVI SRIVASTAVA

Jobs picture in perspective

Youth unemployment is the principal challenge which India faces

THE INDIA EMPLOYMENT Report 2024, brought out by the Institute for Human Development (IHD) and the International Labour Organisation (ILO), has attracted widespread attention. However, some of its findings have been misunderstood or misinterpreted.

The report is based on official data, largely the Employment and Unemployment Surveys (EUS) and Periodic Labour Force Surveys (PLFS), conducted by NSSO. Despite certain changes in the sample design of the PLFS, its estimates are comparable with EUS due to the high level of precision of the all-India and state-level estimates. The analysis compares four years — 2000, 2012, 2019, and 2022 — which capture the changes over the past 22 years, including during the Covid period.

The report highlights some major positive developments in the labour market. The employment quality, as shown by a robust Employment Condition Index, has improved in all states, albeit differently. This is also corroborated by the increase in the share of non-farm employment (and decline in agriculture employment) between 2000 and 2019, as happens with the increasing prosperity of a country, and implies a movement towards the structural transformation of the economy. This trend was accompanied by a steady increase in regular employment and a decline in unorganised sector employment, which was halted only during the Covid period.

The increase in the female workforce participation (FWFP) rate from 24.5 per cent in 2019 to 37.0 in 2023 is quite remarkable,

notwithstanding it being overwhelmingly in the agricultural sector, and of the own-account and unpaid family work kind.

The labour market bounced back quite well amidst the Covid-induced global slowdown. In comparison to the wages of regular workers, the wages of casual workers increased even during 2019-22. In fact, the increase was more in the case of the bottom groups. Along with several social safety measures, this must have played an important role in reducing extreme poverty and deprivation. It is also worth mentioning that even though there was a massive increase in farm jobs during the pandemic (almost 9 per cent per year), overall non-farm jobs also went up by more than 2.6 per cent, a rate higher than that achieved from 2012 to 2019.

Unemployment and underemployment rates increased till 2018 but declined thereafter. The unemployment rate has declined from 6 per cent 2018 to 3.2 per cent in 2023. This also holds for the youth unemployment rate, which also decreased from 17.8 per cent to 10 per cent over this period.

The report also outlines major emerging employment challenges in the wake of developments during the last two decades as well as distortions caused by the pandemic.

The employment pattern remains skewed towards agriculture, which employs around 46.6 per cent workers (compared to 42.4 per cent in 2019). This calls for active steps to accelerate the creation of non-farm employment. The production process has been increasingly becoming capital and skill-intensive, leading to distortions in the labour

market, where despite an increase in educational attainments, unskilled and semi-skilled workers abound. This calls for a greater focus on labour-intensive manufacturing.

Women's participation is still low and they remain largely engaged in somewhat less remunerative jobs in agriculture, unpaid family work and as own-account workers. This requires the creation of other non-farm employment opportunities with further investments in rural areas, including transport and connectivity and access to childcare.

Youth unemployment is the principal challenge and is the focus of the report. With the massive increase in educational attainment, the unemployment problem in India is becoming centred around educated youth, who account for nearly two-thirds of total unemployment. This process has been continuing for the last several decades. The unemployment rate rises with a rise in education levels — 28 per cent among graduates and above (the proportion of women being higher). This has declined from 35.4 per cent in 2018. The report notes the qualifications and skills mismatches, particularly at higher levels of education.

Improving the quality of education and imparting appropriate skills in active partnership with the private sector will continue to be a priority in coming years. Paradoxically, the proportion of youth not in employment, education and training (NEET) is quite high at around 28 per cent in 2022, with the share of females being around five times more than males. This group requires more policy focus.

Despite an improvement in employment conditions over time, jobs largely remain informal and of lower productivity. Over 90 per cent employment is informal, and 83 per cent are in the informal sector — it was close to 90 per cent in 2000. Robust wage growth, particularly of casual and lower strata of regular workers, strengthening of social protection, active policies for formalisation and boosting labour productivity will go a long way in improving the quality of employment.

India is likely to have a demographic advantage for at least another decade. With robust economic growth likely to be witnessed in the coming years, the country can reap this advantage. The report has recommended some policy measures such as (a) making production and growth more employment-intensive with emphasis on labour-based manufacturing and appropriate focus on employment-generating services and agriculture; (b) improving the quality of jobs; (c) overcoming labour market inequalities, particularly by boosting women's employment and effective policies to tackle NEET; (d) making systems for skills training and active labour market policies more effective, particularly by bridging the supply-demand gap in jobs and active involvement of the private sector; and (e) generating reliable statistics so as to better capture the complexities of the changing pattern of labour market due to rapid technological change.

The writers are team leaders of the India Employment Report 2024 and are with Institute for Human Development

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

NEPOTISTIC & HOW

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'A moral failure' (IE, May 4). The BJP ticket from the Kaiserganj seat to Karan Bhushan Singh, the son of Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh, is its admission that the six-time MP is a force to reckon with and it cannot afford to antagonise him. This fact made the party throw its weight behind the man accused of sexual misconduct, despite its tall claims of "nari shakti" and "beti bachao, beti padhao". This move sends out a clear message across the nation: Powerful men can get away with sexual crimes against women. There is little doubt that Karan's victory will mean that Brij Bhushan will continue to hold undeserving power. Is this not an example of blatant *pariwarvad*?

SH Quadri, Bikaner

CURING THE VACCINE

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Rarest of rare cases' (IE, May 4). AstraZeneca (AZ), a leading pharmaceutical firm headquartered in the UK, has admitted that its Covid-19 vaccine can cause certain side effects in "very rare cases". During the pandemic, vaccine clinical trials were fast-tracked due to the urgent need to curb the virus' spread and save lives. This was driven by the overwhelming evidence that the benefits of the vaccinations far exceeded the risks posed by the

virus and the vaccines. However, the side effects, even if rare, have put a question mark over the safety of the AZ vaccine. It is hoped that an in-depth inquiry will be carried out.

Khokan Das, Kolkata

BRING FACTS BACK

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'When social media spares no one' (IE, May 4). Chonghao is right when he says most of us behave in a clownish manner while communicating in today's day and age. Many leaders and their followers profess blatant lies. In this era of knowledge and information, people come to know the reality soon. Even senior politicians have a penchant for engaging in behaviour that don't behave their titles when online. We need checks and balances and a way to value fact checking again.

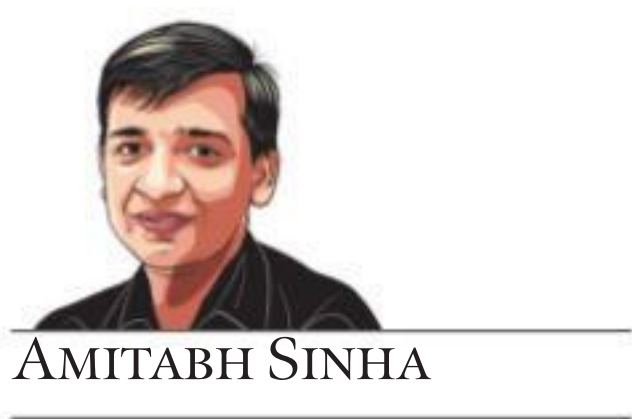
Subhash Vaid, New Delhi

ONLY FOR PLEASURE

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Let them eat bread' (IE, May 3). Nowadays, there are healthier alternatives available for the most popular and unhealthy options. Why does white bread need to be "healthier"? It does disservice to the joy of eating. The key to eating better is moderation. Our scientists' energies can be better utilised elsewhere. Let bread be bread.

Anjali Sharma, Chennai

Covid virus is still here. Why aren't more people falling ill?



IT SEEMS like a distant memory now, but just three years ago, India was in the midst of its worst phase of the Covid-19 pandemic. The month of May 2021 saw more than 1.2 lakh deaths — around 20% of all deaths attributed to Covid in the country so far. In the first three weeks of that month, more than 3 lakh positive cases were detected every day on average. Daily detections peaked exactly three years ago — on May 6, 2021 — when more than 4.14 lakh positive cases were reported.

The crisis continued for at least two more months, even though cases and deaths declined steadily. Unlike many other countries, India did not face any more deadly Covid-19 waves. The Omicron wave of January-February 2022 saw a massive surge in infections, but not too many severe cases or deaths. And although a few cases continue to be reported even now — there were 850 active cases as of Friday, according to the Health Ministry — the pandemic no longer presents a serious threat.

So, is the pandemic finally over?
On May 5, 2023, the World Health Organisation (WHO) announced that Covid-19 was no longer a global public health emergency. It was an acknowledgment that the uncontrolled spread of the virus was over; it was not leading to serious diseases, hospitalisations or deaths, and was no longer stretching public health systems in most parts of the world. The declaration was seen as a formal end to the pandemic.

India had withdrawn all Covid-19-related restrictions after March 31, 2022 — shortly after the Omicron wave had dissipated — and ceased the application of the provisions of the Disaster Management Act. Subsequently, state governments removed their mandates for compulsory wearing of masks in public spaces. However, SARS-CoV-2, the virus that caused the Covid-19 disease, remains very much in circulation — and continues to cause infections and even some deaths. The dominant variant causing the most infections right now is JN.1, a distant descendant of Omicron. JN.1 is a little more efficient at infecting people than its sister variants, but, like all descendants of Omicron, does not cause severe disease. WHO data show that in the four weeks leading up to April 14, more than 2.42 lakh positive cases were reported across the world, over two-thirds of which were in Russia and New

Zealand. About 3,000 cases were reported in India. In this same period, about 3,400 deaths have been attributed to Covid-19 — about 2,400 in the United States, and 53 in India. Despite very little testing, India is still reporting cases in double digits — 50 cases were detected on Thursday. There was even a death in Kerala. A few labs, including the National Institute of Virology in Pune, Centre for Cellular and Molecular Biology in Hyderabad, and Translational Health Science and Technology Institute in Faridabad, have been tracking the circulation of the virus, mainly through wastewater surveillance and samples from hospitals. Wastewater surveillance has revealed the presence of the JN.1 variant in India as well. **Why aren't more people getting infected?** Detections may be low simply because very few people are getting tested.

Luck, or chance, has had a role to play in the way Covid-19 has ceased to be a major health risk in the last couple of years. The Omicron variant, which emerged at the end of 2021, had enhanced capability to spread and infect people, but it did not cause severe disease. A large proportion of the world's population gained natural immunity after being infected with Omicron. By the end of 2021, more than half the global population had also received one or the other vaccine, which strengthened their immunity. The decline in the number of people without immunity, either through natural infection or vaccination, meant that the virus had fewer opportunities to evolve rapidly into newer variants. However, neither natural infection nor vaccines provide permanent immunity. The effect of vaccines taken in 2021 and 2022 is most likely over. Natural immunity also dissipates after some time. The only reason there is no

uncontrolled surge is that people are continuing to get infected with relatively harmless variants, and getting their immunity renewed. "That is exactly what seems to be happening. People are getting infected, possibly in large numbers. We don't know because not many tests are being done. But in the process, their natural immunity is getting refreshed and extended," Anurag Agarwal, Dean of Biosciences and Health Research at Trivedi School of Biosciences at Ashoka University, said. Meanwhile, the fact that the virus has not mutated into a more dangerous variant, has been very helpful. How long this situation will continue is anyone's guess. However, the virus is no longer new to scientists and public health experts, who now have a much better understanding of it, and know what to expect and how to deal with its spread. But the circulating strains need to be constantly monitored and tracked, so that timely interventions can be made.

EXPLAINED SCIENCE

GOLDENE: A SHEET OF GOLD THAT IS ONLY ONE ATOM THICK

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI, MAY 5

FOR the first time, researchers have created a free-standing sheet of gold that is only one atom thick. This makes gold the first metal to be formulated into (free-standing) 2D sheets — opening up a host of exciting possibilities for the future.

Developing goldene

Creating 'goldene', as the one-atom thick material has been named, was not easy for the scientists behind the development, from Sweden's Linköping University. It is not that such 2D materials have not been created before.

Since the 2004 development of graphene, the atom-thin material made of carbon, scientists have identified hundreds of 2D materials.

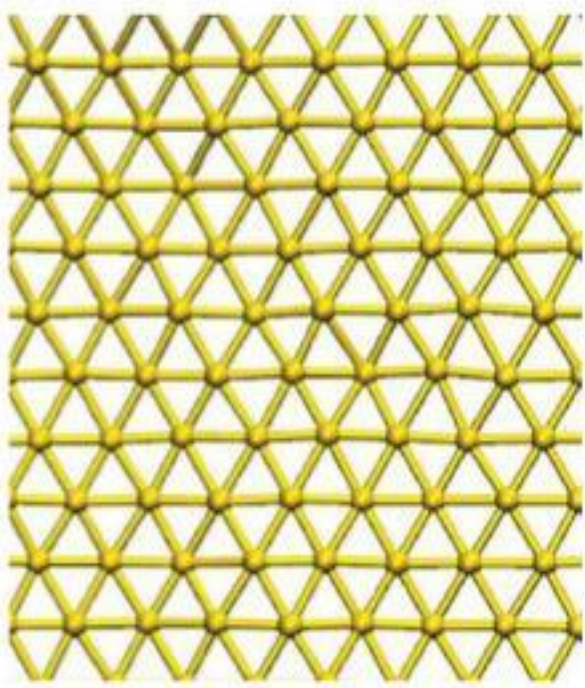
However, coming up with atom-thin metallic sheets has been a challenge, due to metals' tendency to cluster together to make nanoparticles instead. While scientists have previously produced gold sheets sandwiched between other materials, "goldene is the first free-standing 2D metal, to the best of our knowledge", Lars Hultman, part of the team behind this project, told *nature.com*.

To create goldene, researchers first sandwiched an atomic monolayer of silicon between layers of titanium carbide. When they deposited gold on top of this sandwich structure, the gold atoms diffused into the material and replaced the silicon atoms, forming a trapped monolayer of gold atoms.

Subsequently, scientists etched away the titanium carbide layers to create a free-standing, one atom thick layer of gold. This was done with the help of an age-old Japanese technique used to forge *katana*s and high-quality knives, using a chemical popularly known as Murakami's reagent.

According to Hultman's estimates, these sheets of goldene are roughly 100 nanometres thick (a nanometre is a billionth of a metre), approximately 400 times thinner than the thinnest commercially available gold leaf.

Many potential applications



One atom in goldene is bonded to six other gold atoms. Illustration/Nature

Developing goldene is not for the purposes of scientific curiosity alone — far from it. Scientists believe that the super thin, super light material can potentially revolutionise the electronics industry. "Goldene holds promise as a great catalyst because it's much more economically viable than thicker, three-dimensional gold," Hultman told *sciencenews.org*. "You don't need as many gold atoms to get the same function," he said. This means that electronics, which use gold due to its electrical conductivity, can potentially use lesser amounts for the same purpose. Moreover, the technique used by the scientists to create goldene can, in theory, also be applicable to other metallic objects. Shun Kashiwaya, co-author of the study and a materials scientist at Linköping University, said that the team is already working to make 2D sheets of iridium and platinum. Lastly, goldene possibly also has some special properties, like other previously developed 2D materials. This is due to the fact that each gold atom, in this case, has only six neighbouring atoms, compared to 12 in a three-dimensional crystal. Scientists say that future applications could include carbon dioxide conversion, hydrogen-generating catalysis, selective production of value-added chemicals, hydrogen production, water purification, etc.

