

Declining poverty ratio: a continuing trend

The release of the fact sheet of the Household Consumption Expenditure Survey for 2022-23 (HCES) by the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) led to estimations of poverty and inequality trends by many researchers. Some of these studies also discussed comparability of data and measurement issues.

Trends in poverty, inequality
Some argue that in the absence of unit-level data, the estimates based on the fact sheet are provisional. While unit-level data provide more accurate estimates than the averages given by deciles in the fact sheet, the poverty numbers based on the fact sheet data may not differ too much from those of unit-level data. So, we can estimate poverty and inequality with the fact sheet data.

The estimated poverty ratios declined from 29.5% in 2011-12 to 10% in 2022-23 (1.77% points per year) based on the Rangarajan Committee's poverty lines and from 21.9% in 2011-12 to 3% in 2022-23 (1.72% points per year) based on the Tendulkar Committee's poverty lines. If we consider at the earlier period, the poverty estimates based on the Tendulkar Committee's poverty lines declined from 37.2% in 2004-05 to 21.9% in 2011-12 (2.18% points per year).

According to the estimates on inequality provided by Subramanian, between 2011-12 and 2022-23, the Gini coefficient declined from 0.278 to 0.269 for rural areas (0.009-point decline); and from 0.358 to 0.318 for urban areas (0.04-point decline). Bansal et al also show that the Gini coefficient for rural areas declined from 0.284 to 0.266; for urban areas, it declined from 0.363 to 0.315 between 2011-12 to 2022-23.

This means poverty declined significantly between 2011-12 and 2022-23, though the rate of decline was lower compared to the 2004-05 to 2011-12 period. Inequality declined between 2011-12 and 2022-23 particularly in urban areas. It is to be noted that all these estimates depend on



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There has been a decline in poverty. The inequality in consumption expenditure has come down a bit.

where the poverty line is drawn. The NSSO has changed the reference or recall period of data collection over time to improve the reporting of consumption. Three estimates of consumption are available depending upon the recall period of different types of expenditure: uniform reference period (URP); mixed reference period (MRP); and modified mixed reference period (MMRP).

Experts say the varying reference periods for different items underlying the MMRP estimates may be expected to yield estimates that are closer to their true value. The Tendulkar Committee estimated poverty ratios on the basis of MRP for 1993-94 and 2004-05. The Planning Commission used the same methodology and MRP to estimate poverty ratios for 2009-10 and 2011-12. So, the estimates on poverty for 2022-23 (based on MMRP) are not strictly comparable with those of earlier years. However, the Rangarajan Committee used MMRP for estimating poverty ratios for 2009-10 and 2011-12. These estimates are comparable with those of 2022-23. For the sake of comparability, we cannot give up what is considered to be the appropriate mix of the recall periods. We may have to live with this problem if we are comparing periods over a long-time period.

For the 2002-23 data, there were changes in methodology such as coverage of more items, multiple visits, etc. Changes may provide better estimates, but the problem of comparability arises.

Measurement issues

There has also been some discussion on measurement issues relating to poverty lines. Mohanan and Kundu say "the Tendulkar Committee was clear that a calorie norm-based poverty line is no longer appropriate". The Expert Group (Tendulkar) did not construct a poverty line. It adopted the officially measured urban poverty line of 2004-05 based on the Expert Group (Lakdawala) methodology and converted this poverty line, which

is URP-consumption based, into MRP-consumption. It took the urban poverty line as derived from the Lakdawala line as given and derived from it the rural poverty line. The urban poverty line used by the Lakdawala Committee had calorie norms and so, the Tendulkar Committee also indirectly used these norms.

In defining the new consumption basket separating the poor from the rest, the Expert Group (Rangarajan) said that it should contain a food component that addresses the capability to be adequately nourished and some normative level of consumption expenditure for essential non-food item groups besides a residual set of behaviourally determined non-food expenditure. The Group estimated afresh the poverty basket and did not simply update an old basket with new prices.

The poverty line is based on private consumption expenditure. If we take into account public expenditure, the actual well being of the household will be higher than what is indicated by the poverty line. The HCES 2022-23 tried to get imputed values for some items of public expenditure. The value figures for items received free entirely or at low prices by the households have been imputed using an appropriate method. However, a look at the average monthly per capita expenditure (MPCE) shows it captured little of the total public expenditure on subsidised and free items given to the households. The average MPCE with imputation as compared to MPCE without imputation was only 2.3% higher for rural areas and 0.96% for urban. We need to capture these values better as public expenditure on these items is substantial.

Thus, there has been a decline in poverty. The inequality in consumption expenditure has come down a bit. Usually, income inequality is higher than inequality in consumption expenditure. There is no unique way of measuring poverty. The higher the poverty cut off, the more will be the number of poor.

A case of selective outrage

Women's safety seems to take centre stage only when it serves a political purpose

STATE OF PLAY

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On May 9, a 16-year-old girl in Kumbargadige village in Somwarpet taluk in the hilly district of Kodagu in Karnataka got her Class 10 results. She was the only girl to pass the exam from her school and had got good marks too. The same day, she got engaged to a 33-year-old man called Prakash Omkarappa. The District Child Protection Unit intervened in the ceremony, following an anonymous call, and made her parents promise that she would not be married off until she turned 18. Many hours later, the angry groom turned up at her house, dragged her out, beheaded her, and fled with her head. The ghastly incident sent shock waves through the State. The police tracked him down and arrested him the next day.

This incident occurred a few weeks after Neha Hiremath, a first year Masters student of Computer Applications (MCA) and the daughter of a Congress municipal councillor, was killed by her former classmate Fayaz Khondunai in in Hubballi in north Karnataka. She had gone to college to attend an exam on April 18. As she was getting ready to leave the college campus in the afternoon, she was repeatedly stabbed to death on campus by Fayaz. Neha was allegedly close to Fayaz earlier, but had distanced herself from him.

Just hours before Neha's death, a double murder rocked the State's capital Bengaluru. In a park in JP Nagar, a posh locality of the city, Suresh, 46, who is married with children, stabbed his 25-year-old colleague at an event management company to death.

The two were reportedly in a relationship, but she had broken it off recently. The mother of the victim, in an attempt to rescue her daughter, bludgeoned him to death with a stone, the police said.

The common thread in all the three cases is that a man killed a girl or woman after she shunned his advances, broke up with him, or distanced herself from him. Clearly, this is toxic masculinity at play. Girls or women were killed by men who could not stomach the fact that they had been rejected. Studies have shown that those who endorse the masculine honour ideal are more likely to feel insulted if a woman rejects them and respond with aggression. This is the same logic that is behind several acid attacks on women too.

Not surprisingly, the case that drew the most outrage from political parties and larger society was Neha's murder. As the incident happened just before Karnataka went to vote in the Lok Sabha elections, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) gave it a communal colour. Prime Minister Narendra Modi took to direct scaremongering over "appeasement politics of the Congress towards the Muslim community." Minutes after the murder, local BJP leaders dubbed it a case of "love jihad" – a conspiracy theory propounded by Hindutva groups which claim that Muslim men are luring Hindu women into marriage on false

pretences, in order to convert them to Islam. Union Minister and the Hubballi-Dharwad MP for four terms, Pralhad Joshi, who is seeking re-election, too called it "love jihad" and blamed the Congress government for the turn of events.

All this happened despite the Ministry of Home Affairs saying in 2020 in the Lok Sabha that "the term 'love jihad' is not defined under the extant laws. No case of 'love jihad' has been reported by any of the Central agencies."

Such incidents have built immense pressure on the Muslim community to go an extra mile to distance themselves from the incident. For instance, in Hubballi-Dharwad, only Muslim traders and shopkeepers observed a voluntary bandh on April 22, condemning the murder.

However, there have been no statements condemning either the beheading of the 16-year-old girl in Kodagu or the 25-year-old in Bengaluru. There were no candle light vigils or protests. The only statements condemning the beheading of the Kodagu girl came from women's activists. Besides the obvious fact of religion and how it served a political purpose, it is also instructive that while the two other murder victims came from poorer sections of society, Neha was the daughter of a municipal councillor and an MCA student.

While political parties make various attempts during election time to woo women, who hold sway now more than ever before, issues such as the lack of freedom to choose their partners or the lack of safety never become election points independently. They always seem to be subservient to other identities such as class, caste and religion, as the recent three cases illustrate.

The impact of 50 years of vaccination on children worldwide

Measles vaccination has had the most impact in saving lives, with 94 million individuals benefiting from the vaccine

DATA POINT

Hannah Ritchie

In the last 50 years, the lives of about 150 million children have been saved due to vaccinations against different diseases. Of these, measles vaccination alone accounts for saving 60% of lives. These are some of the findings from a new study published in *The Lancet*.

The decrease in deaths due to vaccine-preventable diseases can be attributed to the large-scale expansion of immunisation programmes across the globe. For instance, the measles vaccination rate increased from less than 20% in 2000 to 70% by 2021, worldwide. A similar pattern was observed in the case of vaccination against diphtheria, pertussis, and tetanus (DTP3) too. The significance of vaccinations has been particularly pronounced in reducing infant mortality rates from around 10% in 1974 to 3% in 2024. The researchers estimate that 40% of this decline is due to vaccines.

Chart 1 shows the number of lives saved by various vaccinations from 1974 to 2024 across the world. Measles vaccination has had the most impact, with 94 million individuals benefiting from the vaccine, followed by tetanus (27.9 million), whooping cough-pertussis (13.17 million) and tuberculosis (10.87 million) vaccine.

Chart 2 shows the region-wise share of children fully vaccinated against measles, according to the World Health Organization (WHO). The Western Pacific region saw the most drastic increase in vaccination coverage from 2% in 2000 to 91% in 2021. Rising from 15% in 2010 to nearly 80% in 2021, Southeast Asia also showed significant advancement in measles vaccination rates over the last decade.

Chart 3 shows the share of one-year-old children vaccinated

against DTP3. In 2021, more than 80% of infants received the third dose of the DTP3 vaccine. Here too, the Western Pacific region showed high progress, from less than 10% in 1980 to 90% in 2021.

The progress in vaccination rates is noteworthy because 50 years ago, vaccination coverage outside of Europe and North America was almost negligible. For instance, less than 5% of infants received the DTP3 vaccine. But in 1974, the World Health Assembly, the decision-making body of the WHO, formed the Essential Programme on Immunization. Various vaccination programmes were initiated across the world, which aimed to eradicate vaccine-preventable diseases. This led to a significant rise in vaccination rates.