ALIND CHAUHAN
NEW DELHI, MAY 5

DENGUE IS sweeping through Latin America. In the four months from January to April 2024, more than 6 million cases have been reported in the region that comprises South America, Central America, Mexico, and the Caribbean — over a third more than the 4.4 million reported in all of 2023. Some countries are witnessing a surge much before the peak season for dengue; others are recording severe outbreaks for the first time. The spike in dengue comes as global temperatures, including in the Latin American region, continue their upward march. Warmer weather creates ideal conditions for mosquitoes, the vector that spreads dengue, to thrive.

Rising case numbers

The World Health Organisation (WHO) recorded a 10-fold increase (from 500,000 to 5.2 million) in the number of cases worldwide between 2000 and 2019, with an unprecedented peak in the latter year. There was a decline in reporting in the Covid-19 years of 2020-22, but last year saw a global surge in cases, "characterised by a significant increase in the number, scale, and simultaneous occurrence of multiple outbreaks, spreading into previously unaffected regions", the WHO said in December 2023. On April 23 this year, the WHO said that since the beginning of the ongoing 2023 transmission, reported cases had crossed 6.5 million, with more than 7,300 deaths. The WHO region of the Americas reported 4.5 million cases and 2,300 deaths in 2023. While the fatality rate of dengue is low, the disease can in some cases lead to "breakdown fever", which causes severe joint pain, haemorrhage and, sometimes, death. There is no high-efficacy vaccine yet that can stop the large-scale spread of dengue. (See box right)

Latin American surge

Brazil, the biggest country in the region, is the worst affected. More than 4.2 million people — around 1.8% of the country's population — were infected with dengue between January 1 and April 23 this year, according to Brazil's Health Ministry. More than 2,000 people had died due to the disease in this period, another record for a single year. Several of Brazil's 26 states have declared a state of emergency. The army has set up field hospitals in the capital, Brasília, to accommodate patients who could not get medical attention in packed hospitals. The country is out of mosquito repellents, and it is not clear when new stocks will arrive. *The Economist* reported. Peru and Puerto Rico too have declared a state of emergency. While Puerto Rico had reported 549 cases by March-end (compared

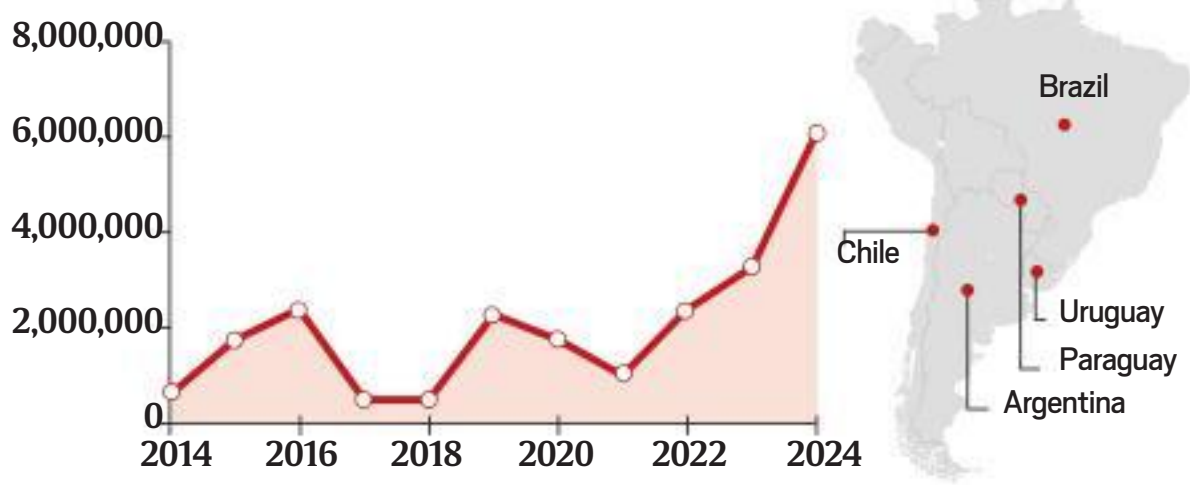
VACCINATION CHALLENGE

Four viral strains
Dengue is spread through bites of the *Aedes aegypti* mosquito. There are four strains of the virus, which makes it a daunting challenge to manufacture a viable and effective vaccine. While vaccines that protect against all four strains do exist, they are expensive and have serious limitations.

"The issue is that if a vaccine protects you from one strain, you become more susceptible to other strains. The biggest challenge is to develop a vaccine which works against all the strains," Dr Virander S Chauhan, president of the Multi Vaccines Development Programme at the International Centre for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology (ICGEB) in New Delhi, said.

Available options
Qdenga: The Japanese-made vaccine costs about \$115 per dose in Europe and \$40 in Indonesia. Brazil has bought in bulk for \$19; however, there will be enough vaccines to fully vaccinate only 3.3 million of Brazil's 220 million people in 2024, according to a report published on April 12 in *The New York Times*. In February, Takeda Pharmaceuticals, which makes Qdenga, said it has partnered with Hyderabad-based vaccine maker Biological E to produce up to 50 million doses a year. This could reduce the price, but regulatory approval for BE to market Qdenga could take several years. *The NYT* report said. **Dengvaxia:** This vaccine, manufactured by the French pharma company Sanofi Pasteur, can be given only to people who have already been infected with dengue. **Brazilian researchers** recently announced that clinical trials of a new

DENGUE CASE IN SOUTH CONE REGION



DENGUE CASES IN INDIA

YEAR	CASES
2018	101,192
2019	157,315
2020	44,585
2021	193,245
2022	233,251
2023	94,198*

South Cone consists of five countries: Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay and Uruguay. Source: Pan American Health Organization. India numbers: National Centre for Vector Borne Disease Control. * Till Sept 2023

vaccine had shown strong immunity against dengue. The single-shot vaccine created by the US National Institutes of Health (NIH) uses live, weakened forms of all four strains of the virus. The vaccine has been licensed for development by the Instituto Butantan in São Paulo. But again, it is unlikely to be rolled out nationally in Brazil for at least a couple of years, *The NYT* report said.

Trials in India
Serum Institute of India (SII) is testing a dengue vaccine based on the NIH's research. SII has completed initial phases of trial and will conduct a large phase 3 trial in children and teens ages 2-18 in collaboration with the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR). **Panacea Biotech** is also conducting

trials of the NIH vaccine. Phase 1/2 trials have been completed, and the company is scaling up manufacturing for a larger phase 3 trial in 18- to 80-year-olds. **Indian Immunologicals** Ltd, a Hyderabad-based biotech company, is using the technology developed by NIH for a vaccine that is undergoing initial phases of human trials. **Two other** indigenous dengue vaccines are under development in India. One, by ICGEB, is a sub-unit vaccine that includes a piece of a pathogen (not the whole organism), and does not contain any live pathogens. No clinical trials have been conducted so far. The other is a DNA vaccine being developed by Tata Institute of Fundamental Research (TIFR) and Rajiv Gandhi Centre for Biotechnology. This too is yet to be tested in humans.

with 1,293 in all of 2023), Peru witnessed 135,000 suspected cases and 117 deaths between January and early April (compared with 33 deaths in the same period last year). Argentina too, has recorded a large increase in case numbers. Central American countries and Mexico, which usually see dengue cases rising towards the end of the year, are witnessing unseasonal spikes. For the first time, Uruguay and Chile are seriously affected. "We already have a large number of cases this year..." — even Uruguay and areas where there has been no transmission of dengue for a century," Pan American Health

Organisation (an arm of the UN) director Jarbas Barbosa said in a press briefing in March. **What's happening and why**
Over the past 30 years, the region has warmed an average of 0.2 degree Celsius per decade, according to the State of the Climate in Latin America and the Caribbean 2022 report. Warmer temperatures have increased mosquito habitats and extended the length of the active season, allowing for longer transmission windows for vector-borne diseases. The situation was exacerbated by the 2023 El Niño, a weather pattern that leads to

abnormal warming of surface waters in the equatorial Pacific Ocean, and increased temperatures even more across the region. Rising temperatures have also led to more frequent and intense extreme weather events. Untimely rainfall, storms, flooding, and rising sea levels create shallow, stagnant pools of water in many places that allow mosquito larvae to thrive. Droughts lead people to collect and save water in containers that provide breeding places for mosquitoes. Rapid urbanisation and the rise of shantytowns with infrequent or ineffective garbage collection has been flagged as a factor as well.

What is artificial general intelligence & why are people worried about it?

BIJIN JOSE
NEW DELHI, MAY 5

IN A recent interview, OpenAI CEO Sam Altman expressed his commitment to invest billions of dollars towards the development of artificial general intelligence (AGI). Despite Altman's repeated endorsement of AGI, many in the global tech community are apprehensive about it.

What is artificial general intelligence?
AGI refers to a machine or software that can emulate human cognitive abilities, such that it can perform any task that a human can do. This includes reasoning, common sense, abstract thinking, background knowledge, differentiating between cause and effect, etc. Humans learn through their experiences — by talking to people or observing things;

by reading books, watching television, and reading articles — which then shape our decision-making (often subconsciously) to solve any given problem, or come up with a new one. AGI seeks to replicate this. Think of a super intelligent robot friend, who can understand everything that you say, learn new things just the way you do, and even think of problems to find solutions.

How is AGI different from the AI in use?
The main difference between AGI and the more common form of AI, also known as "narrow AI", lies in their scope and capabilities. Narrow AI performs specific tasks such as image recognition, translation, or playing games like chess — at which it can outdo humans — but it remains limited to its set parameters. AGI on the other hand, envisions a broader, more generalised form of intelligence that is not confined to any particular

task. This makes it more human-like. This is also why AGI is currently the summit of AI development, which has always been about broadening capabilities. ChatGPT, launched in November 2022, piqued global interest due to its ability to come up with human-like text responses. Since then, as billions of dollars have been pumped in to fuel research in the field, AI models have become progressively better. The creation of AGI is like the final frontier in this development.

How old is AGI as an idea?
The idea of AGI first emerged in 1950 in a paper by Alan Turing, the father of theoretical computer science and AI. In *Computing Machinery and Intelligence*, he introduced the so-called Turing test — if a machine can engage in a conversation with a human

without being detected as a machine, according to the Turing test, it has demonstrated human intelligence. When Turing wrote this paper, AI was a distant dream — even computers were in their nascency. Yet, his work led to wide-ranging discussions about the possibility of such machines, their potential benefits, and risks.

How can AGI help us?
In theory, AGI has innumerable benefits. For instance, in healthcare, it can redefine diagnostics, treatment planning, and personalised medicine by integrating and analysing vast datasets, far beyond the capabilities of humans. In finance and business, AGI could automate various processes and enhance overall decision-making, offering real-time analytics and market predictions with accuracy. AGI

could also transform adaptive learning systems that work towards the unique needs of students, democratising access to personalised education worldwide. In an interview given to *The Wall Street Journal*, Altman said AGI would lead to a "lot of productivity and economic value", and would have unprecedented "problem-solving capabilities and creative expression". **So why is there scepticism about AGI?**
Despite its promise, AGI continues to fuel widespread apprehensions. **The amount of computational power** required to develop AGI systems raises concerns about its environmental impacts, in terms of energy consumption and generation of e-waste. **AGI could lead to massive job losses** and widespread socio-economic disparity. Power would be concentrated in the hands

of those who control AGI. **It could introduce new security vulnerabilities**, and outrun governments' abilities to come up with suitable regulations. **If humans were to become dependent on AGI**, it might in theory even lead to the loss of basic human skills and capabilities. **AGI can outdo human beings**, making its actions difficult to understand and predict. This could conceivably lead to a sci-fi horror: AGI taking actions against human well-being. AI pioneers Yoshua Bengio, Geoffrey Hinton, and Yann LeCun have often warned about the catastrophic outcomes of creating AGI, with Hinton even comparing AGI's dangers to that posed by nuclear weapons. Today, most experts advocate stringent regulations to ensure that the development of AGI is in line with human values and safety standards.

NIJJAR CASE ARRESTS AND NEED FOR UNIVERSAL DEFINITION OF TERROR

THE recent arrest of three members of a hit squad in Canada trended because they were charged with the murder of Khalistani separatist Hardeep Singh Nijjar outside a gurdwara in Surrey, British Columbia, on June 18, 2023. Nijjar had a Canadian passport. The global interest was on whether the trio was tied to the Indian security establishment. The news break came days after the *Washington Post* claimed to have outed an R&AW operative as the handler of a botched attempt to bump off another Khalistani radical in the US, Gurbatwant Singh Pannun. However, the Canadian police gave little away, merely claiming a larger ring was under the scanner and they were looking into their Indian establishment linkage. They refused to share the nature of the evidence and motive. What's known at present is the three people under arrest are Indian nationals who lived in Edmonton for three to five years. They are speculated to have entered Canada on student visas. The trio played different roles as shooters, drivers and spotters on the day Nijjar was killed. Canada is yet to share any information with India, foreign minister S Jaishankar said. Bilateral relations hit an all-time low after Canadian PM Justin Trudeau flagged the Nijjar case in his talks with PM Narendra Modi on the sidelines of the G20 summit in New Delhi without sharing an iota of evidence. Jaishankar accused Trudeau of doing vote bank politics by giving political legitimacy to Khalistani elements because his party is in a minority. He went on to rub it in, adding Canada deserved a strong leader like Modi. An interim report of an independent investigation released in Canada accused India of 'not differentiating between lawful pro-Khalistani political advocacy and the relatively small Canada-based Khalistani violent extremism'. "It views anyone aligned with Khalistani separatism as a seditious threat," the report said. Apparently, the 1985 bombing of an Air India flight with 329 passengers, mostly Canadian Sikhs, by Khalistani radicals is not even a blip in its national memory. Had Canada acted upon the violent elements, like the Nijjars, chances are the mid-air terror attack could have been avoided. Besides, as many as 25 Indian requests for extradition of Khalistanis are yet to be acted upon. Canada's intransigence re-emphasises the need for a universal definition on terror that is binding on all nations.

UGC BID TO GIVE TEETH TO ANTI-RAGGING MEASURES

WHAT happened with Aman Kachroo in 2009 in a medical college in Himachal Pradesh's Kangra was repeated with JS Siddarthan in a veterinary college in Wayanad in 2023. While Kachroo was beaten to death, Siddarthan was bullied, assaulted and driven to suicide. Many more students have endured ragging, which continues to cast its shadow on campuses. In this scenario, it is hoped the University Grants Commission (UGC)'s latest guidelines for higher education institutions will curb such delinquent behaviour. The UGC has already up drawn up a number of commendable initiatives, including a round-the-clock toll-free helpline and dedicated email ID for students to complain. It has now asked states to set up district-level committees to monitor institutions; the committees will include the district magistrate, additional district magistrate, university head, superintendent of police, local media and student organisations—a robust setup that brings together a number of public stakeholders which will, hopefully, prevent and even eliminate this evil. The UGC also suggests regular counselling, identification of troublemakers, surprise inspections of hostels, besides infrastructure like CCTV cameras and posters to raise awareness. Regrettably, it has taken the UGC 15 years to comply with the SC's 2009 directive on setting up committees at the local level, designed to give students a sense of security. The court's directions were part of the judgment in the Aman Kachroo ragging case of 2009, pursued by his father Dr Raj Kachroo. The SC recommended that every institution must have an Anti-Ragging Committee and an Anti-Ragging Squad, and also sought to sensitise all college staffers, be they administrative or contract labour; to report any untoward incidents. There have been cases of college authorities attempting to downplay ragging cases and muffling student voices in a bid to protect the institution's reputation. Notably, ragging is an activity common among males—of the 1,240 ragging cases reported in the past year; 82 percent involved boys. Whether bullying as a form of socialisation is accepted among boys is moot, but when it crosses a certain line, authorities should step in. Besides prevention, there should be stringent punishment for students who attack vulnerable juniors; criminal charges should be slapped, instead of limiting the penalty to rustication. It is hoped these measures and doses of counselling will eventually end this campus activity, and parents will be spared the pain of losing young teenagers.

QUICK TAKE

JUST A TÊTE-À-TWEET

GARY Kasparov's lighthearted jab at Rahul Gandhi's comment that he was good at political chess and idolised the Russian grandmaster caused a mini tweetstorm. Kasparov, now a democracy activist, replied on X that Rahul would first have to win Rae Bareilly. Things got so heated he had to clarify the tête-à-tweet was made in jest. The Indian twitterati seemed oblivious that former world champion recently also called D Gukesh "the Indian earthquake" after the 17-year-old broke his record as the youngest world championship challenger. Let's focus on chess, celebrate the win with gusto and support the sport in India.

AS India's economic influence continues to grow on Sri Lanka, shards of mistrust resurface, reflecting the contentious nature of India-Sri Lanka relations that had seen highs and lows from time to time. But the latest row, a spat over Katchatheevu, an uninhabited island lying between India and Sri Lanka, clearly had one more reason besides political expediency during election time. The BJP recently hit out at the Congress for handing over an important island half a century ago, situated closer to Rameswaram than to Sri Lanka's Jaffna. While looking to score political brownie points as Tamil Nadu went to poll, the BJP also riled Tamil Nadu's DMK for not doing enough to safeguard the rights of Tamils and tweeted that DMK's silence over Katchatheevu was telling and their callousness has harmed the interests of Tamil Nadu's fisherfolk. The Congress has accused the BJP of creating a false narrative on the 1974 Indo-Sri Lanka Maritime Agreement, through which Indira Gandhi ceded the island to Colombo. The island historically belonged to the Ramnad Zamindari, established in 1605, which altogether comprised 69 coastal villages and 11 islands, including Katchatheevu. Records claim the island was a revenue source, thus establishing a historical claim over the island. Sri Lanka's claim had been that the St Anthony's church, the only structure on the uninhabited island, on the island belongs to the Jaffna Diocese and since 1921, Katchatheevu was under British Ceylon, strengthening its claim over the island. In 1976, when the maritime boundary line in the Sethusamudram region was divided between the two nations, the adjoining sea expanse including the disputed island fell within Sri Lanka's maritime jurisdiction. Unlike the present day, when every inch of land gives rise to a battle cry or rhetoric, in the early 1970s when the island was ceded, priority was accorded to the maintenance of healthy relations with a neighbour over creating a dispute over territory. In turn, Indian fishermen continue to have the right to access and dry their fishnets and each year, have access to the island for two days of the year when a religious festival to celebrate St Anthony, the patron saint of fishing communities. But such politics are rare today. Responding to Premier Modi's rousing statement over the island, Sri Lanka's Foreign Minister Ali Sabry said the matter was resolved fifty years ago and there was no reason to reopen the discussion. While the immediate reason for rabble

While the immediate reason for rabble rousing over the island is due to the polls, there are other factors at play, like the possible threat of China using it to extend control in the Indian Ocean

KATCHATHEEVU IN HEADLINES AGAIN AFTER 5 DECADES

DILRUKSHI HANDUNNETTI

Award-winning journalist and lawyer. She is a founder and director of the Colombo-based Center for Investigative Reporting (CIR)



SOURAV ROY

rousing over Katchatheevu is due to the elections, there are other reasons at play, analysts say. Given half a chance, India would still like to reacquire the island, not simply to protect the fishing rights of the Tamil Nadu fisher community but also to extend Delhi's writ over more landmass. It can reduce the number of fishermen daily getting arrested as well. There would be definite political and reputational benefits if the island was brought under Delhi's rule, but at this moment, Katchatheevu offers an opportunity to get even with political opponents in a state where the BJP does not enjoy a significant support base. What other reasons lie behind the impassioned statements? Besides access, Katchatheevu is important to India for reasons beyond politics. It has cultural,

religious, geographical and geopolitical significance. Indian fishermen also pray at St Anthony's shrine and seek his blessings. Beyond the feel-good factors, analysts identify the foremost reason to redevelop an interest in Katchatheevu is to contain China's expanding footprint in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). In this context, the little island between Rameswaram and Jaffna assumes new strategic significance. At present, India's relations with the Maldives, Nepal and Bangladesh remain strained. Following the fiscal crisis in Sri Lanka, India played a critical role in supporting the nation, yet Colombo's romance with Beijing is far from over, even if it is akin to a forced marriage now as the island nation sinks into deeper debt. China has strategic presence in many parts of Sri

THE SAINT BEHIND 30 PERCENT OF KASHMIRI IDIOMS & PROVERBS

RENUKA NARAYANAN

FAITHLINE

meaning 'Endure the lightning and thunder/ Endure the darkness at noon/ Endure the grinding millstone (of earthly life/ Endure, for He comes to you.'

It transforms into recognising 'God-within' as in *Tsal' tsit' uvandas bay' mo ber/ Chon tsinnth karaan paanuh Anaad/ Ts'e kaouh zaanyuh khyod hari kar/ Kival' t'sa tsaandh' yuh taaruk naad*, meaning 'Fear not, O vagrant mind/ Eternal God takes



tsa'ndru'y' gihraan/ Gihraan aayas hiheyh hih/ T'suh h'eu Naraan, t'suh h'eu Naraan/ T'suh h'eu Naraan, yim kam uuh? Meaning 'I searched within for the Moon (of Revelation), As like seeks out like: This is God, this is God, this is God, none else but God. What are these many things (made by You)?'

This is further expressed in verses of serene conviction like this: *Shiv tsu'y' thali thali rozan/ Mo zan Hindu to Musalman/ Ruk ay chuk pan panun parzanaw/ Soy chay Shivas sati zaniy zan* meaning 'Shiva pervades every place and thing; Do not say this is Hindu, that, Muslim; You are intelligent, recognise yourself; That is true kinship with God.' Soon after this realisation happens, Lalla goes about the countryside trying to wean people away from the cruelty of ossified religious practice to the liberating and kindly path of true spirituality.

My favourite is *Lal b' tsayyas swaman baagabaras/ Vuchum Shivas-Shakth milith t'vaah/ Tati lay karmas amritsaras/ Zind' maras t'me kari kyah?* Meaning, 'I, Lalla, entered blooming garden of my own mind, There I joyfully beheld Shiva united with Shakti. There then did I merge in the Lake of Nectar: Alive, I am unchained from birth and death: What can the world do to me?'

This very Upanishadic *vaakh* goes: *Gagan tsu'y' bhutal tsu'y'/ Tsu'y' chuk deyn pa- van ta raat/ Arg tsandun posh poyni tsu'y'/ Tsu'y' chuk soruy ta lagizi kyah?* Meaning 'You are the sky, you are the earth, the air, the hours, the sacrificial grain; You are the water, the sandal paste and flowers; You are already in everything. What shall I worship you with?' It is like a prelude to *Gagan mein thaal rav chand deepak*, which is Guru Nanak's similar, fabulous arati.

Finally, Lalla's deeply Upanishadic message sketches Eternity for us: *As'suhs/ As'si/ T'as'asav*, meaning 'We were, We shall be, We have always been'. Her message: 'Eternally, the sun sets to rise, Eternally, Shiva dissolves to create.'

Her precise date of death is unknown; it's said she died in Bijbehara. Over thirty percent of Kashmiri idioms and proverbs are said to derive from her *vaakhs*.

(Views are personal) (shebaba09@gmail.com)

THE NEW INDIAN EXPRESS

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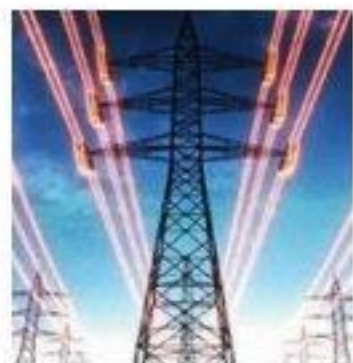
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Old King Coal Still Chief Power Player

Transition challenges more political than economic

India has averted large power outages during peak summer demand by increasing its reliance on coal-fed electricity-generation capacity. Share of renewables isn't improving, partly on account of the intermittence of supply from solar and wind energy. Both thermal and renewables face tepid investor interest because of uncertainty over payments by distribution companies. The Centre has had some success in nudging states to bring down indebtedness of their distribution monopolies, but not on a scale to inspire investing confidence by private capital. The new generating capacity coming up is, thus, skewed in favour of public-funded coal-fired plants.

Distribution holds the key to capacity build-up across the electricity value chain. This is the only point in the chain where revenue enters the system, and it remains because political parties use it to price power to their advantage. The



immediate bottleneck, of discoms running up huge bills with generating companies that, in turn, was affecting payments to coal suppliers, has been corrected substantially in the past two years partly by some smart persuasion. The way forward would be to break monopolies by allowing multiple distributors to share transmission infrastructure. Here, too, challenges are more political than economic. More work also needs to be done to curb power theft through smart metering.

Tepid investment in power storage from RE sources amplifies the problem of intermittence fosters overdependence on coal. PLIs for domestic battery manufacturing have not delivered substantially, but GoI is pitching hard to foreign investors. Renewables offer India a pathway to reduce its dependence on energy imports, apart from achieving self-imposed emission reduction targets. At this point, however, India will feed its economic growth through energy from all sources, and significant energy transition will be deferred. This comes at a cost in terms of price of energy and climate mitigation. But India's growth through exports could pass some of this cost to the rest of the world.

Legalise Cannabis, America May Follow

The land that first made the world consider cannabis to be a dangerous substance — in the 1930s, films like Reefer Madness even demonised the recreational use of ganja as leading to crime, madness and murder — is finally coming around. The Biden administration is moving ahead to reclassify marijuana as a 'less dangerous drug' on a par with ketamine and anabolic steroids from its earlier classification as a Schedule 1 drug alongside the likes of heroin and LSD. This is welcome, especially from an 'influencer' country. While the move won't legalise its recreational use throughout the US — which many states have — it will recognise medical uses of cannabis and that it has less potential for abuse than other drugs, including alcohol. India should use this changing view of cannabis to dump its own anti-ganja law that can, and is, used for harassment.



Cannabis in India is regulated by the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) Act of 1985. The law imposes a ban on extracting the resin and flowers from the plant, while permitting cannabis use for medicinal and scientific purposes. State governments are empowered to permit, control and regulate its cultivation, production and transport. This law was foisted on India as part of Ronald Reagan's media-fuelled 'war on drugs', despite the social acceptability of cannabis use here.

Prohibition takes it underground, outside the purview of quality control with the potential of its misuse. Legalising it also makes economic sense. The global 'legal' marijuana market is valued at \$21 bn in 2023. It's projected to have a CAGR of 25.7% over 2024-30. For India to take a toke of this market, and bring it under commercial quality control, is an opportunity. America can one day follow suit.



Dr Orang is Ready To See Patients

In the lush interiors of Gunung Leuser National Park on the Indonesian island of Sumatra, humanity's fondness for calling itself a special species took another blow when Rakus, an orangutan, became the unwitting star of his own medical drama. Armed with nature's pharmacy, Rakus demonstrated a savvy understanding of self-care that astonished even the most seasoned scientists — putting into serious doubt that humans are the only species capable of self-medication. Rakus, in his mid-30s, was nursing a fight-related facial injury in June 2022 when he took matters literally into his own hands. He plucked leaves of the medicinal Akar Kuning plant, rarely eaten by orangutans in the peat swamp forest, and chewed them as Rx. The arboreal genius knew exactly what to do next. With the deft touch of a seasoned med pro, Rakus — 'orangutan' is derived from the Malay words for 'orang' (human) and 'hutan' (forest) — applied the plant's juices directly to his wound, fashioning a makeshift bandage.

Previous research has documented several species of apes foraging for medicines in forests to heal themselves. But scientists hadn't previously seen an animal treat itself in this way. Photos showed Rakus' wound closing within a month. Orangutans share over 97% of human DNA. Our 3% bragging rights may require recalibrating.

RBI's independence from political pressures ensures economic stability during and after polls

Ring-fenced From Rajniti



Mythili Bhusnurmath

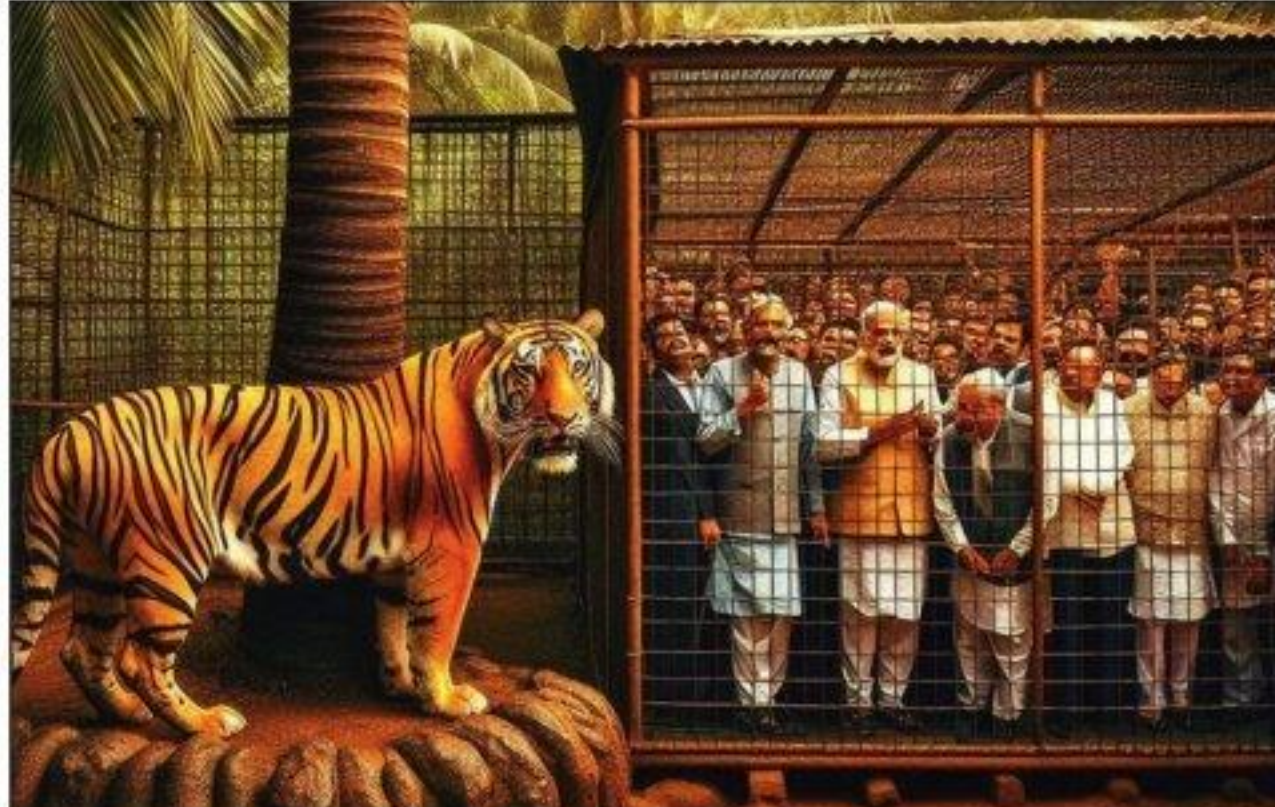
As the world's two largest democracies, the US and India have much in common. Their diverse populations — multi-ethnic, multilingual, multi-cultural, multi-religious — raucousness that accompanies political campaigning, increasing polarisation seen of late, with the political right gaining ground in both countries. Both also face elections this year. We're in the middle of ours, while the US will elect its president in November.