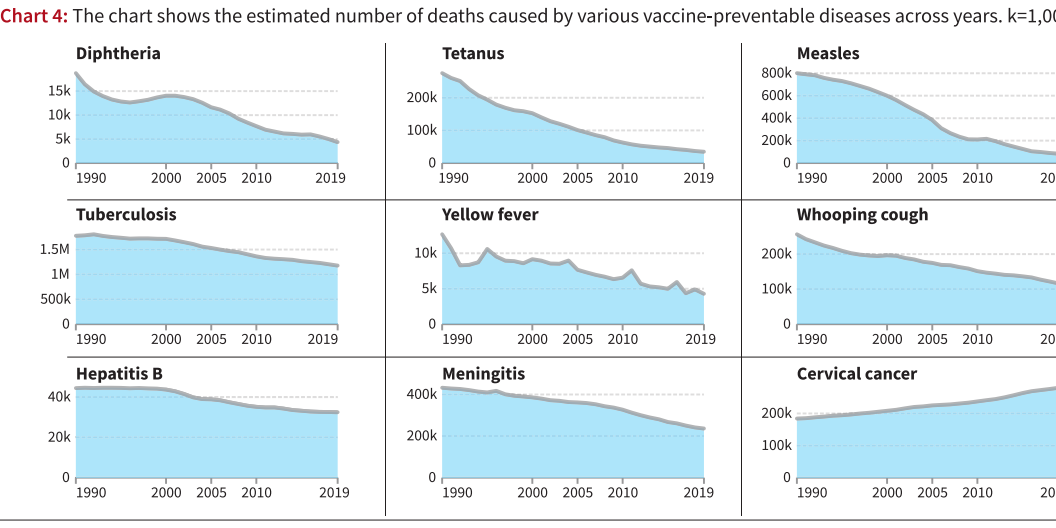
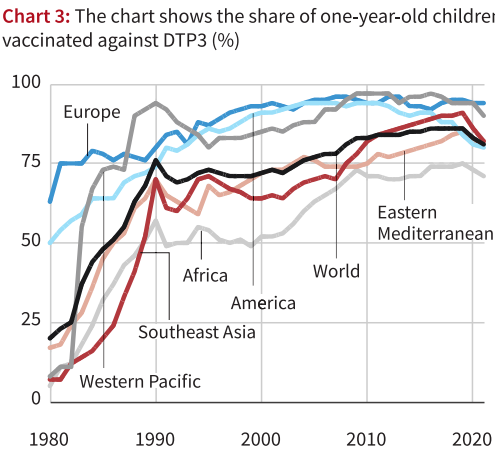
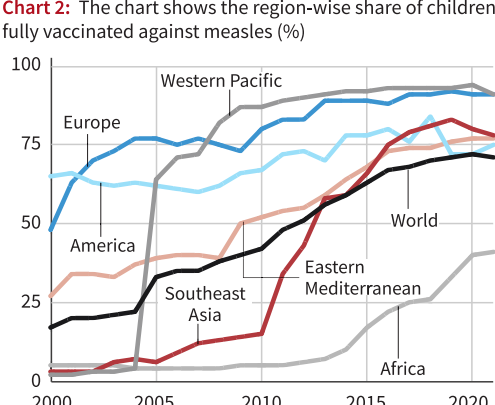
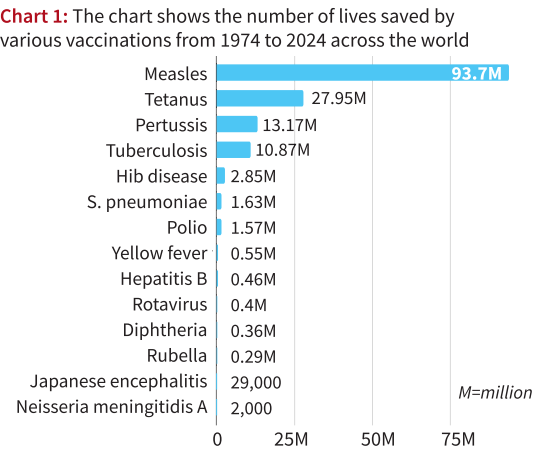
But by 2000, progress was stalling, and many of the world's poorest infants were still being left behind, especially in Africa and Asia. The formation of Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance – a partnership between the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the WHO, Unicef, and the World Bank – has since helped close the gaps by ensuring that vaccination programmes were available for all. While the worldwide progress in vaccination rate is commendable, millions still continue to lose their lives due to insufficient vaccination coverage.

Chart 4 shows the estimated number of deaths caused by various vaccine-preventable diseases across years. Every year, tuberculosis claims the lives of over a million people, while hundreds of thousands still die due to measles, tetanus, whooping cough, meningitis, and hepatitis B.

Thus, we need to push for universal vaccine coverage. This will require increased investment and coordination from governments to provide universal immunisation programmes. It is also imperative to address scepticism and the fear towards vaccination.

Saving lives, one vaccine at a time

Hannah Ritchie (2024) - "Vaccines have saved 150 million children over the last 50 years", published in Our World in Data



FROM THE ARCHIVES

The *Hindu*

FIFTY YEARS AGO MAY 14, 1974

Israeli planes bomb Lebanon refugee camps

Beirut, May 16: Waves of Israeli war planes bombed, rocketed and strafed Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon to-day and first reports said 15 were killed.

The 20 minute air strike came less than 24 hours after a terrorist attack on a school in northern Israel that left nearly 100 killed and wounded.

A Lebanese Defence Ministry communique said a total of 36 Israeli jets took part in the attack on four refugee camps and three border villages in Southern and Central Lebanon.

In Tel Aviv the Israeli Military Command confirmed the raids but a spokesman claimed that it was a "purely military operation and refugee camps were not deliberately hit."

In Cairo, according to a DPA message, the Egyptian Foreign Minister, Mr. Ismail Fahmy, and the leader of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation, Mr. Yasser Arafat, had a one hour talk on the "latest events" in West Asia.

In Washington, the White House voiced criticism of the Israeli air raid as well as the Arab terrorist attack on Maalot.

Meanwhile a military communique announced in Damascus that Israeli artillery to-day bombarded the Syrian village of Bkaasam in the Mount Hermon region damaging several houses.

The U.S. Secretary of State, Dr. Kissinger, had an hour of private talks with the Israeli Premier, Mrs. Golda Meir, in Jerusalem to-day in his continuing bid to disengage Israeli and Syrian forces on the Golan Heights. – AP and AFP.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO MAY 14, 1924

Passage money for Govt. servants

London, May 12: In the Commons, Col. Meyler drew attention to the circular authorising advance pay to Government Servants in India to cover the passage money of those wishing to visit England. He suggested that as the advance had been refused to Government servants who were Asiatics the matter Government of India with a view to abolishing such discrimination between members of different races in the employ of the same Government.

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Children wrongly incarcerated in adult prisons in India

9,600 A new study by a legal rights body has found that more than 9,600 children were wrongly incarcerated in adult prisons between 2016 and December 31, 2021. PTI

Arrests made during campus protests in U.S. over Israel-Hamas war

2,900 Protests over the Israel-Hamas war have spread across U.S. universities and college campuses in recent weeks, leading to disruptions and arrests. AP

Share of northeastern States in total mutual fund assets

40,323 In ₹ crore. A report by ICRA Analytics said that the share of the north-east in mutual fund assets in the country more than doubled in last four years. PTI

The rise in India's imports from FTA partners

38 In percentage. According to GTRI, India's import of goods from countries with which it has a free trade agreement like the UAE, South Korea, and Australia grew during 2019-24 fiscal years to \$187.92 billion. PTI

The number of Ukrainian refugees in Ireland since 2022

1 In lakh. The country's Prime Minister Simon Harris said that Ireland will consider making cuts to state support for asylum seekers and refugees, including to those who arrived from Ukraine. REUTERS
COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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An overview of the Smart Cities Mission

How are smart cities defined by the government? What are the two major aspects of the Smart Cities Mission? Why is the mission considered to be exclusionary to many? Did the SCM override the 74th Constitutional Amendment?

EXPLAINER

Tikender Panwar

The story so far:

The Smart Cities Mission (SCM), a flagship programme of the NDA-1 government, has taken a back seat in this year's list of poll promises and achievements.

What are smart cities?

The term 'Smart City' has been used widely ever since 2009, after the great financial crash. Smart cities were defined by urban practitioners as new Silicon Valleys built with a strong integration of a network of airports, highways, and other types of communications, a so-called intellectual city with advanced ICT.

The NDA-1 government wanted to adapt to these global changes, already happening through the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM). It went ahead with a major flagship programme and thus, the SCM was announced in June 2015. Hundred cities were selected for five years under the mission. However, the mission did not clearly define a smart city. It stated, "there is no universally accepted definition of a Smart City.... The conceptualisation of Smart City... varies from city to city and country to country, depending on the level of development, willingness to change and reform, resources and aspirations of the city residents. A Smart City would have a different connotation in India than, say, Europe. Even in India, there is no one way of defining a Smart City."

What was the SCM?

The SCM had two main aspects: area-based development consisting of three components – redevelopment (city renewal), retrofitting (city improvement), and green field projects (city extension); and pan-city solutions based on ICT. These further comprised some six categories that would include



Still in the dark: The Cochin Smart Mission Limited has installed LED lights on the Katrikadavu Bridge and on the Kaloor-Kadavanthra Road, in Kochi. H. VIBHU

e-governance, waste management, water management, energy management, urban mobility, and skill development. Around ₹2 lakh crore was kept aside for the mission, with public-private partnerships (PPP) an important driver of the same.

The mission that was to be completed in 2020, was given two extensions till June 2024. Additionally, to make the mission effective, a business model of governance was adopted bypassing the existing models of city governance in the country. An SPV (special-purpose vehicle) led by a bureaucrat or a representative of an MNC, and other major stakeholders was created and registered under the Companies Act. The elected council, thus, had little role in the governance structure.

What is the status of the SCM?

The Urban Ministry's dashboard as of

April 26, exhibits that 8,033 projects sanctioned under the SCM have seen a fall in the total outlay from the expected ₹2 lakh crore to ₹1,67,875 crore, which is 16% less than the projected capital flow in 100 cities. The dashboard also states that the SCM grant funded 5,533 projects worth ₹65,063 crore that have been completed, while 921 projects worth ₹21,000 crore are still ongoing.

As many as 400 projects being undertaken by about 10 cities under the Mission are unlikely to meet the extended deadline of June 2024.

Interestingly, the funding pattern shows that not more than 5% has come through the PPP route.

Where did the SCM falter?

The selection of 100 cities on a competitive basis was flawed due to the

diversity in existing urban realities. The scheme was divorced from the ground realities of urban India – the urbanisation here is dynamic and not static like the West.

The SCM became an exclusionary scheme wherein not more than 1% of a city's geographical area was selected for development. For example, Chandigarh which received ₹196 crore in the first tranche under the SCM spent it on smart water meters, a Wi-Fi zone, and solid waste management programmes all ploughed into one pocket-sector 43.

According to two major reports by McKinsey, to make Indian cities liveable, a capital expenditure of \$1.2 trillion is required by 2030. In this context, ₹1,67,875 crore is less than \$20 billion in nine years. This comes to around 0.027 % of the total requirement in urban India. Hence, there was little traction for this scheme.

Additionally, the SPV model designed for smart cities was not aligned with the 74th Constitutional Amendment, which led to many cities objecting to the governance structure. The design, according to critics, was too top-bottom. A hilly town that had an annual budget of less than ₹100 crore claimed projects worth more than ₹2,500 crore. This was incongruent to the demands of the residents of the town.

Urban India, according to the World Bank has more than 49% of the population living in slums. In the name of executing smart city projects, there was displacement of people living in poorer localities. Street vendors, for example, were displaced and urban commons were disrupted.

Another major consequence of the SCM has been enhanced urban flooding. Some of the towns which have historically never been flooded were made vulnerable because of infrastructure development projects that spoiled or dismantled the water channels and contours.

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THE GIST

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What is the legal position on live-in relationships?

What did the Allahabad High Court state with respect to Muslims and live-in relationships?

Ziya Us Salam

The story so far:

The Lucknow bench of the Allahabad High Court stated earlier this month that a Muslim cannot claim rights in a live-in relationship when he or she has a living spouse. A two judge Bench of Justices A.R. Masoodi and A.K. Srivastava called such a relationship against the tenets of Islam while hearing a writ petition by Sneha Devi and Mohammed Shadab Khan. Ms. Devi and Mr. Khan had sought protection from police action after the woman's parents filed a kidnapping case against Mr. Khan.

What happened?

The couple had told the court they were adults in a live-in relationship and that they sought protection under Article 21 of the Constitution (protection of life and personal liberty). The judges, however, stated, "Islamic tenets do not permit live-in relationships during the subsisting

marriage. The position may be different if the two persons are unmarried and the parties being major choose to lead their lives in a way of their own." Incidentally, Mr. Khan was married to one Farida Khatoon since 2020.