But there is one thing that sets India apart from the US: the respect the political class in India, cutting across party lines, has for RBI. Unlike in the US, where it's not uncommon for politicians, including Donald Trump, to take potshots at the Fed head, here, one can't recall a single instance when an RBI governor has been insulted. Certainly not publicly.

'We don't think about political events. We don't think about politics. We think about what's the right thing to do for the economy,' said Jerome Powell in Dec 2023, when asked about the impact of the US elections on the Fed's actions. A similar sentiment was voiced by RBI's Shaktikanta Das when asked about the likely impact of elections on RBI's rate action. Das simply refused to be drawn into a discussion on the subject.

Everybody believes Das, few believe Powell. Despite his denial regarding political influence on Fed rate actions, Powell has to constantly worry that any action the Fed undertakes could be misconstrued. If he cuts rates, Trump and his supporters are likely to accuse him of dressing up the economy for Joe Biden. And if he doesn't, Democrats will say it's holding back the economy to help Trump.

Indeed, the Trump presidency years were marked by frequent skirmishes



Safe from heavy petting

between White House and Fed, with Trump, on occasion, threatening to fire Powell. On one occasion, he practically accused him of being a traitor, saying, 'The Chinese president is kinder to US economy' than Powell.

Worse is in store for the Fed. According to a recent Wall Street Journal report, Trump's political advisers are putting together a plan that would give him 'unprecedented influence over the Federal Reserve, including a provision that could make him an 'acting' central bank board member'.

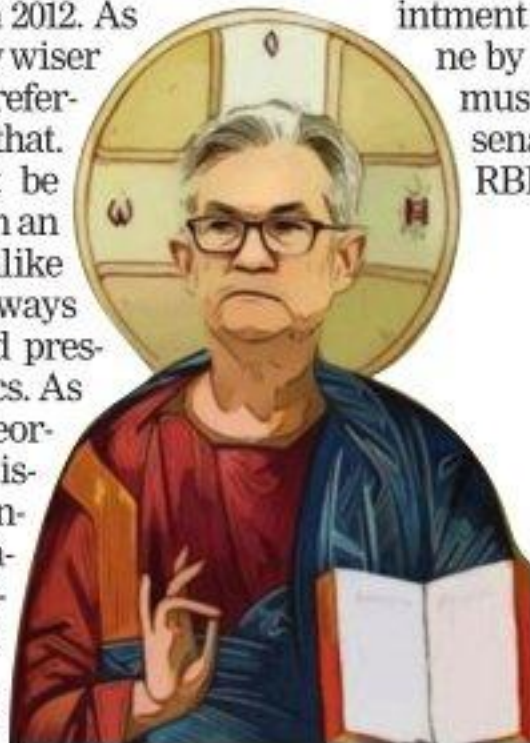
Ironically, Powell is a self-declared Republican. He was appointed Fed chair in 2018 by a Republican president — Trump — though he was appointed to the Fed board by a Democrat president, Barack Obama, in 2012. As for Das, none of us is any wiser regarding his political preferences. And thank god for that.

Central banks must be able to frame policy with an eye on the long haul, unlike elected governments always subject to the pulls and pressures of electoral politics. As IMF head Kristalina Georgieva wrote in March, 'Risks of political interference in banks' decision making and personnel appointments are rising. Governments and central bankers must resist

these pressures... central bank independence matters for price stability — and price stability matters for consistent long-term growth.'

In practice, of course, all central banks face pressure from governments to do their bidding, as revealed by former RBI governor D Subbarao in his latest book, Just a Mercenary? Notes From My Life and Career. Remember, we had a finance minister who, miffed at Subbarao's refusal to cut interest rates at his bidding, threatened to 'walk alone'. But for the rest, RBI guys have been treated with respect. Credit for this must go equally to RBI and to the political class.

Yet, on the face of it, the Fed should be seen as far more apolitical. Appointment of the Fed chair is done by the US president, but must be approved by the senate. In contrast, the RBI governor is appointed



Despite his denial regarding political influence on Fed rate actions, Powell has to constantly worry that any action the Fed undertakes could be misconstrued

ChatGPT

SHAIRI

OF THE DAY

In Pakistan, they've introduced yoga,

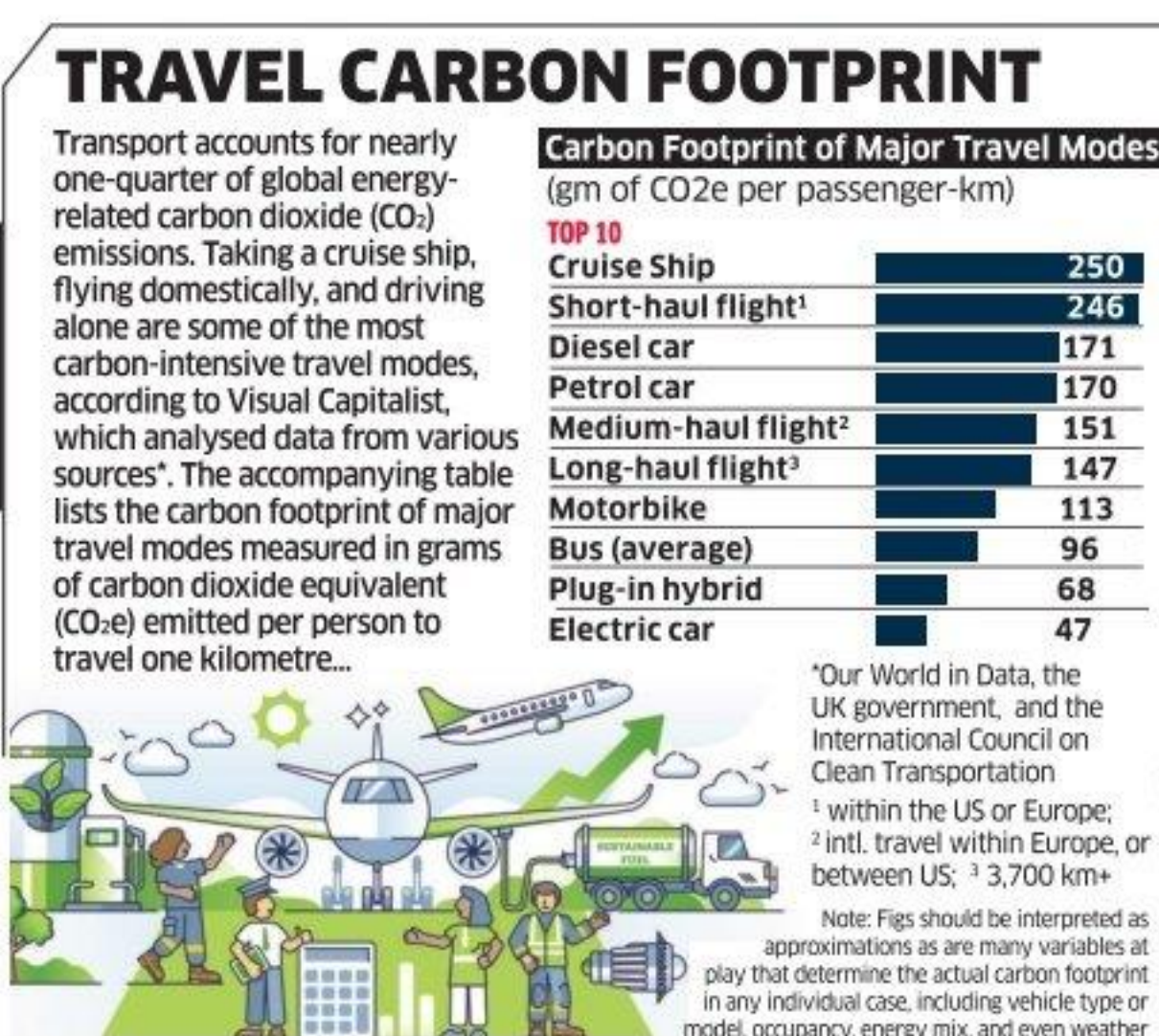
So, Indians are cheering like it's a saga.

But isn't it the wrong ticket,

Like thinking Christians own cricket?

But that's how we are from here to Saratoga.

...



Bell Curves

R Prasad

What was the turning point in your life, boss?

For Clear Air, Go Nuclear



Amit Garg, Saritha Sudharmma Vishwanathan & R B Grover

Globally, nuclear energy will play an important role in decarbonising and achieving net-zero targets. Under the 2015 Paris Agreement, 14 countries have assigned a significant role to nuclear energy in their nationally determined contributions (NDC), and 20 countries have included nuclear power in their long-term strategies (LTS). Also, 30 countries are considering commencing nuclear power programmes, while another 20 have expressed interest in initiating nuclear programmes.

According to the International Energy Agency report, 'Renewables 2022: Analysis and Forecasts to 2027', nuclear energy would play a significant role in providing stable base-load power to India's future energy mix toward achieving net-zero emissions. India, with its indigenous nuclear programme, is poised to significantly increase its nuclear capacity. GoI has demonstrated its commitment to this growth.

However, due to trade bans on uranium imports prior to 2008, and shortage of indigenous uranium, momentum for energy production from nuclear sources was hindered. Relaxation of guidelines by Nuclear Suppliers Group regarding nuclear trade with India has changed this scenario.

India's LTS now estimate a threefold increase in installed nuclear capacity by 2032, with plans to explore a greater role for nuclear energy and increase support for R&D. An April 2024 IIM Ahmedabad study, 'Synchronising Energy Transitions Towards Possible Net-Zero for India: Affordable and Clean Energy for All', has explored India's pathways under three economic growth scenarios and four net-zero scenarios (at a medi-

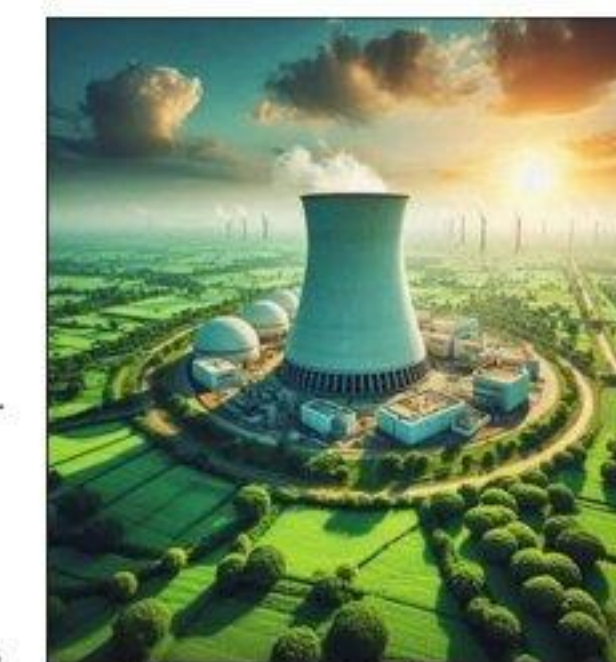
um growth rate) to achieve clean and affordable electricity.

Each of the first three net-zero scenarios emphasises the thrust on nuclear power (NZ1), fossil fuels with carbon capture and utilisation (NZ2), RE (NZ3), and the fourth is an integrated scenario (NZ4). Nuclear generation capacity can save 240-550 MTCO₂e (million tonnes of CO₂-equivalent) under NDC scenarios, and about 605-1,995 MTCO₂ under net-zero scenarios.

Nuclear generation capacity in 2070 will be in the 78-331 GW range (with a share in the supply mix of around 12-50%). Nominal levelised cost of electricity — a measure of average net present cost of electricity generation for a generator over its lifetime — for NZ1 2070 stabilises around 40% below that for 2020 NDC medium growth scenario at ₹2.76/kWh.

Simultaneously, investment needs for NZ1 are lower than the other three NZ scenarios. However, additional investments required in NZ1 are about 43% above those in NDC medium-growth scenario, but could be partly met through carbon markets.

Economies of scale could provide further savings. Its variable costs are low, as compared to fossil with carbon capture, utilisation and storage, or RE with storage technologies. So, nuclear energy could be the winner with almost zero GHG emissions, and the lowest landed price of electricity for the end consumer. As a viable alternative to coal and gas,



Atomise and breathe

nuclear energy offers a host of benefits:

- Provides grid stability.
- Reduces air pollution.
- Diversifies fuel sources.
- Creates new, well-paying jobs.
- Requires less land compared to RE sources.

To fully harness these benefits, India needs to develop a strategy to build nuclear capacity, including a strategic reserve of nuclear fuel to ensure a steady supply over the lifetime of its reactors. While this will help strengthen energy security, scaling up required nuclear capacity and generation in the next couple of decades will be challenging. Despite having the lowest investment needs among all net-zero scenarios, the nuclear option is perceived as a high-cost option due to the prevailing narrative that looks at costs only at the generator end.

Barriers include investment required to develop nuclear facilities and social challenges, such as the 'not in my backyard' viewpoint. Despite India pursuing a closed fuel cycle that gives rise to the lowest waste per unit of electricity generated, the narrative from countries pursuing an open-cycle approach is thought to apply to India.

India has a declared strategic programme and follows stringent rule-based export controls. Proliferation concerns from expansion of nuclear energy is not an issue. India has mastered pressurised heavy water reactor technology and is about to deploy its first indigenously developed fast breeder reactor. Conscious of its fuel resource profile, India continues to develop advanced concepts to ensure that nuclear can play an important role in India's net-zero scenarios for a long time.

Financing nuclear growth will become crucial for achieving net-zero targets. Scaling up nuclear energy will require investments, and further evolution of policies and regulations. India needs to include nuclear energy in its sustainable finance taxonomy to mobilise financial flows.

Garg is professor, IIM Ahmedabad, Vishwanathan is assistant professor, Kyoto University, Japan, and Grover is member, Atomic Energy Commission, GoI

MELODY FOR MONDAY

Meet Na Mila Re Mann Ka

R D Burman, Majrooh Sulttanpuri, Kishore Kumar

This song starts with the happiest of guitar strums and an infectious scratch of the ghüro. Then comes the cheery hum and 'hey hey', and you think, 'Oh my, this is a cheerful song!' And, then, you hear Kishore Kumar's carefree, resonating voice: 'Meet na/ mila/ re mann ka'. As RD Burman's melody from Hrishikesh Mukherjee's 1973 Amitabh-Jaya-starring film, Abhimaan, trips along, you wonder how such a song so lively 'sing' words so sad — 'I (still) haven't met a companion of my mind'.

Melded to Majrooh Sulttan-



pur's long-ing lyrics, the music and sing-ing are con-trapuntal—the very opposite

'moods' heighten the tragedy: of the singer's downright despair in not being able to find someone to share his thoughts with. When Kishore comes to the lines, 'Mann mera dharti par/ Aur kabhi ambar mein/ Usko dhunda/ har nagar mein/ har dagar mein/ Gali gali dekha/ nayan uthaye...' (My mind is on the ground/ Sometimes in the sky/ I search for that someone/ in every town/ in every path/ I see every lane/ with my gaze lifted...), we sense desperation.

Here's a sad song camouflaged in merriment. Or, perhaps, a happy song drenched in sadness.



THE SPEAKING TREE

Life and Letters

NARAYANI GANESH

Reading books is a good habit, we are told. You can get information on facts, figures and opinions, on everything and all subjects, and also enjoy creative storytelling via fiction. Is bookish 'knowledge' sufficient to see us through? Not at all, according to mythologist Joseph Campbell and many other thinkers. In a letter to HK Stone, Campbell wrote: 'The thought of growing into a professor gives me the creeps. A lifetime to be spent, trying to kid myself and my pupils into believing that the thing that we are looking for, is in books! I don't know where it is — but I feel pretty sure that it isn't in books.'