"The constitutional morality may come to the rescue of such a couple and the social morality settled through the customs and usages over ages may give way to the constitutional morality and protection under Article 21 of the Constitution of India may step in to protect the cause. The case before us is, however, different," the court said, adding, "The constitutional protection under Article 21 of the Constitution of India would not lend an un-canalised support to such a right."

What have been previous orders?

Live-in relationships with variables of marital status of the partners, their possibly different faiths, birth of children and even separation have occupied the attention of the judiciary at various levels

in recent years. If in the case of Ms. Devi and Mr. Khan, only the latter was married, in another case last year, both partners were married but involved in a live-in relationship away from wedlock.

In November last year, the Supreme Court stayed orders passed by lower courts and the Gujarat High Court awarding maintenance to a woman from the man she had been living with. The top court order came after a Surat-based man challenged the High Court order arguing that their relationship could not be termed a domestic relationship as they were both married to other people at the time of cohabitation. While their respective marriages subsisted, they lived together in 2012 and had a daughter too a couple of years later. The woman had approached the judiciary as the live-in relationship did not work out, and sought relief under the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005. She sought maintenance too.

Interestingly in the same month, the Punjab and Haryana High Court stated

that a couple living together without obtaining a divorce from their previous spouse cannot be classified as being in a "live-in relationship" or being in a union similar to marriage. The court even felt that such an arrangement would amount to the offence of bigamy under Sections 494/495 of the Indian Penal Code. In this case, the man was already married. The court refused to provide protection to the couple, stating, "The male partner is engaging in a lustful and adulterous life with the female partner without obtaining a valid divorce from his previous spouse."

What have the Courts said about live-in relationships?

India does not have any laws that directly address a live-in partnership. As per the top Court, for a man and a woman to live together is part of 'the right to life'; therefore, a live-in relationship is no longer an offence. The Supreme Court in its various judgments has stated that a man and a woman living like a husband and a wife in a long-term relationship, and even have children, the judiciary will presume that the two were married and that the same laws would be applicable to them and their relationship. The concept of a live-in relationship was recognised in *Payal Sharma versus Nari Niketan* by the Allahabad High Court, where the judges felt, "A man and a woman, even without getting married, can live together if they wish to. This may be regarded as immoral by society, but it is not illegal. There is a difference between law and morality."

THE GIST

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FROM THE ARCHIVES



GETTY IMAGES

India’s population data and a tale of projections and predictions

The UN projects that India’s population will be 1.64 billion by 2050, the IHME projects 1.61 billion by 2048. The country’s demographic future will see peaking and then declining numbers driven by a sharp fertility reduction

Sonalde Desai

In this article, dated August 12, 2020, Sonalde Desai analyses projections about India’s demographic future.

A new study, published in the highly regarded journal, *The Lancet*, and prepared by the Seattle-based Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME), has shaken up the world of population policy. It argues that while India is destined to be the largest country in the world, its population will peak by mid-century. And as the 21st century closes, its ultimate population will be far smaller than anyone could have anticipated, about 1.09 billion instead of approximately 1.35 billion today. It could even be as low as 724 million.

Readers who follow COVID-19 projections will remember that in March 2020, the IHME projected U.S. deaths from COVID-19 to be around 81,000 by August. Deaths in the U.S. today are more than twice that number. The underlying assumptions for the initial model were not borne out. The IHME population projections are also subject to underlying assumptions that deserve careful scrutiny. They predict that by the year 2100, on average, Indian women will have 1.29 children. Since each woman must have two children to replace herself and her husband, this will result in a sharp population decline. Contrast this predicted fertility rate of 1.29 for India with the projected cohort fertility of 1.53 for the United States and 1.78 for France in the same model. It is difficult to believe that Indian parents could be less committed to childbearing than American or French parents.

Until 2050, the IHME projections are almost identical to widely-used United

Nations projections. The UN projects that India’s population will be 1.64 billion by 2050, the IHME projects 1.61 billion by 2048. It is only in the second half of the century that the two projections diverge with the UN predicting a population of 1.45 billion by 2100, and the IHME, 1.09 billion.

Part of this divergence may come from IHME model’s excessive reliance on data regarding current contraceptive use in the National Family Health Survey (NFHS) and potential for increasing contraceptive use. Research at the National Council of Applied Economic Research (NCAER) National Data Innovation Centre by Santanu Pramanik and colleagues shows that contraceptive use in the NFHS is poorly estimated, and as a result, unmet need for contraception may be lower than that estimated by the IHME model, generating implausibly low fertility projections for 2100.

Fertility decline

Regardless of whether we subscribe to the UN’s projections, or the IHME projections, India’s demographic future contains a peaking and subsequently declining population driven by a sharp reduction in fertility. In the 1950s, India’s Total fertility rate (TFR) was nearly six children per woman; today it is 2.2. Ironically, the massive push for family planning coupled with forced sterilisation during the Emergency barely led to a 17% decline in TFR from 5.9 in 1960 to 4.9 in 1980. However, between 1992 and 2015, it had fallen by 35% from 3.4 to 2.2.

What happened to accelerate fertility decline to a level where 18 States and Union Territories have a TFR below 2, the replacement level? One might attribute it to the success of the family planning programme but family planning has long lost its primacy in the Indian policy

discourse. Between 1975 and 1994, family planning workers had targets they were expected to meet regarding sterilisations, condom distribution and intrauterine device (IUD) insertion. Often these targets led to explicit or implicit coercion. Following the Cairo conference on Population and Development in 1994, these targets were abandoned.

If carrots have been dropped, the stick of policies designed to punish people with large families has been largely ineffective. Punitive policies include denial of maternity leave for third and subsequent births, limiting benefits of maternity schemes and ineligibility to contest in local body elections for individuals with large families. However, as Nirmala Buch, former Chief Secretary of Madhya Pradesh, wrote, these policies were mostly ignored in practice.

Aspirational revolution

If public policies to encourage the small family norm or to provide contraception have been lackadaisical, what led couples to abandon the ideal of large families? It seems highly probable that the socioeconomic transformation of India since the 1990s has played an important role. Over this period, agriculture became an increasingly smaller part of the Indian economy, school and college enrolment grew sharply and individuals lucky enough to find a job in government, multinationals or software services companies reaped tremendous financial benefits. Not surprisingly, parents began to rethink their family-building strategies. Where farmers used to see more workers when they saw their children, the new aspirational parents see enrolment in coaching classes as a ticket to success.

The literature on fertility decline in western countries attributes the decline in fertility to retreat from the family;

Indian parents seem to demonstrate increased rather than decreased commitment to family by reducing the number of children and investing more in each child. My research with demographer Alaka Basu at Cornell University compares families of different size at the same income level and finds that small and large families do not differ in their leisure activities, women’s participation in the workforce or how many material goods they purchase. However, smaller families invest more money in their children by sending them to private schools and coaching classes. It is not aspirations for self but that for children that seems to drive fertility decline.

In language of the past

Ironically, even in the face of this sharp fertility decline among all segments of Indian society, the public discourse is still rooted in the language of the 1970s and on supposedly high fertility rate, particularly in some areas such as Uttar Pradesh and Bihar or among some groups such as women with low levels of education or Muslims. This periodically results in politicians proposing remedies that would force these ostensibly ignorant or uncaring parents to have fewer children.

Demographic data suggest that the aspirational revolution is already under way. What we need to hasten the fertility decline is to ensure that the health and family welfare system is up to this challenge and provides contraception and sexual and reproductive health services that allow individuals to have only as many children as they want.

Sonalde Desai is Professor of Sociology at the University of Maryland and Centre Director, NCAER National Data Innovation Centre. The views expressed are personal

THE DAILY QUIZ

A quiz on personalities and places that went to polls in Phase 4 of Lok Sabha elections

Srinivasan Ramani

QUESTION 1

What was unique about Imtiaz Jaleel’s victory in Aurangabad in Maharashtra in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections?

QUESTION 2

What is the claim to fame (or notoriety) of this candidate Akshay Kanti Bam of Indore? Name the party that he was supposed to represent.

QUESTION 3

The Rashtriya Janata Dal candidate in Munger in Bihar, Anita Devi Mahato is married to a person named Ashok Mahto who was arrested after the notorious Nawada

prison breakout case in 2002 and released in 2023. A crime thriller written by Neeraj Pandey, based on the gang led by Ashok Mahto, premiered on Netflix in November 2022. Name the series.

QUESTION 4

Name the constituency from Andhra Pradesh where former Prime Minister Narasimha Rao won a bypoll with a record margin, earning him an entry in the Guinness Book of World Records.

QUESTION 5

Name the former Indian cricketer who is contesting the elections in Baharampur in West Bengal. Name the party he is representing.



Visual question:

Identify this prominent leader, next to Mayawati, originally from Punjab who represented the Etawah constituency in Uttar Pradesh in 1991. THE HINDU

Questions and Answers to the previous day’s

daily quiz: 1. The place where the inaugural race was held and its winner. **Ans: The first World championship race took place at Silverstone Circuit with Giuseppe Farina taking the honours**
2. This circuit hosted the most World Championship races. **Ans: The Autodromo Nazionale Monza**
3. This racer holds the record for most podium finishes with 197 and counting. **Ans: Lewis Hamilton**
4. This two-time champion holds the record with 383 career starts. **Ans: Fernando Alonso**
5. Name the Australian driver who claimed the honours in 1966 in a car designed by him. **Ans: Jack Brabham**
6. The unique distinction Jochen Rindt holds. **Ans: He won the World Championship posthumously**
7. This champion holds the record for the youngest driver to start a Formula One race at 17 years and 166 days. **Ans: Max Verstappen**
Visual: The place where one can see this statue. **Ans: Autodromo Enzo e Dino Ferrari**
Early Birds: Vineet Giri| Rajmohan.V| Jyot Prakash Gulati| Sunil Kannada| Saheni George



ABSTRACT

Does WFH benefit working mothers?

Prashanth Perumal

Harrington, Emma and Matthew Kahn, “Has the Rise of Work-from-Home Reduced the Motherhood Penalty in the Labor Market?”, University of Virginia Working paper, October 2023

A significant number of working women leave the workforce after they become pregnant as they focus their efforts on raising a family. This has traditionally been called the “motherhood penalty” and has been used to explain women’s low labour force participation rate in many countries. The motherhood penalty has also been found to be higher in professions such as finance that are considered to be rigid and unfriendly towards those wanting to focus on their families. In “Has the Rise of Work-from-Home Reduced the Motherhood Penalty in the Labor Market?”, Emma Harrington and Matthew E. Kahn look into whether work-from-home (WFH) arrangements, which make work more flexible for women could help reduce the motherhood penalty by allowing mothers to successfully juggle work and family.

Impact on employers and employees

The researchers studied the impact of WFH arrangements during the 10 years before the pandemic on mothers’ participation in the workforce of different fields. They found that in fields such as finance and marketing, which are unfriendly towards families but where a lot of work can be delivered from home, there was a relative rise in the employment of mothers compared to other women when there was a rise in WFH arrangements. To be precise, a 10% rise in WFH arrangements was found to cause a 0.78 percentage point rise in the employment of mothers in these fields when compared to other women, according to the researchers. Similar positive effects, however, were not observed in other fields such as education and pharmacy, which are considered to be quite family-friendly already and where the physical presence of workers in the workplace is considered to be crucial. WFH arrangements can thus help economies retain more women, and perhaps even men, in the workforce by offering more work flexibility and work-life balance.

WFH arrangements became widely adopted during the pandemic as employers could not get their workers to come to office during lockdowns. And importantly, it also helped many employers save money on rent and other costs of running their business from a traditional office space, thus boosting their financial returns. The concept of co-working spaces became very popular as businesses figured out that they could pay for space based on actual usage rather than investing huge amounts in large offices. But since the end of the pandemic, many employers have increasingly urged their workers to return to office. Some researchers believe that the push by corporate executives to get workers back to office may have little to do with improving the productivity of workers. They argue that it may be the case that bosses simply want to reassert control over workers.