A story is told of how legendary editor of The Times of India, literary critic and famous columnist, Sham Lal, would be engrossed in a scholarly tome on poverty, while beggars and peddlers knocked on his car window at the red light.

This does not take away from the fact that Lal was an intellectual, so erudite, knowledgeable and deeply respected, but sometimes, the experiential world out there may be bursting with a different kind of knowledge that may help us know even more than what books have to offer.

Campbell's words remind us that there is a 'felt reality' around us, 'transcending the capacities' of books to articulate what we need to know'. Kristina Dryza, expanding on Campbell's thoughts writes, 'The reality around and within us is just too expansive and too subtle to be captured by books and their words...'

Chat Room

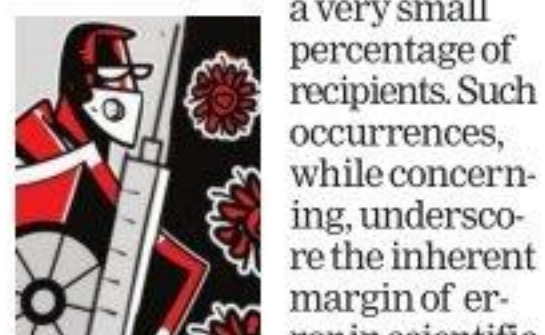
Taking Diplomatic Bull by the Horns

Apropos ET Roundtable, "India Not Xenophobic, But One of the Most Welcoming Nations" (May 4), S Jaishankar articulates well the foreign policy of the Modi government. He never minces words to put things in perspective. Today, India is on the threshold of another major transformation. From being the fifth-largest economy, India is fast moving towards becoming the third largest. This is an appropriate time for India to present its growth story, and project its strength in the international forum, and who better than the astute diplomat Jaishankar himself to do so.

SRINIVASAN UMASHANKAR
Nagpur

Risk a Side Effect Of Life-Saver Jab

This refers to AZ Vaccine Side Effect Rare, Occurs Within a Month of Getting Jab: Ex-ICMR Scientist' by Teena Thacker (May 3). The maker of the widely used Covishield vaccine, developed in record time in collaboration with Oxford University, has acknowledged potential rare side effects, including fatal blood clotting in



a very small percentage of recipients. Such occurrences, while concerning, underscore the inherent margin of error in scientific endeavours. The urgent global need for a Covid-19 vaccine led to swift R&D, with various approaches explored, including mRNA technology. Its widespread administration was instrumental in mitigating the devastating toll of the pandemic. It's essential to weigh the risks against the benefits.


AMARJEET KUMAR
Hazariabagh, Jharkhand

For Inner and External Peace

Apropos 'The Real Issue of Rising Xenophobia' (Just In Jest, May 4), silence may be golden but most of us have become addicted to noise, and the media and the entertainment industry are dependent on this addiction for their revenues. Problems arise when arguments and even elections are won based on which side can shout out the opposite views. Noise gets the upper hand in debates in legislatures and even in media discussions. The trend needs to be reversed if sanity is to be restored in governance, and administration of justice.

MG WARRIER
Mumbai

Letters to the editor may be addressed to
editet@timesgroup.com



CONTRAPUNTO

I have no axe to grind; only my thoughts to burnish

- GEORGE SANTAYANA

Mantri For Emigration

Global demographic trends are creating a huge opportunity for our workers. GOI needs a full-time minister to tap it

India topped the remittance global chart in 2023 with an inflow of \$125 billion, or 3.4% of GDP. That was a direct boost to the income of millions of families. As a report in **TOI** (The Great Indian Outplacement, May 5) showed, a number of families that benefitted from it would have to thank children who are engaged in blue-collar work. People are our greatest asset, if govts take steps to harness this resource.

Structural driver | We are in a century of demographic transformation. Wealthier countries are aging rapidly, leading to labour shortages. There's no way to offset this problem except through immigration. This is where India scores. Our median age is around 29, and we are home to millions of eager young people who are willing to fill the gaps in the labour market for blue-collar work. Kerala alone has people working in 182 countries, which is just 11 short of the full membership of the UN general assembly.

States take the initiative | Blue-collar workers are vulnerable to exploitation by agents because they lack the means to gather adequate information on potential employers. Many states have stepped in to fill that gap, for which they deserve praise. Kerala has a long tradition of doing so, but the initiative of states such as Telangana, Haryana and Jharkhand is impressive as it's a purposeful way of matching the needs of overseas employers with job aspirants in many areas, including skilling.

GOI can be a force multiplier | In future, all states will do well to have an emigration minister. However, given the structural factors shaping the global labour market, GOI needs to play a far more proactive role.

Emigration minister | The next govt should have a standalone minister for emigration. This cannot be an ornamental post. Given the paramount importance of jobs, this ministry will be at the heart of India's economic policy. It will have to liaise with MEA, skill development ministry and states. To make it effective, it will need the full backing of the PM.

Robotics and AI are crunching labour demand in manufacturing. Services are an alternative growing in importance. To realise this potential, economic policy needs to use govt's reach to plug gaps between individual aspirants and potential employers everywhere. It's not just about ensuring the safety of workers. Appropriate skilling through agencies such as NSDC will provide young Indians a competitive edge. Coordinating all this should be the job of the emigration minister.

Dodgytal

TN Police portal breach highlights the need for greater accountability on those storing sensitive personal data

The big data breach that hit Tamil Nadu Police last week is another demonstration of weak data security infra in the country. Hackers were not only able to access the department's Facial Recognition Software portal – which contains more than 60 lakh records of individuals, including photos, names, FIR numbers and details of police officers – but have also reportedly put the data on sale on the dark web.

Protecting data goldmine | Given India's huge population and growing digitisation, govt departments are increasingly storing massive volumes of data. This is also precisely why India is a big target for cybercriminals. Over the last couple of years there have been multiple data breaches, especially targeting the Indian healthcare sector. Last year, a server breach in ICMR compromised personal information of about 81 crore Indians who had taken Covid vaccines. In 2022, a ransomware attack at AIIMS-Delhi crippled e-hospital services.

National security threat | Apart from potential harm to people whose data is being pilfered, there's a clear national security risk here. We already have reports of Chinese data processing farms potentially collecting gigantic volumes of data from across the world, including India. Sensitive information of political leaders and VIPs falling into the hands of a strategic rival can be dangerous. North Korea is another known source of ransomware attacks. These need to be countered.

Greater accountability | India's cybersecurity infra includes agencies like the India Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT-IN). But most breaches are actually reported by foreign entities. We need to be far more proactive. Plus, there's little accountability for data breaches. India's data protection law gives sweeping exemptions to govt entities. But no one is penalised or fined when massive data hacks take place at their servers. A system of penalties needs to be instituted if cybersecurity infra is found wanting. That's the only way to keep our defences tight.

Treacly friends

Literally and happily in each other's hair until...

Bikram Vohra



Columnist based in Dubai

Expats tend to cobble their friendships at a frenetic pace. Pretty much like airport lounge bonding when strangers become confidantes till the flight lands and one is united with one's luggage, then it's goodbye Columbus see you never.

In the interim we tend to invade each other's homes since being in the same boat becomes the operative sentiment. Wives are close, children closer, weekends spent together, literally and happily in each other's hair and sharing everything, including our innermost secrets. The temporary texture allows for it. Then, as is this transient nature of expat relations, one family returns to their native land and there is much fond and emotional farewell with fervent promises of never letting the rope go.

So on a trip to Hong Kong where one such friend now resided, with milk of human kindness sloshing about inside me and fond ideas of recalling yesterday, I was all gungho. We had worked together, played together, partied together and now here I was in his neck of the woods, full of gifts ribboned in the memories of another day. I called. He answered. I said, hello, hello can you believe it, I am actually here.

There was a long treacly silence. Followed by another hesitation. He said, sorry who is that? Chilled water on my excited expectations. I said, hey it's me. More silence. I could visualise him saying to his wife, hiss, hiss it's that guy from Dubai, he is here. I said, are you on the line, can't hear you. He faked enthusiasm, telling me haltingly what a pleasant surprise it was hearing me (as pleasant as being stung by a nettle). Then he asked me the pivotal question, which is how long will you be staying? It is a wriggle room question because once you know the timeframe of this potential guest's presence on your turf you can formulate your get out of the corner plan.

I said Monday evening. He injected great relief and regret in a kind of pastiche of both sentiments and said oh great we are off to Vietnam today for a break but back Sunday evening, so must catch up Monday, will call you. All this accompanied by much gushing and asking how the lovely lady was. Lovely lady who made you great Indian meals and you yummied yummied all the way through them. Our togetherness was okay in expatland, another time, another place, not in Hong Kong. So the unsung, unopened gifts, like felled chess pieces, were placed one by one back in the suitcase because I knew it would be Monday and rainy days but no call would ever come.

QUESTION ON THE MARGIN

Modi's home state is likely to deliver big for BJP again, despite Rajput angst & Congress retrying KHAM. But will the wins be as big as 2019?

Bharat Hun



Columnist based in Ahmedabad

A Congress candidate from Surat dropped out of the race at the last minute. A number of Independent candidates followed suit, rushing to withdraw from the competition, leaving BJP with a Lok Sabha win without contest. A prominent Congress candidate from Ahmedabad quit the party to join BJP.

BJP juggernaut marches on | Since 1989, BJP has dominated every parliamentary election in Gujarat. In 2014 and 2019, it won all 26 seats. This year seems no different, perhaps its strongest wave yet. The party's 2022 victory will be remembered as one of the biggest wins by any party in the history of India's assembly elections. Congress is claiming opposition candidates are dropping out because there is no democracy in Gujarat, calling BJP 'lokshahi ni hatyari', democracy's killer. But chai shops are filled with gossip that candidates are dropping out because they're unwilling to be the political 'bali ka bakra' – sacrificial goat – destined for a loss by a humiliating margin.

KHAM 2.0? | In the mid-1980s Congress enjoyed a brief resurgence in Gujarat under the steam of the formidable KHAM (Kshatriya, Harijan, Adivasi, Muslim) alliance, gathered around an anti-reservation agenda. In recent elections Congress has tried to resuscitate KHAM, but with little success. A recent remark by junior Union minister Parshottam Rupala, however, renewed Congress's hope of a KHAM revival. Rupala said, "Rajput kings and states married their daughters instrumentally to British rulers (roti-beti na vyavahar)." A tsunami of Rajput protests crashed against Rupala's parliamentary candidacy, but BJP still decided to field him, saying he has apologised. As a result, many of KHAM's K and M (Kshatriya and Muslim) voters will now support Congress, which will try to ride the wave to consolidate the H and A (Harijans and Adivasis).

Patidar consolidation and more | In a bid to revive KHAM, Rahul Gandhi wielded a copy of the Constitution during his speech in Patan, warning his SC/ST audience that BJP is poised to change the Constitution and dissolve its provision of reservations. Modi retorted with a claim that Congress aims to turn the SC, ST, and OBC reservations over to Muslims. Reservation duels aside, Rupala's comments and Rajput protests have consolidated the Patidars, Gujarat's biggest dominant caste, from which Rupala hails, around BJP. Patidars, once among BJP's fiercest opponents, are now openly rallying in its support.

With most votes in hand in Gujarat, BJP continues to wrest ST votes into its "inclusive Hindu" fold. As part of the truculent Hinduisation of tribals, which the Sangh Parivar has long pursued in Gujarat,

Tata-Airbus aircraft manufacturing unit for IAF, and of snatching resources away from Maharashtra. Congress comments against the moving of the bull statue from Bombay Stock Exchange to Gujarat's new International Finance Tec-City (GIFT City) infuriated many in Gujarat.

Urbanisation advantage | Gujarat's aggressive urbanisation also plays into BJP's hand. According to a 2021 Niti Aayog report, 40% of Gujarat is now urban. And in Gujarat's cities BJP has no competition. The state's urban middle classes have taken to Modi's blend of development and Hindutva, and the many migrants in cities (estimated at 10%) tend to support BJP's development policies. It's not that urban Gujaratis are altogether content with the way their state is run. Talk of multiple problems ("samasya to bahut che") from sanitation to drinking water and unplanned development, is a common refrain. Widespread discontent with life in Gujarati cities continues to drive wave after wave of migration to Western countries. But the opposition is failing to capitalise on this disaffection, leaving little political choice.

Getting the votes out | On May 7, the people of Gujarat will decide whether the state will be a clean sweep again for BJP. The party's dazzling 2022 performance makes many believe that it may well do. But it will depend on the degree of enthusiasm that BJP has managed to generate among its voters. Slumping voter turnouts in the first two phases of the elections suggests that a mixture of smugness and ennui may be setting in.

The widespread belief that BJP will sweep the elections will do little to make voters, especially from the comfortable urban classes, wish to stand in long queues in the summer heat. As an old pastoralist said, "ani baar ras nathi" (this time [the election] is not interesting). But is this merely boredom or a red flag of India's slackening democratic drive?

The writer is a social anthropologist

Gujarat (26 seats) votes on May 7 for its single-phase LS election

Is 'The West' Worth Saving? Is The Idea Delusional?

There's hand-wringing on everything from Ukraine to Israel. A realistic take would show where others see hypocrisy, Western countries perceive virtue. That won't work anymore

Rashmee Roshan Lall



Columnist based in London

It's not often these days that a British PM, particularly the current ethnic Indian incumbent, gets kudos for renewing the West's pioneering cred in the same month he is slammed for setting a bad example to the rest of the world.

In mid-April, Rishi "no filter" Sunak pushed through the toughest anti-smoking law in the world, hailed by many as a likely global template for public health legislation. When up and running, it would impose a lifelong restriction on cigarette sales to anyone born after 2009 and living in UK, thereby protecting the youngest members of Gen Z from the number one preventable cause of death, disability and ill health.

Barely 10 days later, Sunak managed the passage through parliament of another tough piece of legislation, this time a deportation law that will outsource uninvited refugees to Rwanda. In the disapproving words of UN, it "hinders the rule of law" and "sets a perilous precedent globally".

Global benchmark? The weight given to these two pieces of British legislation is in line with the expansive idea long advanced by western politicians and policy wonks that their laws make or unmake global standards. Or as Samuel Huntington once put it, "the notion that the culture of the West is and ought to be the culture of the world".

This partly explains the West's intense disappointment that most non-western nations don't seem to share the same outrage over Russia's invasion of Ukraine, nor see it as a sign of collapsing international norms.

China's Xi Jinping dismisses "the so-called universal values of the West" as a new form of imperialism.

Just what is "the West"? The West often takes the evident geopolitical gap as a sign that the rest don't care for international rules

and that the West is the last defence of civilisation as we know it.

Cue the tendency almost every other day for politicians in Europe or America to invoke "the West" as an endangered entity. The latest is Britain's shortest-serving PM Liz Truss, whose solipsistic polemic on her 49 days in office is titled Ten Years to Save the West.

But just what is the West, considering non-western hemisphere countries like Australia and New Zealand (and often, even Israel) are part of the in-group? And is it worth saving?

We know something about the West, which busily exported mercenaries, missionaries, colonialists, language and legal systems worldwide in the last millennium. By many accounts, the West came into being in 480 BC, when the Athenians defeated a massive attempt by the Persians to militarily subdue Greece, then a geographical expression for a patchwork of city states.

Their victory allowed Athenians to develop their democratic culture, proto-Greece's legacy was inherited by Rome and passed on to modern Europe, creating the entity known as "the West". In the age of imperialism, Greek, Roman and Christian cultures were taken together as a solid block and labelled "western" civilisation, which was said to boast such exalted "classical" virtues as rationality, justice and democracy.