Word of the day

Canalise:

provide (a city) with a canal

Usage: The river has been canalised.

Pronunciation: bit.ly/canalisepro

International Phonetic Alphabet: /ˈkæn.ə.laɪz/

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

Health for all

Publicly-funded insurance schemes are no panacea

In a recent circular, the Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority of India (IRDAI) has mandated life and general insurers to extend individual cover in certain identified gram panchayats. A similar exercise is expected to be taken up by the General Insurance Council. According to the National Family Health Survey, over two-fifths of households have at least one member covered under health insurance, which in turn corresponds with other estimates of just over 50 crore people being covered.



Of this, the bottom half is being serviced by publicly-funded health insurance (PFHI) schemes such as Ayushman Bharat Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (PMJAY) under which approximately 21.9 crore beneficiaries have been verified. In sum, two-thirds of the population has no insurance cover, while most of those covered are the non-poor. While insurance coverage among the poor leaves much to be desired, the key issue is whether it has worked well for the insured poor by curbing their out-of-pocket expenditure (OOPE). Let us take the case of PMJAY or Ayushman Bharat. PMJAY mainly covers inpatient care. It provides services by empanelling private and public hospitals and the services are designed to be cashless and completely free for enrolled households.

Various States, such as Haryana, have enhanced the income limits for which cover is available, while southern States have their own schemes. However, studies suggest that enrolment in PFHI schemes is ineffective in ensuring financial protection. Reshmi *et al* (BMJ 2021) show that PMJAY did not enhance financial risk protection of the beneficiaries. In another study done in Chhattisgarh, it emerged that private hospitals empanelled under PMJAY charged patients in a big way while also claiming reimbursement from the government. Therefore, publicly-funded health insurance schemes are ineffective in controlling OOPE. It can be safely assumed that more than half of all health spending in India is still met by patients.

According to a PIB release on January 31, 2023, OOPE as a proportion of total health expenditure (which would include spending by government, insurance companies, organisations and individuals) was 48.2 per cent in FY19, which is likely to have increased with Covid despite the introduction of PMJAY in September 2018. What is required is a policy shift where resources are allocated less for health coverage through insurance, and towards more publicly-funded institutions that ensure health for all. The overall pie too must increase. Central and State health spending as a percentage of GDP increased from 1.4 per cent in FY20 to 2.1 per cent in FY23, but that was because of Covid. It must go up much further. Universal care rather than insurance coverage should be the required goal.

POCKET

RAVIKANTH



Making of universal digital financial system

IN THE WORKS. By using tokens and unified programmable ledgers, FINTERNET seeks to connect multiple ecosystems to deliver quality financial services faster, cheaper and securely



GETTY IMAGES



B SAMBAMURTHY

Buoayed up by the success of Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) in India, Nandan Nilekani teamed up with Agustin Carstens of BIS (Bank for International Settlement) to prepare a blueprint for a new digital global financial system and they christened it — FINTERNET (Financial Internet). This is designed to be user-centric, universal and unified. This attempts to unite the foundations of economics, finance and commerce with technological innovation. Multiple ecosystems would be connected so as to deliver universal and unified access to high quality financial services.

At a higher level they would like the proposed financial system/asset transfers to be as easy as making a phone call to anyone across the globe irrespective of device, network or service provider. And much like booking accommodation or renting a cab across the globe. They seek to remove friction and make transfers less costly, faster, instantaneous and secure and make the system more efficient. On the face of it, the project looks ambitious, if not audacious. This is a planet scale project that is touted to touch 8 billion-plus people.

HOW IT WORKS

Tokenisation and unified programmable ledgers are the twin pillars of the

technology architecture of FINTERNET. All the financial assets including bank deposits, stocks, mutual fund units, all kinds of securities and physical assets (land, cars, works of art, etc) would be tokenised and reside on programmable unified ledgers.

The tokens may represent assets whether registered/unregistered, attested/unattested, regulated/unregulated, fungible/non-fungible, bearer/non bearer, block chain enabling/non-enabling. Thus, it is tech and asset agnostic platform. These tokens are transferable on unified ledger and programmable platforms instantaneously and in a secure manner. It is beyond portability.

These tokens, digital representation of assets, will contain information like ownership, rules and logic governing transfer. This will avoid lengthy messaging system between institutions and stakeholders. The clearing and settlement system may be compressed or eliminated. This will reduce costs and transfers would be faster and secure and even instantaneous.

The collaborators of the project have made some smart moves to gain

All the financial assets including bank deposits, stocks, mutual fund units, all kinds of securities and physical assets (land, cars, works of art, etc) would be tokenised and reside on programmable unified ledgers.

acceptance by the regulators and incumbent institutions. Firstly, central bank governors of Brazil, South Korea and Brazil were roped in as panellists in the first round of conference on FINTERNET and some of them may emerge as partners. Secondly, to get acceptance from incumbent institutions, assurance has been given that the project will not disturb or demolish their intermediary role and structure. The high-performance transaction engine comprising tokens and unified ledgers would be 'airdropped' — that is, without disturbing the existing institutional structure. But banks have to redefine their business/operating models.

UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES

Many digital lenders/apps have designed products and processes to remove frictions and make borrowing easy and faster. But this has pushed many small-time borrowers to over-leverage and the RBI raised the red flag. It is not hard to see similar unintended consequences in social media and even concentration in UPI. We need to be mindful of unintended consequences.

Trust is very important. A well-functioning real-time grievance redressal and dispute resolution mechanism is a key element that inspires trust. So also, the need to mitigate ever increasing cyber security threats/frauds. This needs new governance mechanisms and laws. Regulators and supervisors need to write new rule books.

WAY FORWARD

India is not new to successfully and securely operating large-scale

platforms. As the global financial regulator (BIS) is the collaborator, it opens the doors at several places globally. Now the ball is set rolling, it is party time for high impact citizen-centric fintech innovations at various layers of the new architecture. It is a once-in-a-life-time opportunity and some unicorns may emerge.

Use cases is a critical success factor. It would be interesting to see response of other stakeholders, particularly regulators in legislating enabling laws and regulations. Over 100 central banks have already initiated, or are operating, projects to tokenise their fiat currencies. BIS innovation hub is super active with several cross-border payment use cases through tokens. This combined with tokenisation of commercial bank money augurs well for the FINTERNET.

A big bang approach would be difficult and it may find its own legs as experience and benefits evolve. Look for low-hanging fruits. Turf wars are sure to flare up and need to be doused.

Will it amplify or attenuate the next global financial crisis or financial instability. Will it alter macro financial theories? One may not be faulted to assume that with involvement of global regulator BIS, these issues would receive greater attention and scrutiny.

The government may constitute a FINTERNET council with majority participation of the private sector.

Bill Gates had predicted that agents will replace apps. This could emerge as an important element in FINTERNET. Will India bite the bullet and showcase to the world, *a la* UPI?

The writer is a former chairman of a commercial bank, and Director and CEO, IDRBT.

How to deal with delayed payments to MSMEs

Leverage GSTN network for data sharing, and prioritise timely payments rather than arbitrarily shorten the payment period

BL Chandak

The Supreme Court recently asked a group of MSME industry associations to petition the High Courts regarding Section 43B(h) of the Income Tax Act, 1961. It may seem counter-intuitive that the clause, inserted in the FY24 Budget to promote timely payment to MSMEs, has been challenged by MSMEs themselves. The section mandates that expenses in this regard are deductible in the relevant financial year upon actual payment, not when due, starting from assessment year 2024-25. However, this provision faces challenges stemming from unintended consequences and practical realities. Many MSMEs have experienced avoidance of purchases from them. To safeguard their sales, some of them have changed their status to traders while others cancelled their Udyam registration.

Historically, leniency in penal interest on delayed payments to MSMEs under the MSMED Act 2006 persists due to MSMEs' reluctance to demand it, fearing a disruption in business relationships. Contrary to 45 days upper limit, buyers can even now significantly extend payment periods with impunity as in practice very little penal interest is paid on delayed payments and the Section 43B(h) applies only to year-end outstanding overdue to MSMEs. The extended period can be anywhere between 364 days and 46 days for

purchases made between April 1 and mid-February, respectively, and settled by the year-end. The year-end MSME payments bunching creates asymmetrical payment flows, bank credit utilisation, and overall business operations across firms.

Timely repayment is the lynchpin of sustainable lending and a thriving credit ecosystem. However, MSMEs continually grapple with payment delays, defaults, and backlog of receivables despite a long history of well-intended legal and regulatory safeguards, disclosure mandates (dating back to 1993 and 2006) and initiatives like Samadhan, TReDS, and RBI advisories to address the issue. A Dun & Bradstreet survey (May 2022) estimated that ₹8.6 trillion is annually struck in delayed payments to MSMEs. Brickworks Ratings [June 2020] reported ₹3.3 trillion delayed payments to MSMEs by the 760 largest corporates by market capitalisation.

WAY OUT

The asymmetrical power equation between buyers and MSMEs disadvantages smaller suppliers, necessitating an integrated market-driven payment discipline mechanism with real-time monitoring of late payments. Leveraging the GSTN network as a data-sharing platform for B2B credit sales and repayments enables this. This requires:

Incorporation of payment due date and payment receipt date fields in the GSTN portal.



PAYMENTS. A concern for MSMEs

Auto-graded red-flagging of trade debtors' GST accounts on the 11th, 21st, 31st, and 61st days for overdue payments, categorised as 1st, 2nd, 3rd, and 4th red-flag, respectively. Late payments after 60 days incur monetary penalties, with a risk of GST account suspension after 90 days.

The third red-flagging triggers digital credit default report's auto-transmission to CIBIL, concerned banks, Ministry of Corporate Affairs, and stock exchanges. This impacts the perception of a firm's credibility and reputation with market, credit rating agencies, investors, bankers and vendors. Real-time engagement of these multiple stakeholders enhances oversight, enforcement efficiency, and market discipline in payments.

Implementing the proposed strategy in stages, starting with firms with annual turnovers exceeding ₹500 crore, followed by those exceeding ₹300 crore,

₹100 crore, and eventually extending to all GSTN-registered firms, provides adjustment time for smaller firms and enhanced liquidity circulation.

Regarding trade credit tenure, it could be gradually decreased from 120 days. However, prioritising the assurance and reliability of timely payments over arbitrarily shortening the payment period is a better idea. Certainty in timely payments fosters bill discounting, credit sales, and efficient funds planning. Intense competition to discount bills of vendors of top-rated companies underscores how assured timely payments can boost bills discounting in general.

Timely realisation of receivables enhance its collateral value, reducing the need for asset collateral. These bolster cash flow-based lending and bill discounting. These boost transaction volume, liquidity circulation, and credit velocity and lower receivable management costs, while minimising business failure risks. Streamlined repayments benefit business operations, while helping real-time detection of financial distress can aid in improving NPA and banking credit fraud management, and potentially reducing NCLT workload as majority of the NCLT cases relate to operational creditors.

Exploring alternatives to current MSME payment regulations, particularly within the GSTN digital framework, is crucial.