Two sides of the same coin? If the West now feels fragile and in need of saving, that's because the rest of the world is

increasingly prone to quote historian Roger Osborne's rueful observation: "...for every Leonardo there is a Mussolini, for every Beethoven symphony a concentration camp, for every Chrysler Building a My Lai massacre".

And then there is the West's self-serving defence of the so-called international order. There is the perceived hypocrisy on Israel's war on Gaza, even as students on American university campuses are arrested simply for protesting against nearly seven months of the brutal collective punishment of a whole people.

At a recent lecture in Washington, DC, the beating heart of today's West, Brazilian international relations professor Matias Spektor suggested that the only way forward was for western governments to change the incantatory refrain around the rules-based order. He said that instead of "fictionalising the differences between an enlightened West and a backwards rest around a 'standard of civilisation', should we not be pushing for a universal 'standard of truth' instead?"

Spektor was having a dig at western civilisational standards, the detritus that still remains in our decolonising world and which deems certain (western or western-leaning) cultures as better biological vectors of values such as democracy and human rights. That said, a universal standard of truth would be a compelling opening gambit for a long overdue real conversation between the West and the rest.

Calvin & Hobbes



The Inescapable Presence Of Absence

Jug Suraiya

In a recent interview with **TOI** following the release of his latest book, *Knife: Meditations on an Attempted Murder*, which narrates the near-fatal assault he suffered two years ago and which left him blinded in one eye, in response to a question regarding the role of art in society, Salman Rushdie replied, "Imagine a world without art. Imagine a world without books, music, painting, and film. What a barren world that would be."

Elaborating on the theme of imagined absence, he recalled an episode from his early career in advertising. Working on a campaign for a glass manufacturer, Rushdie's team used the eloquence of absence to showcase the importance of glass in everyday life.

The campaign used photographs in which glass was made conspicuous by

not being there. "It said imagine a world without glass. So there were walls with no windows, and tables with no glasses to drink from. It was a brilliant idea. Just take away the thing that is important, and show its importance by its absence."

In his *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre dramatically illustrated the overwhelming presence that absence can create. He walked into a café where he was expecting to meet his friend.

The café was full, but his friend was not there. The not-thereness of the friend filled the crowded room; in absentia the friend was more present in the café than the people who were actually there.

Rushdie's missing glass, and Sartre's missing friend, highlight the power of absence to make us see anew the

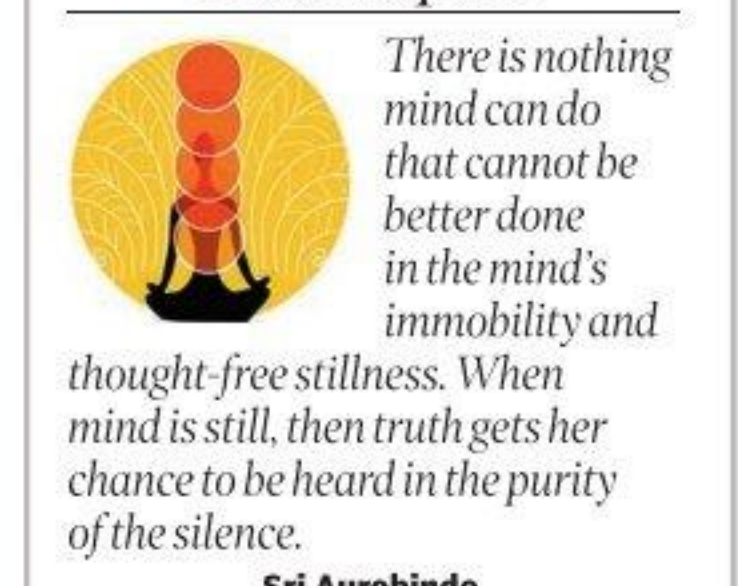
accustomed, the things, and situations, and people, that we take for granted and whose importance is often minimised or overlooked by us through consciousness made cursory and careless.

Absence can help to recreate our world for us, a world blurred by familiarity which is suddenly snapped into sharp focus by the emphatic exclusion of a single element in it which, like the metaphoric elephant in the room, or Ionesco's *Rhinoceros*, gets spotlight by its lack of acknowledged presence.

Absence can be a reawakening from the humdrum of the everyday, from what Tagore called "the sands of dead habit", to heighten perception of that which exists ordinarily through the extraordinary perspective of its projected non-existence.

What is most often overlooked – or

Sacredspace



Sri Aurobindo

There is nothing mind can do that cannot be better done in the mind's immobility and thought-free stillness. When mind is still, then truth gets her chance to be heard in the purity of the silence.

And the end of all our exploring/ Will be to arrive where we started/ And know the place for the first time," wrote TS Eliot. There are many forms and ways of exploration. Were we to close our eyes and, sightless, mentally minus ourselves from where we are, when we open them would we, coming back to the same place, really see it for the first time, in wonderment?

Nepal plays the hardball

Nepal is flexing its muscles by depicting Indian territories on its currency notes

In a recent development that has stirred regional tensions, Nepal has included certain disputed territories in its new currency notes. The move not only challenges India's sovereignty claims but also signals a significant alignment shift towards its northern neighbour, China. This seemingly innocuous act of updating currency notes has escalated into a diplomatic standoff and the growing influence of external powers in the region. The inclusion of the disputed territories, namely Lipulekh, Kalapani and Limpiyadhura, has sparked outrage in India, with officials condemning Nepal's actions as a violation of bilateral agreements and provocative steps that can further deteriorate the relations between the two countries. India has urged Nepal to respect sovereignty, return to dialogue and refrain from unjustified assertions. Earlier the relationship between New Delhi and Kathmandu became strained following Nepal's release of a political map in mid-May 2020, which incorporated territories like Lipulekh,



Kalapani and Limpiyadhura, previously depicted in India's November 2019 map. At the heart of the dispute lies historical ambiguity and differing interpretations of border demarcations. While Nepal claims that the territories rightfully belong to it based on historical treaties and cartographic evidence, India maintains control over these regions, citing its historical precedents and strategic imperatives. The dispute has simmered for decades, occasionally flaring up but never fully resolved.

The present move by Nepal has a lot to do with its new political leadership which is deliberately leveraging its proximity with China to browbeat India.

Besides, many other issues have also cropped up which have been a cause of concern for Kathmandu. India's Agniveer policy has also not gone down well with Nepal. What makes Nepal's move particularly noteworthy is its perceived alignment with China. Over the past few years, Nepal-China relations have strengthened considerably, fuelled by mutual economic interests and strategic cooperation. China has invested heavily in Nepal's infrastructure projects, including roads and telecommunications networks, enhancing connectivity between the two countries. Furthermore, Nepal's participation in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has deepened its economic dependence on Beijing, providing an alternative to traditional ties with India. Against this backdrop, Nepal's decision to incorporate disputed territories in its currency notes could be interpreted as a strategic gesture signalling its independence from Indian influence. It is indeed a reason to set off alarm bells in New Delhi and it should take some immediate steps to stop the drifting away of Nepal and becoming part of Chinese hegemony. It would be India's loss if Nepal also walked the Maldives' path. It is time to leverage historical India-Nepal ties and convince the new leadership that China is only going to use Nepal and suck it dry as it did many other nations.

PICTALK



Anganvadi workers take part in a voting awareness campaign ahead of the polling for Lok Sabha elections, in Jalaun PTI

Mastering self-leadership during work from home

As work dynamics evolve towards multi-location, knowledge-driven autonomy, employees' proactive task management is essential

While some suggest that work from home (WFH) offers greater autonomy, leading to increased family time and reduced commuting, others argue that it blurs the boundaries between work and home, potentially diminishing productivity. The co-location of work and home during WFH blurs the traditional separation between the workplace and the family domain. This integration can exacerbate conflicts between work and home responsibilities, resulting in heightened levels of job dissatisfaction, anxiety and disengagement from work. As individuals possess finite personal resources such as energy and attention, focusing on one role often depletes resources for another. For instance, individuals working from home full-time may frequently transition between work responsibilities and home duties, such as pausing work to attend to childcare or household tasks. These transitions can further strain individuals' capacity to effectively manage both work and personal responsibilities. Boundary theory has become



increasingly relevant in the context of WFH. Expanding upon this theory, it is observed that employees are more likely to transition between work and home responsibilities, resulting in heightened levels of job dissatisfaction, anxiety and disengagement from work. When employees work from home, both their work and home roles converge within the same physical space, creating a unique dynamic. According to boundary theory, the nature of these role transitions can significantly impact conflicts between work and home domains. Certain types of role transitions may facilitate the blending of work and home responsibilities. For example, interrupting work to attend to familial duties, such as picking up children from

school, can lead to conflicts arising from the home encroaching upon work time (home-work conflict). Subsequently, resuming work after attending to such responsibilities may trigger conflicts stemming from work encroaching upon home life (work-home conflict). Organisations play a pivotal role in supporting employees by offering flexibility, particularly on days when they work from home, thereby assisting them in managing conflicts that arise when their work and home roles intersect. However, relying solely on organisational support may not offer a comprehensive solution. The concept of self-leadership becomes invaluable during periods when employees face challenges arising from the blurred boundaries between work and home, particularly on remote workdays. The considerable expansion of remote and hybrid work in the aftermath of the pandemic underscores the importance for employees to proactively manage their responsibilities. Although remote work was not unprecedented,

its widespread adoption during and following the pandemic has been unmistakable. Evidence suggests that diverse remote work arrangements, encompassing hybrid models and full-time remote setups, are poised to remain prominent in the future of work. While remote work has revealed advantages such as increased flexibility and job satisfaction, its implementation has also presented new hurdles. These include diminished managerial support, which can dampen professional creativity, hinder the willingness to share new ideas and diminish confidence. The complexities of remote work, ranging from varying locations and home working conditions to frequent interruptions and diminished focus, emphasise the importance of self-leadership in today's professional realm. Moreover, in the remote work setting, there is a heightened need for adaptability and the ability to navigate challenges independently, which harmonises with the fundamental tenets of self-leadership. (The writer is associated professor, HR&OB, FIIB; views are personal)



TAVLEEN KAUR

Delhi school bomb hoax reflects rancor

The extremists might be unaware that their malicious actions could jeopardise the safety of their community. It falls upon the responsible segment of the community to rein in the extremists

The bomb hoax received by up to 285 schools in and around Delhi, reflects the burning anger among extremists. Although the threatening message from a Quranic text was dispatched from a Russian electronic source, evidently, the email identities were sent from Delhi, most probably from Indians. The email was most offensive to quote; "Did you real think that there would be no answer for all the evil you have done? Since childhood, the fire of jihad has been lit in our hearts, we have become this fire, Inshallah who preside over just retribution". The extremists may not realise that their nefarious activity can endanger the safety of their community. It is for the responsible section or the community to control the extremists. If they think that it is for the law-and-order authorities only to deal with such mischief, they are mistaken. The police and others can do so only much and no more. In short, it is not their function to protect the goodwill of the responsible section of the minority. If they do not do so, the Indian people almost would gain the impression the responsible section is also somewhat sympathetic towards the extremists' activity. Remember Partition is not a forgotten chapter of India's recent history. Pakistan and Bangladesh are standing minarets of Muhammad Ali Jinnah's Two Nation Theory whereby Hindus and Muslims cannot coexist in the same country. Hardly any Hindus have been allowed to remain in Pakistan, wherein Bangladesh non-Muslims are reducing in numbers by the week. Mohandas Gandhi told Dr Syama Prasad Mookherjee and Rajkumari Amrit Kaur the day before he was assassinated that India was a secular country because the division was a territorial and not religious one. This may have been a kind human gesture to protect the minority, but it was not the truth. Most Hindus, do not believe that it was not a division based on religion. The Hindu heart believes that it was the final settlement between Hindus and Muslims. Yes, Jawaharlal Nehru, Gandhi



and their followers are free to hold their views but that era has passed and a new age has dawned in India. Following in step with the moving train of time is wise and not getting stuck in the mud of the past. Here, it is also wise to remember that Europe no longer welcomes emigrants and the USA is reportedly slow and shows of much reluctance. The only open space appears to be Africa. One of the loud messages of the Israel-Hamas war in Gaza is that emigrants are no longer welcome even in a West Asian country, whether Egypt, Jordan or any other. No neighbour has lifted their fingers toward the trigger for saving the Gaza Heights. One reminded of the ghazal by Talat Mahmood "Jayein to Jayein Kahan". Mughal emperor Akbar understood clearly even as a boy it could be easy to rule India if he made Hindus who were 95 per cent of his empire safe, happy and well-treated. As a sign of his impartiality between religions, he went, for Muslims to the extreme extent of not performing sunnat or circumcision on his son Salim who rose to become Jahangir,

PARTITION IS NOT A FORGOTTEN CHAPTER OF INDIA'S RECENT HISTORY. PAKISTAN AND BANGLADESH ARE STANDING MINARETS OF MUHAMMAD ALI JINNAH'S TWO NATION THEORY, WHEREBY HINDUS AND MUSLIMS CANNOT COEXIST IN THE SAME COUNTRY

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

POLITICAL DIATRIBE

Madam — Apropos the news article, "Modi's advice to RaGa: 'Daro mat, bhaago mat'" published on May 5, this is my response. Contesting from Wayanad as well as Rae Bareilly is "cowardice" of "Shehzada" indeed. Still, contesting from Vadodra as well as Varanasi was an act of "supreme bravery" by a certain "Hindu Hriday Samrat"! Relentless stalking of the much-maligned "Pappu" and consistent character assassination of him provide direct testimony of who is in relentless fear of Rahul Gandhi! If Sonia Gandhi's adoption of the Rajya Sabha route proves her "escapist" mindset; hope this very same formula applies to S.Jaishankar to Ashwini Vaishnaw also! Lots of thanks for shedding a deluge of tears for the "atrocities" upon women in Sandeshkhali; but please let at least a single teardrop make an appearance for the spine-chilling gangrape murder and forced cremation of the Dalit girl in Hathras, murder of the little Kathua girl after gangrape and torture for days within a temple, mass gangrape and murder of women in 2002 Gujarat and gangrape and murder of Kuki women in Manipur after getting paraded naked! A Constitutional representative claimed that Hindus are "second class citizens" in Bengal, implying which community is "first class." This is blatant communalism in our diverse democracy.

Kajal Chatterjee | Kolkata

RAHUL'S STRATEGY

Madam — Apropos the news article, "Rae Bareilly Rahul's new battlefield," published on May 4, this is my response. Gandhis have ended weeks of suspense with a twist and chose Rae Bareilly over Amethi for Rahul Gandhi, there is no doubt Rae Bareilly is a safer seat than Amethi in the current electoral context. Putting Kishori Lal Sharma in Amethi, who is an old Congress loyalist and served both Amethi and Rae Bareilly in

Pakistan on Indian elections



Apropos, "Pak wants Rahul as PM to weaken Govt: Modi," The Pioneer, May 3, this is my response. Whatever may be the political rhetoric of PM Modi linking the Congress party to Pakistan, the fact is that the latter desperately wants the Modi-led NDA Government to lose in the ongoing elections for many reasons. In contrast to the Congress party's soft approach against terrorism sponsored by Pakistan, the

Modi Government's zero-tolerance stance has triggered the surgical strike on the Balakot, the den of terrorists, in retaliation to the Pulwama attack in 2019. The abrogation of Article 370 in Jammu and Kashmir by the Modi Government has rattled Pakistan and it even failed to garner the support from the international community on the matter.