The writer is former DGM, SIDBI

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Project finance

This refers to 'Draft project finance norms: FinMin to take up infra lenders' woes with RBI' (May 13). The RBI's proposed stage-wise increase in provisioning from the current 0.4 per cent to 5 per cent represents a well-considered response to the array of risks inherent in project finance, encompassing legal, political, regulatory, environmental, and social factors, which have the potential to gradually erode the credit portfolio and asset quality of banks over time. Given the prolonged nature of project finance and its exposure to significant upside risks, the RBI's directive to incrementally raise provisioning to 5 per cent is a

prudent approach, aligning with the broader objective of fortifying resilience and stability within the banking sector. Moreover, complementary measures, such as the ongoing monitoring of stress signals throughout the lifespan of such loans and the stipulation of yearly provisioning based on such stress factors will further enhance clarity and adherence to the proposed project finance guidelines. **Srinivasan Velamur** Chennai

Vaccine testing

This refers to the editorial 'Vaccine lessons' (May 13). When Covid-19 was in full swing claiming millions of lives and the people were frantically

looking for a way out, different brands of hurriedly invented vaccines were introduced. These were accepted and administered even before they could complete all their protocols of human trials. India doesn't have a foolproof structure with stringent norms to study a product before granting approval and maintain follow-up reports with details of improvement or adverse effects post administration. **AG Rajmohan** Anantapur, AP

Bane of bureaucracy

This refers to 'Rein in the bureaucracy' (May 13). Adoption of the principle 'the best management is that which manages the least' has

been tremendously successful in the development of countries like Japan, China, etc. Unfortunately in our democracy, it is has been 'least management and least development' for many years. The main causes for this are vague rules, creating room for bribe-taking and, with absolutely no accountability in many departments, right from the lowest to the highest levels. **Katuru Durga Prasad Rao** Hyderabad

Health effects

The findings of the class action suit in the UK opened up a much-needed probe relating to the efficacy of the vaccine administered during Covid time, considering its ill-effects and

serous health-hazards in some cases. Even at the first stage of vaccination, lots of apprehensions were raised regarding possible side-effects such as blood clots that could lead to heart ailments, especially in persons suffering from co-morbidities. As rightly suggested, unmindful of the consequences foreseen in the long run, the Health Ministry should consider a no-fault compensation protocol in keeping with WHO norms. Also, a notification may be released by the ministry about the outcome of the legal case and its impact on the health of citizens so as to put to rest all the related apprehensions. **Sitaram Popuri** Bengaluru

Curbing audit frauds

The Borgers case in US is a cautionary tale

Mohan R Lavi

It is clear that the way in which regulators are looking at the work being done by accounting firms has changed over the last two decades. In the US, the accounting firm Arthur Andersen self-collapsed in 2002 thanks to their negligence during the audits of Enron and Worldcom. In 2024, the US Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) has shut down the accounting firm BF Borgers due to “massive fraud”, “deliberate and systematic failure” and running a “sham audit mill”.

BF BORGERS CASE
SEC charged the firm, BF Borgers, and its founder, Ben Borgers with falsely representing to clients that its audit work would comply with US standards, and fabricating documentation. It said Borgers, one of the most prolific auditors of US public companies, was responsible for one of the largest wholesale failures by gatekeepers in our financial markets. Without admitting or denying the SEC’s findings, the firm has agreed to pay a \$12-million penalty and Ben Borgers to pay \$2 million. Borgers has expanded rapidly to become auditor to hundreds of small and microcap companies, but the SEC said that three-quarters of its audits were faulty. The agency said it was stepping in to permanently close what it called a “massive fraud” and “sham audit mill”, and it told Borgers’ clients they would need to check past financial statements in case they contained errors. The firm’s deliberate and systemic failure to meet professional standards affected more than 1,500 company filings, the SEC said. Borgers built the eighth-largest client list of any US audit firm in just 15 years while still operating out of a single-storey building in a suburb of Denver, Colorado. Its latest regulatory filing showed it had just 50 staff, 10 of whom are certified public accountants. Borgers himself signed off on more than 140 audit opinions in the past year. His firm was found to have a 100 per cent deficiency rate in audits inspected by the Public Company Accounting Oversight Board, the Colorado state board of accountancy fined him \$5,000 earlier this year for bad audits of retirement plans and Canada’s audit regulator barred BF Borgers from operating in that country. The SEC’s order barring the



AUDIT FIRMS. Need for accountability /ISTOCKPHOTO

firm from public auditing leaves more than 170 US public companies searching for new accountants. SEC said it would monitor the situation and advised companies they were entitled to limited extensions for filing their financial results if needed. The SEC also stated that issuers should consider whether their filings may need to be amended to address any reporting deficiencies arising from the BF Borgers engagement.

QUANTITY OVER QUALITY
A look into the order of the SEC brings out the fact that the auditor in question was focusing only on quantity of audits and not on the quality of audits. The firm clearly did not have the resources to handle a large number of audits with only 50 staff out of which only 10 were CPAs. One can expect many companies for which Borgers was the auditor to restate their financial statements in due course. In India, the National Financial Reporting Authority (NFRA) has been penalising auditors and audit firms who have been negligent in the discharge of their duties. Rule 11(6) of the NFRA Rules empowers NFRA to take no action, impose a monetary penalty, ban the auditor from doing certain types of audits or impose a penalty and ban the auditor for a certain period of time. Till date the NFRA has issued more than 60 orders imposing monetary fines on auditors and/or banning them for some time. The Code of Ethics and other regulations from the Institute of Chartered Accountants of India limit the number of audits that firms and their partners can do in India. Due to this, one may not get an audit firm running a sham audit mill in India provided audit firms ensure that the entities they audit do not cross the line with respect to compliances.

The writer is a chartered accountant



CP CHANDRASHEKHAR, JAYATI GHOSH

Interest in India’s almost unique success as a services exporter in global markets persists. India’s services export receipts rose from \$95.8 billion in post-crisis year 2009-10 to \$341.1 billion in 2023-24. Close to one half (47 per cent) of those exports were exports of software services, with business services accounting for another 24 per cent. Led by those sectors, India’s share in global exports of commercial services has risen from 3 per cent in 2010 to 4.7 per cent in 2023. India has indeed done well in this area. Charts 1 and 2 illustrate how the increase in global exports share has made a significant difference to India’s performance as an exporter of services. Chart 1 tracks the revenues from the exports of commercial services in the case of India and the world, showing the degree to which India’s services export growth has exceeded that of the world. Chart 2 shows what India’s performance (relative to actual) would have been if its share had remained at the 3 per cent level it recorded in 2010. The ability to win larger shares of the global market, by retaining its competitive advantage, has been crucial to India’s success.

GROWTH PATH
But that does not necessarily justify the view that this success in services export is driving India’s GDP growth in a way that makes its development trajectory unique. The criticism that the share of manufacturing in India’s GDP has been (and remains) disappointingly low is discounted in this assessment, since the country is seen as pioneering an altogether different road to developmental success, in which labour absorbing services serve as the growth drivers. However, as of now, in a country where services contribute more than 50 per cent of GDP, net revenues from services exports amounted to just 3.4 per cent of GDP in 2022. Thus, the direct contribution to GDP of the 22 per cent increase in net services exports in 2021-22, for example, would have been just three-fourths of a percentage point. Moreover, the service sectors that account for the rapid export expansion do not seem to be as labour absorbing as they are presumed to be. While services account for more than 50 per cent of GDP, they provide only around 30 per cent of all jobs. Most of those jobs are in the retail and wholesale trade sector and in other informal services. While overall employment is estimated at around 510 million and that in services is placed at around 160 million persons, the contribution of the information technology and business process management industries, which yields much of the export revenue, is estimated by one source at just 5.4 million. This means that the IT-related sectors that are responsible for around 7.5 per cent of GDP contribute only around one per cent of total employment and 3.4 per cent of services employment. This implies in turn that the multiplier effects on aggregate income of the services export boom cannot be too high.

FOREX BOOST
The real benefit that the services export boom provides is the foreign exchange earnings it delivers. These reduce India’s balance of payments vulnerability and increase the policy flexibility that the government enjoys. Foreign exchange receipts related to software exports and business process outsourcing are larger if we include remittances of savings of workers employed to provide onsite services to clients abroad. Aggregate private transfers, consisting mainly of remittances from Indians working abroad, was at \$102 billion, equal to 70 per cent of the

Services exports as growth engine

The surge in services exports points to an alternative path to development. But the evidence presents a complex picture

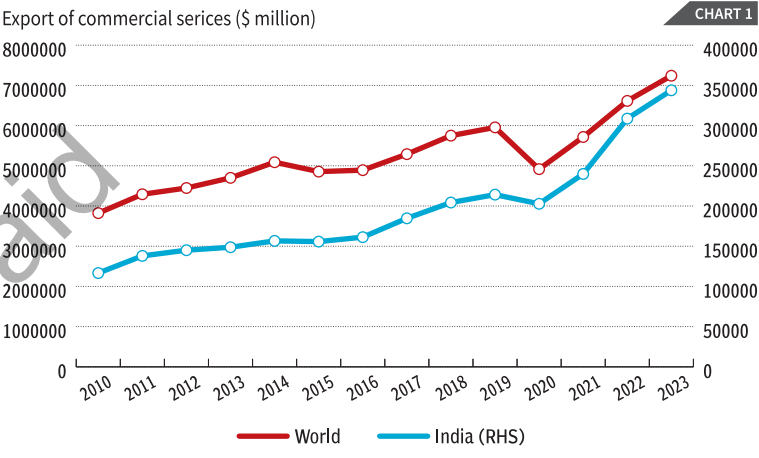


REUTERS

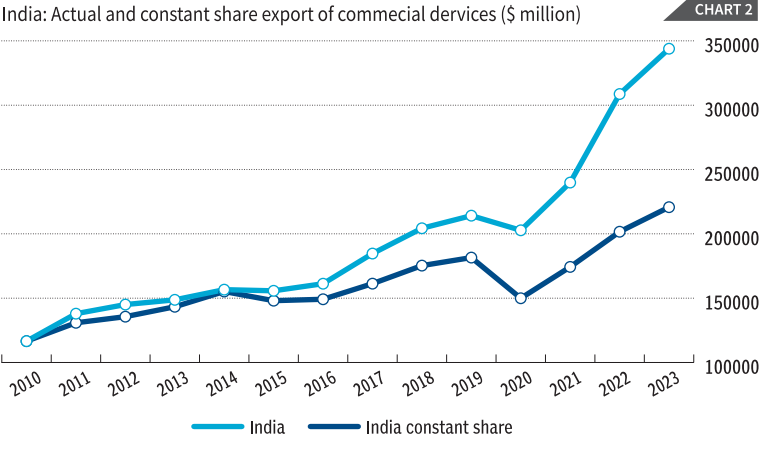
earnings from services exports. That was the other important source of balance of payments resilience, though not all of these remittances came from workers providing software or business process outsourcing services onsite. But here too, the role of the sector should not be exaggerated. Foreign exchange earned from net services exports amounted to just 2.1 per cent of the current account deficit recorded in 2023. The equivalent of more than a third of those earnings in that year was exhausted through net investment income payments to foreign investors repatriating surpluses from the country. The absence of caution with regard to the balance of payments effects of foreign direct investment, encouraged in part by earnings from services exports, erodes some of the benefit of those earnings. The outflows of net investment income payment seem to be gathering momentum (Chart 3). Meanwhile, India is beginning to pay a price for its software success. Attracted by the opportunity of emerging as a software exporter, the government decided to liberalise imports of hardware from the 1980s. This was a departure from the recommendation of the Homi Bhabha committee of 1968 that India must develop the capability to meet the inevitable growth in demand for computers other than mainframes, from domestic production. The protection afforded to the hardware sector in pursuit of this objective was dismantled as part of liberalization. The result is now visible in the growing dependence on imports of computer hardware and the growing presence of assemblers of foreign brands of computers in the country. The import of computer hardware has more than doubled from \$6.89 billion in financial year 2016-17 to \$14.14 billion in 2022-23. In the first quarter of 2023, foreign brands like HP accounted for 33.8 per cent of PC shipments in India, Lenovo for 15.7 per cent, Dell for 13.9 per cent and Acer for 12.3 per cent. Recent efforts at raising domestic production with subsidies has not helped. Among the 27 companies cleared for support under the production-linked incentive scheme are HP, Dell and Lenovo, which between them control much of the domestic market. Such foreign players are more likely to depend on imported components and to repatriate profits, which would further

Services export boom has bumped up forex earnings. But growing reliance on hardware imports could fritter away that advantage

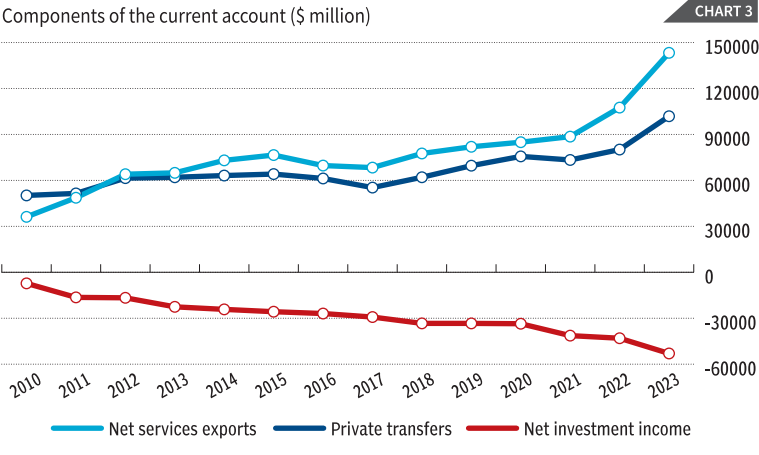
Surging ahead



India’s success



Outflows spike



add to foreign exchange outflows of investment income.

Finally, India is not an important producer of software products, with the Indian market being largely serviced by the likes of Microsoft, Acrobat, Oracle and SAP. As computerisation proceeds, these tendencies would intensify, leading to increased foreign exchange leakages through imports, royalty payments and profit repatriation.

Thus, as time goes by, a substantial share of the foreign exchange realised through services exports is likely to leak out, eroding even the balance of payments benefits that the services exports currently offer. It is time India uses the benefit of these earnings to diversify activity within and outside of services, including into new export lines, to retain the flexibility that foreign exchange access ensures.

thehindubusinessline.

TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

May 14, 2004

Shell-shocked NDA coalition bows out

In an unexpected reversal of fortunes, the Congress and its allies and the Left parties on Thursday handed out a severe drubbing to the BJP-led NDA coalition at the Centre. Proving all the exit polls and political pundits wrong by a large margin, the Congress combine, as per the latest trends and declared results, has emerged as the single largest party and is all set to stake claim to form the next government.

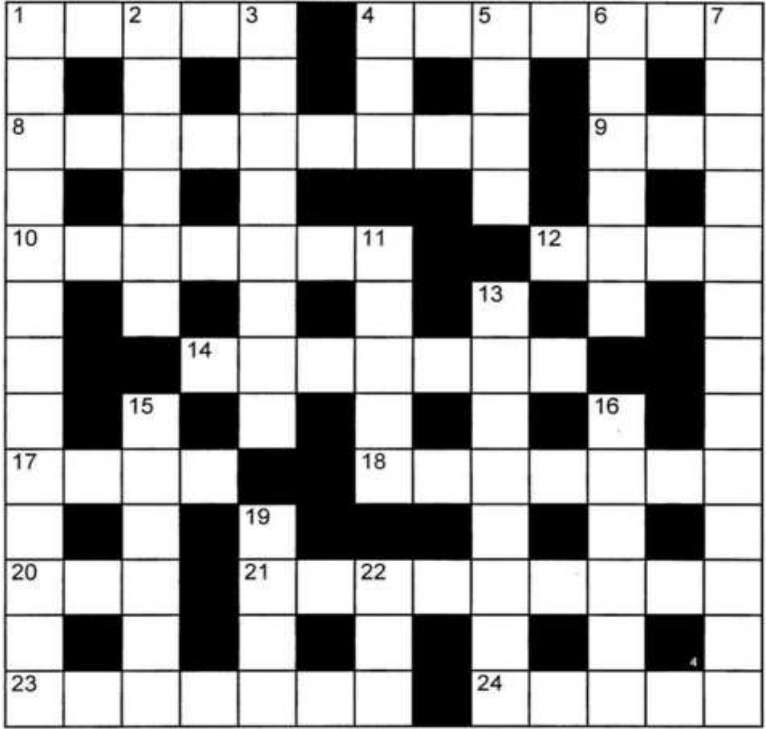
Vajpayee pledges to support the new govt

Shortly after resigning, the Prime Minister, A.B. Vajpayee, on Thursday said, “our hand of cooperation”, would be extended to the new government in all its endeavours that are in the interest of the nation and people. “We have given up office, but not our responsibility to serve the nation. We have lost an election, but not our determination,” he said in an address to the nation.

Markets rebound

The financial markets heaved a sigh of relief on Thursday as election results erased uncertainties and fears over a hung Parliament. Prices of equities, currency and bonds recovered as news of Congress leading ahead of NDA reached markets.

BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2438



EASY

ACROSS

- Threw carelessly (5)
- Upholder of contrary belief (7)
- Trade association members (9)
- Fellow (3)
- Made wide and thorough search (7)
- Thin strip of wood (4)
- Drape (7)
- Fellow (4)
- Most warm (7)
- Hostelry (3)
- Singer (9)
- Item of wearing apparel (7)
- Kinds (5)

DOWN

- Thoroughly self-investigative (4-9)
- Complete agreement (6)
- Open-handed (8)
- Possesses (3)
- File (4)
- Move as small child (6)
- Buildings; interpretations (13)
- Of the Netherlands (5)
- Films (8)
- Style (6)
- Below-ground storage (6)
- Pain (4)
- Louse-egg (3)

NOT SO EASY

ACROSS

- Was a throw-away worn over the shoulder? (5)
- He doesn't hold the established view that the rice is wild (7)
- A French one on : is a back-street for card-carrying members? (9)
- He's the fellow to put something on (3)
- Made a roving search and got cleaned out (7)
- The last to get the third ahead is long, thin and wooden (4)
- Final comedown in the theatre (7)
- A bloke who had a book that this man hawked around? (4)
- The very latest news, that one is least able to grasp? (7)
- Where refreshment may be got at the wicket, begin to negotiate (3)
- Singer opposed to a lot of change (9)
- What's worn by male customer getting arm in? (7)
- Categorises the athletic pursuits quietly excluded (5)

DOWN

- Critical examination of black music looking for something new? (4-9)
- Complete agreement achieved by us in no disagreement (6)
- Liberal transmitter of heredity with sour potential (8)
- Is not one of the have-nots involved in high aspirations? (3)
- File snake right ahead (4)
- Move a little way (6)
- Interpretations that may have been piled together (13)
- Sort of treat that's self-financing: double it? Nonsense! (5)
- Ancient inhabitant of our islands sure to change the images (8)
- Style of a girl taken in by a man's address (6)
- It may hold a lot of wine or a little salt (6)
- Stomach expanding may reveal something hurtful (4)
- Use needles, one hears, for what isn't wanted ahead (3)

SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2437

ACROSS 2. Limit 5. Pipe 7. Flag 8. Nominate 9. Advocate 11. Soon 12. Octogenarians 15. Bone 17. Election 19. Contract 21. Bide 22. Crop 23. Tinge

DOWN 1. Melodic 2. Log 3. Mania 4. Tempera 5. Pun 6. Patio 10. Ozone 11. Shift 13. Elegant 14. Noonday 16. Odour 18. Eaten 20. Top 21. Bee

Gaining strength

Improving bank balance sheet will support growth

The last financial year, 2023-24 (FY24), was good for private banks and excellent for public-sector banks (PSBs). Net interest income in aggregate expanded for all banks and net interest margins have been sustained for the most part. Non-interest income too has increased as banks have developed better cross-selling mechanisms and generated more fee income. Across the board, gross non-performing assets (GNPA) have reduced sharply. Net NPAs have also declined. Provisions have been reduced or reversed in many cases, as sticky loans have been recovered, resulting in higher profits and lower credit costs. Interest income has grown 38 per cent year-on-year (Y-o-Y) for private banks and 26 per cent Y-o-Y for PSBs in FY24 compared to FY23.

NPAs have reduced both nominally and as a percentage of advances. Aggregate GNPA for PSBs stood at ₹3.4 trillion in March 2024, versus ₹5.4 trillion in March 2022. Net NPAs stood at ₹72,544 crore in March 2024, versus ₹1.54 trillion in March 2022. GNPA stood at ₹1.24 trillion in March 2024 for private banks, versus ₹1.74 trillion two years ago. Net NPAs for private banks were around ₹29,000 crore in March 2024, versus ₹40,500 crore two years ago. Most banks have managed to keep net NPAs below 1 per cent while reducing provisions. As a result, most banks now boast stronger balance sheets. The stock market response in this context is worth analysing. The National Stock Exchange's private bank index has returned 6 per cent in the last year, underperforming the benchmark Nifty 50 (up 20 per cent). The Bank Nifty, which includes both private banks and PSBs, while being overweight in private banks, returned 8.3 per cent. The PSB index returned 78 per cent.

PSBs had much lower valuations and much more in the way of bad loans. Although private banks still receive higher valuation discounts and have better balance sheets, the dramatic improvement in PSB balance sheets has meant a positive re-rating for many of these. Outperformers with triple-digit returns include Bank of Maharashtra, Punjab National Bank, Indian Overseas Bank, Union Bank, and Central Bank. These were among the institutions with the largest GNPA and net NPA overhang. In contrast, State Bank of India, and Bank of Baroda, which are the two strongest and best-capitalised PSBs, have received less recognition from the stock market, though they have returned 40 per cent plus, which is objectively good.

Among the private majors, HDFC Bank, for instance, has seen negative returns in the past year, with the market still uncertain about the impact of its amalgamation with HDFC. In many ways, banks seem to be looking at a positive future. They are anticipating strong demand for corporate credit as growth accelerates and also hoping for easing of monetary policy and rate cuts as and when the inflation rate declines to the legally mandated target. However, the central bank has raised risk weighting for several categories of unsecured loans and proposed increasing provisioning for infrastructure-related loans in an apparent attempt to prevent overheating. Also, as credit-deposit ratios are tightening, banks are being forced to raise interest rates on deposits and this will impact interest margins. While tighter control by the Reserve Bank of India will affect profits in the near term, the sector is in good health. From the macroeconomic standpoint, the banking sector is now well placed to support the revival in private-sector capital expenditure.

The power gap

Battery storage systems can maximise RE

Renewable energy (RE) is the key to achieving India's commitment under the Paris Agreement. To this end, the government had set a challenging target of adding 500 Gigawatt (Gw) of RE power by 2030. So far, the installed capacity of RE power — mainly solar and wind — is 136 Gw as of March 2024, up from just 35 Gw in March 2014. But this relatively encouraging four-fold increase in RE installed capacity has never matched its actual contribution to electricity supply. Last financial year, for example, RE accounted for about a third of installed power-generating capacity. But it contributed to only about 13 per cent of the electricity supply. Thermal power accounted for 76 per cent.

This mismatch between the installed capacity in wind and solar power and supply has been a staple of the Indian power scene for some years now. It contrasts with the United States and European Union (EU), where wind and solar generate 21-22 per cent of electricity. In some EU countries, RE accounts for more than half the power supply. The key reason for India's sub-par RE performance is a technical reason that grid operators refer to as the "duck curve" of high supply and low demand. This trend is partly the result of shifts in peak demand. Earlier demand peaked during office hours; now growing electrification in urban and semi-rural India and an increasingly prosperous middle class owning air-conditioners and refrigerators have created a new peak in the evening hours. The problem is that RE generation is not by its nature in sync with peak demand patterns since it can be generated only when the sun shines or the wind is blowing. Thus, it is likely to be available mostly during daylight hours when the demand is not all that high but is unavailable during the evening-hour peak. Increasingly hot summers are likely to keep power demand on the boil — for instance, in March this year, peak power demand rose to 221 Gw, against 208 Gw in March 2023. With late snowfall expected to limit hydro power generation this summer, coal-fired plants will likely do the heavy lifting in terms of meeting demand. This situation is unlikely to help India reach even its admittedly distant Paris Agreement commitment of net zero by 2070.