Add to this, the NDA Government's categorical stand to not initiate the talks to break the logjam between India and Pakistan as long as the latter aids and finances the terrorists to target India has put Pakistan in a disadvantageous position, even as it is embroiled in the economic turmoil - while it badly needs the trade with India. In these contexts, Pakistan strongly believes the BJP Government under Modi has severely jeopardised its machinations to target India and its interests as well.

N Sadhasiva Reddy | Bengaluru

Gandhi's absence, has in a sense provided a cakewalk to the Smiriti Irani. It will be after 25 years that there are no Gandhis in the fray from Amethi. Gandhis not contesting from either of these seats would have been a bad political message and would have shattered the confidence of Congress workers. In the eventuality of Rahul Gandhi winning both Wayanad and Rae Bareilly, he has to leave either of the two and it would be better if he retains Wayanad to concentrate on the 2026 Kerala assembly elections and leave Rae Bareilly for his sister Priyanka Vadhra to contest in the by-poll. With this strategy, Gandhi would be able to revive the Congress in Uttar Pradesh because, without any Gandhi at the helm, Congress could not expect to revive itself in the State.

Bal Govind | Noida

ALLEGATION RESPONSE

Madam — Apropos to news report, "Woman staffer files complaint against Bengal Governor," published on May 3,

this is my response. A Raj Bhavan employee who works in the telephone room and stays at the residential quarters on the campus itself, complained of molestation against West Bengal (WB) governor C.V. Ananda Bose on Thursday evening, introducing an element of the unprecedented in Bengal politics and pitting the Trinamool Government and the governor's office in direct conflict in the middle of an election season. It's important to investigate the allegations against Bose carefully.

A central agency should investigate under a Supreme Court judge. If the TMC Government is found to be trying to defame him, it should be scrapped. If there is any truth to the allegations, the Governor should also be punished. The truth must be revealed and the innocent must be treated with full dignity.

Bidyut Kumar Chatterjee | Faridabad

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

FIRST COLUMN

SUDARSHAN KRIYA: A KEY TO A PEACEFUL LIFE

A transformative path overcoming addiction with redemption



Some years ago, while I was posted at Gorakhpur, an Art of Living devotee happened to read my maiden book, *The Matter of the Mind*, wherein I narrated the efficacy of the Sudarshan Kriya technique and how it extricated me from the cesspool of alcoholism. Today by the grace of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar and the breathing technique of Sudarshan Kriya I am sober. The devotee connected me to a psychiatrist and soon along with two other faculty members, we began conducting courses for alcoholics and drug addicts at a rehab centre. They were around 40 and we were three. Some looked menacing, others disenchanted, a few engulfed by ennui. But in our arsenal was the potent cassette of Sudarshan Kriya enveloped with the divine benediction of Gurudev. We began with gentle warm-ups. This was followed by pranayama and finally Sudarshan Kriya. A few hardened addicts attempted to derail the Kriya. But the febrile minds gradually settled as the rhythms of Soham resonated in the dingy hall. **Meaning of Sudarshan Kriya** The unique breathing technique of Sudarshan Kriya is the fulcrum of the Happiness Programme of the Art of Living. Su means proper, Darshan implies vision and Kriya is a purifying action. Through the actions of our breath, we appreciate a proper vision of who we are. It is momentous to understand that nature runs on a rhythm. For instance, the sun rises and sets at a particular time, similarly, seasons arrive and exit at predetermined times. Our emotions, feelings and thoughts are all cast in the symphony of rhythm. We are unable to distinguish between cacophony and symphony in this frenetic pace of life which is cannonaded by innumerable thoughts. When sounds are harmonised by the syllable of Soham we can term it as magical music.



Enlightenment is not accruing anything providential but harmonising our whole being rhythmically. During the breathing process participants feel varied sensations, emotions, laughter and weeping among others. Chanting “Soham” to match one’s breath with a Guru’s guidance is a relaxation technique that releases stress and promotes relaxation. Studies show that it can improve heart rate, cognitive function, breathing patterns and calmness in both mind and body. It may also have positive impacts on the endocrine system and potentially prevent Alzheimer’s disease. This technique increases the body’s energy levels. This wonderful knowledge and wisdom have triggered humaneness to blossom. Every cell and particle of the body overflows with jollity and life is abundant with the glow of love and the body becomes the wick. Love and belongingness become a natural process of our inner being if practised unflinchingly. Several practitioners feel they can practice the breathing technique at home. But that is only walking half the path. It is indispensable and paramount that one must practice the technique daily and attend the follow-up once a week, where a certified Art of Living teacher plays the chant of Soham in Gurudev’s voice as it reinvigorates the body and mind. One should also be wary of imitations available on YouTube these days. Breath is the very kernel of our very existence. *(The writer is the CEO of Chhattisgarh East Railway Ltd. and Chhattisgarh East West Railway Ltd. He is a faculty of the Art of Living; views are personal)*

Consequences of illusionary conspiracy

The wounds from the Easter Sunday Massacre linger, but within Sri Lankans’ resilience lies a beacon of hope, illuminating a path forward amidst profound despair



NILANTHA ILANGAMUWA

After the Easter attack tragedy, there arose a chorus, delving into the search for a “mastermind” behind the barbaric attack. Known as the Easter Sunday Massacre, on 21st April 2019, eight suicide bombers detonated themselves, targeting selected places in Colombo and Batticaloa, resulting in the deaths of over 260 innocent people and injuring hundreds more. A former Attorney General, a key figure in this discourse, ignited speculation by suggesting a possible hidden agenda. However, his evasion of the court and avoidance of investigators seeking clarification on his previous Statements only intensified suspicions. Politicians, social activists, journalists and even ordinary citizens unwittingly propagated a conspiracy theory based on prejudices and unverified media reports. From my perspective, this conspiracy theory inadvertently served a unique purpose amid the chaos and irregularities. It acted as a temporary balm, diluting the rising tide of animosity against Muslims and briefly restoring social equilibrium. Without it, the nation risked a recurrence of the 1983 ethnic riots, albeit on a larger scale. Yet, as the conspiracy theory gained traction, it altered the societal psyche, fostering normalcy among diverse ethnic groups, albeit with attempts by some to exploit the situation. What remains lamentable is that this theory misled the public and squandered an opportunity to establish a socio-legal framework for preventing future occurrences. During my conversation with Malith Jayathillake, former National List Member of Parliament and head of the Sectoral Oversight Committee on National Security appointed by then-President Maithripala Sirisena, the overlooked reality became stark. The report he presented in February 2020 outlined proposals for formulating and implementing laws to ensure national security, eradicate new terrorism and extremism by fostering unity among races and religions. Regrettably, this invaluable contribution by lawmakers was largely ignored. Jayathillake dismisses the notion of a conspiracy behind the attacks, recognising instead a meticulously planned suicide mission inspired by the ideology of the Islamic State. Concurrently, Dr Ameer Ali from Murdoch University’s School of Business and Governance dispels conspiracy notions, attributing the attack to subsequent political manipulation. Yet, in probing the roots of extremism, he identifies a turning point in 1977 when the country embraced the free market. Within certain segments of the Muslim communities, exclusivism emerged, alienating inclusivism and sowing the seeds for the proliferation of extreme ideas within the societal fabric. In the aftermath of the tragedy, about a month later, I engaged in an interview with Jonah Blank, a Principal Investigator and Senior Political Scientist for RAND Corporation. Blank astutely highlighted two critical aspects of the Easter Sunday bombings in Sri Lanka. Firstly, he emphasised that the attack was a result of political negligence rather than being solely classified as an intelligence failure by various parties. Secondly, Blank pointed out that the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) did not choose Sri Lanka; rather, Sri Lankan extremists opted for allegiance to ISIS. Addressing the ongoing political crisis in the country, Blank remarked, “When the



AMID THIS TURBULENT PERIOD, THE FIFTH ANNIVERSARY OF THE EASTER MASSACRE SERVES AS A DISTRESSING REMINDER OF THE COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY TO LEARN FROM THE PAST AND FORTIFY THE NATION AGAINST POTENTIAL THREATS

nation’s two top officials are locked in open conflict, they can’t cooperate to ensure the safety of the citizens.” Despite my interview with Blank becoming a talking point in various media circles and social groups, rational arguments and factual information struggled to counter the persistence of conspiracy theories. Complicating matters further, a full four years following the tragic incident, a British television channel not only fuelled baseless speculation but later begrudgingly admitted to a shocking lack of substantial evidence backing the allegations. These unfounded claims stemmed from a lone source purportedly recruited by a United Nations agency, casting a dark shadow over the entire narrative. Amidst the discourse, I observed a political theatre unfolding, overshadowing the much-needed societal discussion. Those involved seemed more focused on accusing one another rather than earnestly seeking the truth. In the last five years since this barbaric attack, committees appointed by the President and Parliament have conducted investigations, producing lengthy reports. However, there is a noticeable absence of dialogue about future threats and the potential aftermath. The tragic events unfolded against the backdrop of a nation grappling with its political identity and leadership struggles. Blank’s insights into political negligence shed light on a systemic issue that extended beyond intelligence failures. Sri Lanka’s socio-political terrain, marred by internal conflicts and power struggles, created an environment ripe for extremist ideologies to take root. The intricate web of political discord, coupled with a failure to prioritise national security, laid the groundwork for the devastating Easter Sunday attacks. As the media frenzy surrounding conspiracy theories intensified, genuine efforts to understand the

root causes of the attack were drowned out. Blank’s observations about the political crisis resonated deeply, underscoring the importance of unity among leaders during times of national peril. However, the cacophony of blame-shifting and finger-pointing persisted, hindering the nation’s ability to address the multifaceted challenges posed by this emerging social phenomenon. Amid this turbulent period, the fifth anniversary of the Easter massacre serves as a distressing reminder of the collective responsibility to learn from the past and fortify the nation against potential threats. The committees’ findings, though crucial, must be more than backdated analyses; they should serve as a foundation for proactive measures and policies to safeguard Sri Lanka’s future. The narrative must evolve beyond the immediate aftermath to address the lingering societal scars and instil a renewed sense of resilience and preparedness. After spending nearly five years immersing myself in a myriad of materials and conducting extensive interviews with numerous sources on this heinous crime, I am compelled to acknowledge the absence of any substantive facts supporting conspiracy theories. Instead, what emerges is the chilling reality of negligence and deliberate ignorance in addressing extremism and the imperative need for robust de-radicalisation efforts. I opt to accentuate the triumph of our adversaries—a triumph exacerbated by the gross negligence and underestimation displayed by defenders of national security and political stability. Our genuine focus must now pivot resolutely towards preventing the recurrence of such crimes and sculpting a secure future for our nation, a nation that has too often lived amidst violence rather than peace, grappling with both internal and external threats. The repercussions of the Easter massacre extend

far beyond the economic sphere, infiltrating into an unprecedented degeneration of societal values. Regrettably, as we mark the fifth anniversary of the attacks, a pressing and profound necessity emerges for a narrative shift—one that moves beyond unsubstantiated accusations aimed at specific individuals. We must transcend the cycle of blame and retrospective scrutiny, opting instead for thorough approaches that delve into the underlying causes of extremism, fanaticism and terrorism regardless of ethnic or religious affiliations. This calls for a holistic approach, encompassing not only the reinforcement of intelligence and security protocols but also the fostering of a society that celebrates inclusivity, empathy and constructive discourse. The journey toward healing and rebuilding necessitates a sincere effort from all corners of society. Ultimately, the aftermath of the Easter Sunday bombings underscores the resilience of the Sri Lankan people in the face of immense adversity. Looking forward, it is paramount to harness this collective strength and channel it into comprehensive strategies. These must not only confront immediate threats but also lay the foundations for a future characterised by security and harmony. The lessons distilled from this tragedy should propel the nation towards a collective commitment—a commitment to unity, understanding and the prevention of recurring horrors. Otherwise, in a society where the majority languishes in a deep slumber, indulging in unproven conspiracies and scapegoating a select few, we will only rouse from our stupor when the next tragedy inevitably befalls us. *This is the second part of the article on five years of Easter attack in Sri Lanka. concluded (The writer is a Sri Lankan journalist. Views are personal)*

Pakistani YouTubers: The art of subtle propaganda

As consumers of digital content, it is crucial to discern between genuine discourse and agenda-driven narratives

Today’s warfare is increasingly characterised by information warfare tactics. Social media serves as an ideal weapon for conducting modern conflicts where the battle for narratives and perceptions plays a crucial role in shaping outcomes. In this digital context, the emergence of Pakistani YouTubers has garnered significant attention in India over the past five years. Their channels span various genres from reaction videos to those featuring interactions with common people in Pakistan and podcasts and discussions on geopolitics. However, a closer look reveals a subtle yet concerning trend in their content. Initially, these YouTubers sought to attract Indian viewership by praising India



SULAGNA MOHANTY

unabashedly. They lauded India’s policies and economic growth and even expressed admiration for Prime Minister Modi and the BJP. Their narratives echoed sentiments of unity and regret over the partition, portraying India’s economic liberalisation in the 1990s as a commendable move. This strategic approach garnered them millions of Indian subscribers. Even edu-

cated Indians appreciated such rare, seemingly sane views and analyses from Pakistani youth. At first, it was perplexing to witness the sudden change in tune from Pakistan, a country historically marred by animosity towards India. Suddenly, Pakistani YouTubers were singing praises for Jawaharlal Nehru as the best Prime Minister and socialism as the ideal policy for India. This abrupt shift raised eyebrows, especially considering Pakistan’s track record of hostility towards India over the past 70 years. So, it begged the question how was it that Pakistanis have only now discovered virtues in Indian leadership and policies that they previously overlooked or actively opposed? But still, these

YouTubers were embraced by Indians with open arms, evident from the predominance of views and comments on their videos from India. However, as time passed, their mask began to unravel. Channels focusing on geopolitics gradually began to push their agenda subtly. Considering Pakistan’s precarious economic situation, these YouTubers advocated for the resumption of trade with India which was halted by their Prime Minister Imran Khan in 2019 as a protest against India’s decision to revoke Article 370 in Kashmir. They openly criticised Imran Khan’s decision, labelling it as foolish given the adverse impact it had had on Pakistan’s economy. However, recently when the

Indian Government did not reciprocate to the India-Pak trade agenda, these YouTubers’ tones shifted dramatically towards anti-India and pro-China propaganda. Suddenly, they started painting India as a regressive Hindu country with an authoritarian Government where minorities as well as the democracy are allegedly in grave danger. Now, they consistently invite guests onto their channel providing them with a platform to perpetuate anti-India and anti-Indian narratives. It is striking how these Pakistani YouTubers seldom address the pressing issues within their own country. They seem conspicuously silent on the plight of minorities particularly the violence perpetrated against them.