The key to integrating RE into a round-the-clock availability of power to cope with demand cycles is battery energy storage systems (BESS). But here, high capital costs have been a traditional deterrent. This issue is now being addressed by a flurry of recent policy initiatives. In September last year, the government endorsed viability gap funding for BESS. It aims to establish 4,000 Mwh of BESS projects by 2030-31 and will provide financial assistance of up to 40 per cent of the capital cost. Detailed guidelines were announced in March. In December, India became a member of the BESS Consortium, led by the Global Leadership Council of the Global Energy Alliance for People and Planet, which provides generous concessionary finance for BESS projects. These initiatives are in the early stages but urgently demand fast-tracking if RE is to become a meaningful component of India's energy mix and underline the authenticity of India's climate-change commitments.

Priorities for the next govt

It must deliver on policies required for equitable growth

ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA



Regardless of who wins the election, the new government's primary focus will be implementing what has been promised in its election manifesto. Much of this will involve funding of new welfare schemes in the Budget, which will be presented in the middle of the year. However, the real need is for redesigning development strategy to bring us closer to the goal of growth with equity.

There are some long-term deficiencies in our development performance and some shortfalls that recent data indicates, which require measures:

(i) to stimulate the growth of private consumption and corporate investment;

(ii) to promote the growth in productive jobs; and, related to this, a policy for small and medium industries that encourages them to grow;

(iii) substantial improvements in education, skill development, and healthcare to make our labour force more suitable for newer occupations; and

(iv) connected with all this, greater respect for the need and the benefits of effective federalism.

First, let's consider the need to stimulate private consumption. The most recent National Accounts Statistics (NAS) show a drop in the annual rate of growth of consumption from around 7 per cent between 2011-12 and 2018-19 to a little over 4 per cent in the past five years. (Table 1.1 NAS 2024).

In fact, the second advance estimate for 2023-24 shows only a 3 per cent growth in private consumption. In a large country like India, a slowdown in private consumption growth will affect corporate investment. That is why the recent NAS shows a drop in the annual rate of growth of private corporate investment from a little over 10 per cent between 2011-12 and 2015-16 to under 5 per cent in the years since then until 2022-23. (Table 1.11 NAS 2024).

This may be due partly to the slowdown in exports of goods and services (as a percentage of gross value added, or GVA, down from 28 per cent in 2013-14 to 20 per cent in 2019-20 with some recovery in the post-Covid year). However, except for a few sectors, corporate investment is driven by

domestic demand growth, which is shaped by what happens to private consumption.

What could the slowdown of growth in private consumption be due to? It is not higher savings, as the NAS (Table 1.14 NAS 2024) shows a decline in household savings as a percentage of household income from 29 per cent in 2011-12 to 23 per cent in 2022-23. In my view, it is because of a shift in income to higher-income groups, reflected in the rising demand for higher-end durables and consumer products. The slower income growth of lower-income groups probably is the main factor behind slow consumption growth.

The assessment of income inequality in India is widely diverse, particularly in recent years, perhaps due to its political fallout and data deficiencies. But let me point out one obvious element in income distribution — the fact that according to the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) of 2022-23, about 46 per cent of the workers are in agriculture, while the share of agriculture in the national level GVA is 18 per cent, with a significant part of it accruing as returns to land ownership.

Add to this another group of widely exploited workers who are generally casual employees: The workers in construction, who were also badly affected by the Covid shutdown in March 2020. They account for 13 per cent of the workforce and have access only to a part of the 8 per cent share of construction in GVA. One can add more to support the thesis of low bargaining strength of workers — the fact that only 21 per cent of those employed have regular wage/salary income and 18 per cent are just helpers in a household enterprise (Statement 6, PLFS 2022-23). Note also that in the non-agricultural sector, 74 per cent of the workers are in proprietary and partnership enterprises (Statement 8, PLFS 2022-23), many of which are beyond the control of labour laws.

Enforcing laws about worker's rights does matter and should be done. But the key answer is a development policy that aims at creating new productive jobs at a rate higher than the growth of the work-



NITIN DESAI

'Affordable' electric air taxis

Competitively priced electric air taxi rides can significantly change urban living, as well as real estate benchmarks. There is rising interest in this segment from the aviation industry, the automotive sector, and property developers, among others.

"I think we are going to see interest from real estate operators accelerate over the next few years," Joe Ben Bevitt, founder and chief executive officer of Joby Aviation, told BloombergNEF. The California-headquartered Joby plans to launch electric air taxi services in 2025. It manufactures an electric vertical takeoff and landing, or eVTOL, aircraft — capable of carrying four passengers in addition to the pilot — and will run the service.

"Real estate is the world's largest global asset class, and it is all about location, location, location. With eVTOLs, you can move seamlessly from one location to another," he said.

The electric air miles race includes other eVTOL companies like Lilium, which aims for the first piloted test flights later this year, Volocopter, and Archer Aviation. Eve Urban Air Mobility, a subsidiary of Brazil's Embraer, holds orders for nearly 3,000 eVTOLs, with the aircraft expected to enter into service in 2026. Hyundai's company, Supernal, aims to begin initial test flights of its electric air taxi by the end of the year and launch service in 2028. Japan's SkyDrive began production in March at the plant owned by the official production partner — Suzuki Motor Company. Cumulative outstanding orders for eVTOLs already number over 10,000.

Self-driven or autonomous eVTOLs would be next. "We believe the quickest way to bring eVTOL flight to the public is with a piloted aircraft, as currently regulatory agencies don't have a path to certify

fully autonomous aircraft," Mr Bevitt said.

In terms of emissions, they could beat battery-powered cars. "Our target is to have lower grams of CO2 equivalent per passenger kilometre (or mile) — on a life-cycle basis — than riding an electric car on the ground, and yet you are able to get to your destination more than five times faster," Mr Bevitt said.

India's record auctions

India awarded a record 20 gigawatts of capacity in clean energy auctions in the first quarter of 2024, compared with 1.2 Gigawatts (Gw) in the same period last year, according to the most recent update from BNEF. The top winners during the quarter were JSW Energy, Avaada and ReNew.

The share of complex auctions — involving multiple technologies — has been rising, and dominated the first quarter awards, at 9.7 Gw. Standalone solar auctions totalled 9.2 Gw, while wind projects added up to 1.2 Gw.

In terms of cumulative renewables capacity auctions (completed and announced), India is next only to China, according to data compiled by BNEF, with Germany, Denmark and France rounding out the top five.

India's cumulative installed solar capacity has crossed 80 Gw, and accounts for almost a fifth of the total installed capacity of about 440 Gw.

Energy storage

Long-duration energy storage — defined by BNEF as energy storage that delivers more than six hours of charge and discharge — is a growing market.

An advanced compressed air energy storage solution offered by Hydrostor looks fairly cost-competitive. "The cost to add one hour of storage is about



VANDANA GOMBAR

ing-age population for about a decade.

This will stimulate the shift of workers out of agriculture and improve the wage market environment for the bulk of workers. Such an effect can be seen in the earnings of workers in regions where productive job creation exceeds local working population growth or where social factors strengthen the bargaining power of labour. One example of this is the difference in the daily wages of male non-agricultural workers in Tamil Nadu relative to the national average. (₹482 against ₹348). The difference is also large in other migration-dependent states in the South and the North-West. Migration can help and, according to the Census, this increased from 33 million workers in 2001 to 51 million workers in 2011. But migration is not a sufficient answer for the expected growth in the working-age population, particularly in the North. The key lies in accelerating the growth in productive jobs in the North.

I believe a major factor is the dynamism of small enterprises. The more dynamic ones can be startups in new areas arising from demand growth and technology changes, either as input suppliers or as initial final product suppliers for local demand. However, the policy incentives given to them, particularly by way of exemptions from control regulations, tend to persuade them to remain small. This should be avoided, and they should be encouraged to expand from small to medium and even medium to large.

The other dimension of productive job creation is systematic attention to national value chains, which, with our steadily improving physical and digital infrastructure, can connect the northern states, where job creation is a more acute necessity, to the higher-growth southern and western states. The rapid emergence of e-commerce and digital payment systems can also help in this.

Effective job creation requires the availability of adequately qualified workers. This will require a more effective system for skill development than what we have had so far. One can go a step further and work also to improve the quality of education and healthcare, which provide not just greater equality but also a better basis for the availability of an effective workforce.

These measures can lead to a rise in incomes because of a higher rate of productive job creation, particularly in regions where the need for a shift from agriculture to manufacturing and services is more necessary. It will stimulate consumption demand, and through that, investment and growth, benefitting all states. But one qualification is important. Most of the measures required will have to vary significantly from state to state. Hence, our national policies should really formulate just a broad strategy and leave sufficient financial and decision-making room for states to design and implement more specific measures.

Therefore, my request to the new Union government is to fulfil your hand-out promises. But also, undertake the measures required to accelerate growth with equity and understand and respect the geographical variation of needs and possibilities in the country.

1. RBI, Handbook of Statistics of Indian States, 2022-23, Table 113; desaind@icloud.com

\$50 per kilowatt-hour of storage capacity, which would compare to \$200-300+ for a lithium-ion system on a fully installed basis," said Curtis VanWalleghem, CEO and co-founder of the company. "When you look at the total value proposition: Low cost, long life, high performance, low impact, and easy to site and permit...we think it is a very compelling alternative."

Hydrostor has more than a dozen projects in the pipeline, with two projects at an advanced stage in Australia and in California. Key investors in the company include Goldman Sachs Asset Management and Canada Pension Plan Investment Board.

Solar panel prices

The price of solar panels has been falling and creating challenges for countries trying to seed a domestic manufacturing industry.

The current slump is "irrational" and there's only a small probability it will continue, Jinko Solar Chairman Li Xiande said in a joint presentation hosted by the Shanghai Stock Exchange.

Chiming in, Trina Chairman Gao Jifan said: "The price of photovoltaic modules is currently at a low level, and there's limited room for further decline."

Importing cheap panels enables ultra-competitive solar power generation, but there is a tradeoff that leaves manufacturers and project developers standing on different sides of the fence. A group of solar manufacturers in the US have sought additional tariffs aimed at the solar supply chain in Southeast Asia. New tariffs may inflate module prices in the US to about three times the price paid on the global free market, BNEF estimates. This would increase the cost of building solar projects in the US and hurt solar developers.

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India's clandestine love affair with crypto



BOOK REVIEW

DEVANGSHU DATTA

This book uses a nice mix of anecdotes plus data to look at the dark underbelly of Digital India. It goes on to examine demographic and sociological trends that drive India's fascination with the related areas of cryptocurrency, crimes involving crypto, and the deep Dark Web.

The book also takes a mildly haphazard look at the policy space. The fact that the policy description is mildly haphazard is not the author's fault. She's done a good job in imposing some degree of coherence in her description of a policy environment that is actually very haphazard and chaotic.

There's a lot to unpack here so I will

attempt to summarise what the reader will learn. One, as India has digitised, and created a structure for smooth electronic transfers of cash, it has become increasingly vulnerable to "faceless" cyber-scams.

It has a large population of elderly non-tech savvy folks, who are shaky when it comes to digital security. It has corporations and government organisations that are casual about data security. It has been late in legislating laws to safeguard data privacy, and those laws have grey areas. People in law enforcement struggle to understand data security and cybercrime. The ambiguous policy attitude about crypto makes it even harder to police.