While they are quick to produce videos condemning alleged injustices against Muslims in Palestine and India, they conveniently overlook similar atrocities within Pakistan. Some YouTubers remain silent on the oppression of Muslims in China, despite evidence of human rights abuses against Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang. This raises questions about the sincerity of their activism and suggests geopolitical influences on their narrative. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that these Pakistani YouTubers also openly criticise their Government and army, a rarity in Pakistan where dissent against the establishment is often met with severe repercussions. This raises suspi-

cions about their affiliations, true intentions and ulterior motives behind their digital presence. One cannot help but wonder if these YouTubers are planted by some foreign agencies to serve as mouthpieces for their agenda. Here, the concern is that many Indian youths, unaware of this shift, continue to consume their content, inadvertently perpetuating the agenda. Many Indian intellectuals and geopolitical experts have begun to criticise these YouTubers for their manipulative tactics. Interestingly, this manipulation is not only limited to India but has been extended to Bangladesh too as these podcasters churn out videos portraying the 1971 war as a mistake. They label West Pakistan’s attempt to

suppress and colonise East Pakistan as evil and this new narrative aims to attract Bangladeshi viewers first and subtly push their agenda later. In the era of information, overload critical thinking is our best defence against manipulation. Hence, it is imperative to recognise and address this subtle propaganda and analyse the content the Indians consume. As consumers of digital content, it is crucial to discern between genuine discourse and agenda-driven narratives. Everyone needs to realise and understand that India stands for peace and brotherhood but not at the expense of its national security. *(The writer is an academician; views are personal)*

The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Raking up xenophobia

Biden's potshots at India, Japan out of place

US President Joe Biden's bracketing of allies India and Japan with Russia and China in a campaign speech could be attributed to political expediency. Speaking at a fundraiser last week, Biden sought to bring new immigrants into the party fold by praising their decision to opt for America. He also tried to placate the cynics within the party over the recent unabated immigration that has overwhelmed America's border with Mexico. Biden may have succeeded in neither attempt when he alleged that there was a direct link between the 'faltering economies' of the four countries and their 'xenophobic' attitude towards immigration. Other countries can speak for themselves, but it is a stretch to call India xenophobic or pathologically averse to foreigners. Post-Independence India has had no refugee policy; political calculations have decided the kind of reception given to those fleeing persecution or an economic meltdown, as is the case in the US. The Citizenship Amendment Act, cited by Foreign Minister S Jaishankar to counter Biden's comment, is limited in scope and intent. But migrants since ages have found a happy home here, though it was crowded, complex and competitive. From a foreign policy standpoint, Biden was tarring countries that are vital American partners at a time when the Great Power rivalry is back and there is no longer any undisputed superpower. Both India and Japan, whom he called xenophobic, are part of the Quad that offers strategic and economic competition to China. The ceaseless hounding of the Indian government by the masters of black operations in the Gupatwant Singh Pannun case is also ill-timed. To remain on top of the perch in an evolving world order, the US must bolster its network of regional alliances and institutions.

Toxic waste disposal

Extinguish the suffocating fumes in Nuh

THE incessant burning of toxic industrial waste at Khorī Khurd and Khorī Kalan villages of Nuh in Haryana, bordering Rajasthan's industrial town of Bhiwadi, paints a grim picture of environmental degradation and human suffering. Sadly, for over a decade, despite complaints to the authorities, the nearly 2,500 households of the twin villages have been enduring the suffocating fumes emanating from chemicals that are illegally disposed of, turning their homes into a hazardous gas chamber as hundreds of tonnes of chemical waste are brought to these sites and set afire every night. Their plight reflects the apathy of the authorities. The distressing accounts of a surge in chronic thoracic, pulmonary and ophthalmic ailments among children and elders underscore the urgent need to intervene. The adverse consequences extend to wildlife and crops, amplifying the ecological crisis. Haryana has been at loggerheads with Rajasthan over the illegal discharge of industrial waste into Nuh. The failure to enforce regulations and curb illegal dumping activities points to a systemic disregard for the welfare of marginalised communities. The Central Government, along with state and local authorities, must take steps to shut down the illegal disposal units, impose stringent penalties on the violators and implement comprehensive remedial measures to mitigate the long-term effects of contamination. The National Green Tribunal's (NGT) intervention could be crucial in ensuring accountability and a swift resolution of this problem. By taking suo motu cognisance of the matter, the NGT can mobilise resources and expertise to expedite corrective efforts and provide much-needed relief to the affected people. The special medical camps organised following the Nuh District and Sessions Court's order to the health authorities to assess the impact of waste fires are a welcome initiative.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, TUESDAY, MAY 6, 1924

Swarajya Party programme

SINCE the meeting of the Executive Council of the Swarajya Party was held recently at Bombay, some doubt has arisen in the mind of the public as to the exact position of the party and the change, if any, in its policy and programme. No statement of an authoritative kind has yet been made as to the results of the Juhu discussions or of the subsequent Bombay meeting of the Swarajists; and their continued reticence in this respect has created the impression, rightly or wrongly, that the results of these proceedings are not altogether satisfactory. Some light, however, has been thrown on the question in the interview granted last week by Mr A. Rangaswami Iyengar, President of the Tamil Nadu Swarajya Party to a representative of *The Hindu*. He admitted that various conflicting rumours were circulated regarding Mahatma Gandhi's attitude to the council-entry question and some of those who started them did so for sensational purposes rather than for promoting common understanding and plan of work for the national cause. He was not at liberty to disclose what precisely took place at the meetings and conferences or what may be expected finally on the question of council entry. "So far as the Swarajya Party is concerned," he said, "their anxiety is to appeal to Mahatma Gandhi's goodwill and sympathy, as well as support and sanction to whatever extent it may be possible. They are eager to convince that on most of the items of their programme, they have tried to the best of their lights to frame and carry out according to their conceptions the principles of non-co-operation to the extent to which they are committed to it in the Congress, apart from the general theory or philosophy of non-violence and non-co-operation."

OPINION

Taking on mighty Jewish lobby in US

Protesting students want their rich alma maters to disinvest from Israel-linked companies



THE course of Israel's nearly seven-month-old war on Gaza is not the reason for the protests that are now convulsing campuses in the US. It is only a symptom, not the disease. The disease is the stranglehold that Israel and the near-omnipotent Jewish lobby in the US have systematically developed and put on almost every important aspect of American life over many decades. Young Americans finally want to break free from the vice-like grip of the Jewish lobby, which makes a mockery of the choices and freedom that they are taught in schools to be embedded in the soul of the US. For Indian readers to understand this state of affairs, take the case of Arun Gandhi, grandson of the Father of the Nation. He moved to the US in 1987 to do research at the University of Mississippi. In 2001, he founded the MK Gandhi Institute for Nonviolence, initially at a university in Memphis, Tennessee, where Martin Luther King Jr was assassinated. The institute later shifted when the University of Rochester in New York State offered to house it on its campus. In 2008, Gandhi wrote an article in the 'On Faith' section of *The Washington Post*, in which he perspicaciously foretold some of what is now going on in Israel. The American-Jewish lobby was unforgiving. It got the University of Rochester to extract Gandhi's resignation from the institute he founded. Hundreds of Jews, mostly American, trolled him on *The Washington Post* website, where the moderators of the 'On Faith' section had to grovel and



ON THE WARPATH: Historically, US students have been harbingers of change. AP/PTI

apologise to save their own skin and close the matter. Gandhi never wrote for this newspaper again. Other US newspapers attacked Gandhi in a media trial clearly influenced by the Jewish lobby. He profusely apologised for his initial post, but the American Jewish Committee said his apologies were inadequate. The redoubtable committee called his views 'reprehensible', as if he were a neo-Nazi, though he had only written a fraction of what today's campus protesters are saying about Israel. The end result was that Gandhi's career in the US was finished. For successive years, he had been feted in state Capitols, at the iconic John F Kennedy Library and Museum in Boston, and became associated with the Parliament of the World's Religions, first held in Chicago in 1893, when it was addressed by Swami Vivekananda. But once the American Jews turned on Gandhi, no one in the US could stand up to their lobby. After several attempts to salvage his legacy, he returned to India and died a broken man in Kolhapur last year. Shorn of the flood of disinformation, what are the US students demanding? Firstly, they want

Joe Biden's bravado against students is beginning to sound hollow after Brown University's compromise with the protesters.

their rich alma maters, like Columbia University in New York — home to Wall Street — to disinvest from companies which profit from Israel's war against the people of Gaza. It is a legitimate demand. In such activism, the students are merely taking a leaf out of similar campus agitations in the 1980s demanding that US companies stop investing in racist South Africa. Those countrywide student protests forced the US Congress to sanction White-ruled South Africa under its Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act. The student protests subsequently spread to Europe and forced continental conglomerates to stop investing in countries that prac-

tised apartheid. Secondly, they want Columbia's prosperous university endowments to be transparent about their investments — a fair demand. Thirdly, they call for amnesty for all students and faculty who have participated in protests. Agitators in other US campuses have similar demands. Last week, students at Brown University, an Ivy League institution in Providence, Rhode Island, ended their protests after the university's governing body agreed to vote on a proposal to divest its \$6.6-billion endowment from companies with any affiliation to Israel. US President Joe Biden's bravado against US students is beginning to sound hollow after Brown University's compromise with the protesters, which may well be a precedent in ending the ongoing campus agitations. Historically, from racial segregation through the Vietnam quagmire and the more recent Iraq war, US students have been harbingers of change. However, taking on the Jewish lobby and Israel will be a more formidable task than anything that they have done before. In 1985, the US government had arrested Israel's most valuable spy to date, Jonathan Pollard

was first an employee of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and later worked for an important unit of the US Naval Intelligence Command. Over the years, Pollard sold to Israel several volumes of the National Security Agency's manuals on America's intelligence-gathering process. He also compromised the safety of thousands of people who cooperated with the CIA worldwide by giving their names and other details to Israel. Pollard pleaded guilty in court and was sentenced to life imprisonment in 1987. Such is the audacity of the Jewish-American lobby and Israel that shortly after Pollard was sentenced, they began a campaign within the US for his release. In 2011, they managed to enlist the support of former US National Security Adviser and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, who wrote to then President Barack Obama, seeking commutation of Pollard's sentence. Kissinger was a Jewish émigré from Germany to the US. Nearly 40 Jewish-American Congressmen sought clemency for the man who other Americans viewed as an unforgivable traitor in their midst. Prominent non-Jews, including half a dozen former US Defence Secretaries, were agast and opposed clemency. As Vice-President, Biden opposed commutation of Pollard's sentence. No one could stand in the Jewish lobby's way. At the end of 2015, the convicted Israeli spy was released on parole. While he was in jail, Israel granted Pollard citizenship. Three-and-a-half years ago, he emigrated to Israel, flown to Tel Aviv like a hero on the private jet of a Jewish-American billionaire. Unlike older Jewish-Americans, who have memories of the Holocaust, their new generation is more American than Israeli — like the younger Cuban-Americans in Miami who are not inimical to a Communist Havana. That explains the large presence of Jewish students in the ongoing protests. It is a good augury for the US and the future of the Jewish community in America.

“While democracy in the long run is the most stable form of government, in the short run, it is among the most fragile.” — Madeline Albright

Marx, Darwin and London's museums

MAHABIR S JAGLAN

DURING a recent trip to London, my visits to the Natural History Museum and the British Museum gave me an insight into the connection between two legendary thinkers, Charles Darwin and Karl Marx. At the history museum, I saw a life-sized statue of a man sitting on a pedestal — it was Darwin, who wrote one of the most celebrated scientific treatises, *On the Origin of Species*, in 1859. The impact of this book was not confined to natural sciences; it also influenced the methodology and themes of studies in social sciences. The relevance of Darwin's work to scientific social thinkers was brought to the notice of Marx by his friend, Friedrich Engels, who was one of the earliest readers of this book. Engels told Marx that Darwin's thesis on evolution represented a radical break from the dominant idea of that period that the universe, including the human world, was the creation of a supernatural power. It exploded the teleological myth that Homo sapiens and various species of organisms were the creations of the Almighty. After going through Darwin's work, Marx called it 'epoch-making'. During a walk around London, I noticed a poster of the 'Karl Marx Walking Tour'; instantly, I asked my son to buy its tickets. We joined this tour at Piccadilly Circus and traversed through Soho and adjoining areas of the city to witness the places and buildings associated with the life and works of Marx. The tour guide, Heiko Khoo, told us about the hardships of Marx's life and the political events associated with him, such as the 1848 revolution and the dramatic and bloody events of the 1871 Paris Commune. Our troupe of about 35 persons was taken to Red Line Pub in Soho, where German exiles formed a communist association, and Marx and Engels lectured and wrote the path-breaking work *The Communist Manifesto* in 1848 at the behest of the Communist League. Marx lived in different houses in Soho and areas around it between 1849 and 1883; four of his seven children died in London, including three in infancy, primarily due to poor living conditions. At 28, Dean Street, Soho, a blue plaque installed by the Greater London Council on a building reads, 'Karl Marx lived here 1851-56'. The final destination of our walking tour was the British Museum, which I had visited two days previously and taken a special interest in the sections on the history and culture of India and China. We were led to the reading room, in particular to the desk where Marx penned one of the most celebrated, inspiring and impactful books of human history, *Das Kapital*. Marx, who was born on May 5, 1818, continues to be regarded as a colossus of social, political and economic thought.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Lack of level playing field
Apropos of 'Politics of new and old dynasts' (*Nous Indica*), though various political parties are responsible for the rise of dynastic politics, it is the grand old party that is mostly targeted for it. But it is important to acknowledge that dynastic politics is not that bad an idea. The scions of a political family have the advantage of experience, and they know the tricks and nuances of politics better than an outsider. But a candidate belonging to a family of politicians must also have the will to serve the public, besides a clean image. The downside of dynastic politics is the lack of a level playing field in elections.
RAVI SHARMA, DHARIWAL

Scourge of dynastic politics
With reference to 'Politics of new and old dynasts' (*Nous Indica*); it was a thought-provoking read. The author has rightly pointed out how dynastic politics has been dominating the electoral scene. Though political parties often point fingers at one another for promoting dynastic politics, not one of them is above it. From the Abdullahs in Jammu and Kashmir to the Yadavs in Bihar to the Thackerays in Maharashtra, there is no stopping it. The fact that Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh, a controversial MP, managed a ticket for his son reflects the sad state of affairs. Only those leaders who can contribute to the development of the country should be fielded as candidates.
SUBHASH C TANEJA, GURUGRAM

A year filled with strife
Refer to the editorial 'Manipur's ordeal'; a year has passed since the eruption of an ethnic conflagration in the northeastern state. It is concerning that violence is still continuing unabated there. The threat of another outbreak of violence is looming as the differences between the Kukis and the Meiteis have only grown bigger. The Centre must do more to bring an end to the crisis. Restoring peace in the state will need greater sagacity than what the political leadership has shown so far. It is a shame that when PM Narendra Modi finally spoke on the crisis, he put the blame on the Congress instead of taking responsibility.
GREGORY FERNANDES, MUMBAI

Pro-Palestine supporters vilified
Major demonstrations have been held across the US over Israel's response to the October 7 Hamas attack last year. Universities have taken a serious view of the demonstrations. Students protesting in support of Palestine on campus have been suspended. Several pro-Palestine student protesters at Columbia University who had occupied campus buildings were arrested by the police. The action is disproportionate. The drastic measures taken against the demonstrators have rightly sparked protests across the country by other students and faculty members. It is just some powerful pro-Israel voices, right-wing politicians and the media that have been trying to smear the protests as anti-Israel and pro-Hamas.
PL SINGH, BY MAIL

Middle class bears the brunt
Refer to the article 'Middle class facing a massive squeeze'; the Indian middle class has been the most exploited segment. Easily swayed by emotional pitches appealing to religion and patriotism, it is made to pay for the freebies offered to the poor as well as the shenanigans of those belonging to the business class, many of whom don't even repay their loans to banks and leave for foreign lands. Too honest to steal and too proud to beg, the middle class continues to be squeezed from all quarters.
ANTHONY HENRIQUES, MUMBAI

Risks of Covid vaccine
British firm AstraZeneca has admitted that its Covid-19 vaccine, which is known as Covishield in India, causes thrombosis with thrombocytopenia syndrome in some cases. The fact is a testament to the complex nature of medical science. The admission has caused concern among the recipients of Covishield, which is produced by the Serum Institute of India in the country. Reassurances from doctors that there is no need to panic are comforting. But the development underscores the fact that all medical interventions carry potential risks. It is important to stay informed and ensure rigorous monitoring of vaccines to reduce the risk of side effects.
SAHIBPREET SINGH, MOHALI