Second, India also has a huge population of young, tech-savvy, unemployed people with access to smartphones and cheap data plans. It is easy for them to create, or to get sucked into get-rich-quick schemes. They naturally gravitate to crypto, and they're amoral when it comes to shady practices since in many cases, they're

driven by desperate need.

Unemployment, demonetisation, and the pandemic have all helped to turbocharge the move into crypto.

Third, India has a large diaspora with a constant flow of inward and outwards remittances. It is much easier, quicker and cheaper to do transfers under the radar using crypto. This means a wider acceptance of crypto even among people who are otherwise techno-conservative.

There's a lot of *masala* in the book centred on young men (there is a gender skew in the space, though there are plenty of women traders) who have pulled off spectacular scams and hacks in the cyber realm. There's plenty of entertaining characters portrayed in these tales of skulduggery. Those are the anecdotes.

Hacking crypto wallets is one favourite game. Another route to quick money is the "rug pull" — this is the launch of new crypto coins, sales of which are followed up by disappearances, or by the coin dropping to zero. Setting up fraudulent exchanges (where one can list newly dreamt up

coins) is a scale-up of this concept.

Another popular scam is the offering of absurdly high returns in variations of ponzi schemes involving crypto.

A fourth growth area is ransomware — all sorts of *desi* firms and institutions have been hacked with the data encrypted and decryption keys being made available on payment in crypto, of course. Selling data on the Dark Web, including readymade know your customer (KYC) kits that enable people to set up fake accounts, is another popular pastime. Drug deals done via the Dark Web is another target of opportunity. There are dark rumours in government circles of terror funding through this route.

In addition to all this, there is the practice of cross-border transfers using

crypto. Some of this activity is attached to money-laundering and round-tripping. But a lot of the cross-border transfers consist of migrant workers sending small sums — \$200 or \$500 equivalent — home to families through the quickest, cheapest route.

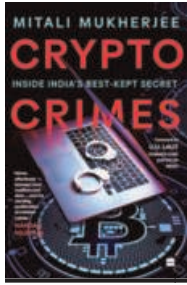
At various times, the Reserve Bank of India has tried to cut off the bank financing of crypto trading but the Supreme Court stopped that. The Securities and Exchange Board of India doesn't like cryptos either but it doesn't have a framework for regulating either coins or crypto-exchanges. The government can't decide how to classify these assets, but by imposing taxes it has effectively legitimised them.

In the midst of all this, there are millions of Indians, maybe a hundred million Indians, regularly dabbling in crypto trading. Small towns and semi-rural geographies are deeply penetrated by crypto culture. Many of these traders

also surf the Dark Web. Some host websites there. According to one statistic cited in the book, about 26 per cent of Dark Web users are Indians. A large proportion of Dark Web users do normal stuff — chat, play games, and so on in an environment where they are not under surveillance by nanny states, or policed by their parents.

But a minority are deeply involved in Dark Web markets that are the world's go-to places for drugs, weapons, malicious code, porn, and pirated content and data. Every Dark Web transaction involves the use of crypto currency, so practically anyone who uses the Dark Web has a crypto-trading profile.

This is a meticulously researched, well-written book that lays out the state-of-the-art across these connected spaces. It sources and cites data from multiple places. The author also conducted extended interviews of entrepreneurs (legit and criminal), law enforcement personnel, and influencers. The book explicates the ecosystem and presents the varying perspectives of people who operate in this environment without being judgmental. It is as good an overview of India's love affair with crypto as you will find.



CRYPTO CRIMES: Inside India's best-kept secret
Author: Mitali Mukherjee
Publisher: HarperCollins
Pages: 336
Price: ₹499



OPINION

The
Hindustan Times
ESTABLISHED IN 1924

{ OUR TAKE }

Preparing for La Nina days

State and local government must be prepared to deal with heavy rainfall, possible flooding

Conditions have turned favourable for the La Nina phenomenon in the next few months, according to the Climate Prediction Centre of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration of the US. This holds both promise and warning for India. La Nina, historically, is associated with heavy rainfall during the southwest monsoon, which arrives in early June. The rains — the India Meteorological Department has already predicted an above-normal monsoon with estimated rainfall of 106% of the long period average — would be a welcome relief for the parched land in the Deccan, especially parts of Marathwada, which have faced drought-like conditions this year. Southern India and Uttarakhand have already started to receive pre-monsoon showers.

A good monsoon would also mean better crop yields, and, hopefully, relief from high food inflation. Last year's El Nino saw a below-par monsoon (94.4% of long period average), which resulted in food grain production falling by 6% in the 2023-24 crop year over the preceding year, and caused retail food inflation to spike to 8.52% in February. The room for the central bank to ease rates narrowed significantly despite overall inflation remaining within its tolerance band, and the Union government opted for export bans and restrictions, which it relaxed a few days ago. Clearly, an abundant monsoon is likely to bring much relief to both farmers and consumers.

That said, the La Nina prediction is also a warning to be prepared for disruptive rains, which have become frequent and potent with the advent of the climate crisis. Warming, many experts hold, has caused monsoon patterns to turn erratic, with large volumes of precipitation being concentrated over a short period and weeks of unseasonal dry weather. Landslides and floods in Himachal Pradesh last year, and the 2018 floods in Kerala are evidence of the devastating consequences of changing monsoon behaviour. State and local governments need to be prepared with contingency plans and drills. From assessment of disaster management readiness to audits of dams, flood signalling and early warning systems, they must contend with long task lists.

A different challenge awaits urban centres, which have faced the brunt of downpours in recent years. Cities including Delhi, Bengaluru, Chennai, and Mumbai, have all had their inadequate physical infrastructure exposed. Unplanned and illegal developments have resulted in encroachments on tanks, lakes and wetlands and destroyed natural drainage systems. Municipal governments need to recognise this and prepare now.

Kathmandu shouldn't politicise map dispute

The Nepal government's decision to put a map showing disputed regions along the border with India as Nepalese territory on new currency notes has triggered a row in Kathmandu, with the president's economic advisor being forced to quit over his remarks against the move. Chiranjivi Nepal, a noted economic expert, had characterised the government's move as "inappropriate" and flagged that political rhetoric should not be institutionalised by giving shape to it in the form of currency notes. The politics being played in Nepal with the map can have serious repercussions for bilateral ties, especially given that similar claims by the Himalayan country in 2020 soured ties.

That year, Nepal's Parliament passed a constitutional amendment to endorse a new political map that claimed the areas of Lipulekh, Kalapani and Limpiyadhura, which have for long been under India's control. This was in response to the Indian side opening a strategic road connecting Dharchula and Lipulekh. The issue lingered like a dark cloud over bilateral relations till the two sides agreed to address the border issue through established mechanisms. The Indian side also made it clear that Nepal's "artificial enlargement of claims" wasn't based on historical fact and violated the existing understanding to address outstanding boundary issues through talks.

Besides the disputes over two stretches at Kalapani and Susta, the rest of the India-Nepal boundary has been settled. These boundary disputes ought to be discussed through existing mechanisms between the two governments and away from the public glare, so that contentious issues can be sorted out in a spirit of give and take. Unfortunately, that is not the direction in which Kathmandu appears to be moving.

Demography politics misses the big picture

Population growth and fertility rates have been falling among both Hindus and Muslims in India since 1991

At an international conference in the early 1980s, Bagicha Singh Minhas, the newly appointed chair of the National Sample Survey Organisation, claimed that several global institutions often produce data on income of countries without knowing their population. The Prime Minister's Economic Advisory Council's (EAC-PM) analysis of the changing pattern of the religious demography of 197 countries over the period from 1950 to 2015, without considering the changes in religious denominations and geographical boundaries, is reminiscent of this. EAC-PM uses dataset Version 2.0 RCS dm, supported by the Association of Religion Data Archives, which provides yearly data on 97 religious denominations for over two centuries, tapping information from a large number of sources that have diverse scopes, different timeframes and overlapping coverage, but whose statistical robustness has not been established in the domain of research.

The dataset used in the study, "Share of Religious Minorities: A Cross-Country Analysis (1950-2015)", unfortunately, does not belong to an archive, maintained by any country or

the UN system. The purpose of the study is a research paper, produced by the creators of the dataset, which through multiple statistical analyses shows that "religious characteristics are significant factors in explaining the socio-political developments in the contemporary world". A few of the issues of comparability and authenticity of the data are noted by the authors. Interestingly, this dataset gives yearly figures for countries that have had no population census in the recent past. For example, the set has yearly data by religion for Afghanistan although the last census there was conducted in the seventies. Researchers must be encouraged to probe issues in uncharted territories when these have high socio-political significance. One can agree with the authors that "religious characteristics influence political processes and outcomes far more importantly than conventionally understood". There is a need to probe these even when the where-withal is inadequate.

The EAC-PM report would not have become a matter of political debate but for the strong inferences it has drawn, which do not clearly emerge from the global data. The authors make a purposive departure from the original premise of "abstracting away from the causes" in the analysis of change. In 2020, a

Technical Group constituted by the government gave macro projections of the rural and urban population up to 2036 — but without disaggregation by religion. It was generally accepted that there have been significant dips in total fertility rate (TFR) for minority groups in recent years. The use of global databases and unverifiable assumptions would be acceptable for academic research for answering limited research questions. However, an Advisory Council presenting such readings to the PM is a matter of concern.

The key hypothesis of the EAC report is that the rising share of minorities in the total population "is a good proxy for the status of minorities in a country over time. ... a society which creates a hostile environment for minorities and/or denies them access to public goods and services is more likely to witness a decrease in their share of the overall total population". The authors clearly ignore the differential impact of economic well-being and access to public goods and services on population growth at different levels of deprivation. One does not have to be an expert demographer to see that communities in most countries grow at a sluggish pace due to their higher levels of income, education, modern values and access to technology. Statements on the growth in per-



Amitabh Kundu



PC Mohanan



The increase in the Muslim population has taken place largely because of their poverty and illiteracy, resulting in high fertility HT PHOTO

centage shares over time can easily be misleading if these shares are highly unequal across communities, or have arbitrary base years. The media has reported a decline of 7.82% in the share of Hindus in the population, while Muslims have recorded an increase of 43% during 1950-2015. If this sounds really alarming, it is because of the low percentage of the Muslim population in the base year. A similar calculation would show that the share of Buddhists has grown by over 1,500%. While the Hindu population as per the 1951 Census was 304 million, which went up by 661 million during 1951-2011, the Muslim population increased by only 114 million during this period. Furthermore, the change in the share of minorities at two points in time with a gap of 65 years is likely to give erroneous signals since it may be attributed to contemporary developments. The increase in the Muslim population has taken place largely because of their poverty and illiteracy, resulting in high fertility. The growth rate of the Muslim population during 1951-61 was as high as 33%. In the subsequent two decades, it fell to 31% but went up again to 33% during 1981-91.

The rate, thereafter, has fallen continuously, reaching 25% in 2001-11. In contrast, the population growth for the Hindus was 22% during 1951-61 and rose to 24% in the following two decades. The rate, here, too, has gone down sharply — as low as 18% in 2001-11. The EAC study's findings have been amplified by the media and political entities. However, the findings are not new. The census data itself has shown that the growth rates of the Muslim population have been higher than that of the Hindu population. Correspondingly, the TFR for Muslims continues to be higher than that of Hindus as well as the SC/ST population. These, understandably, lead to an increase in the share of Muslims in the population. But, there has been a sharp decline since 1991. There is a clear trend of convergence, both in terms of population growth rate and TFR, now over the past three decades.

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Reading Constitution at the time of elections

The Indian Constitution is in the news in this election. Some parties have claimed that this election is about protecting the Constitution. The Prime Minister had earlier proclaimed that the spirit of the Constitution was the spirit of India. Almost all legal scholars and judges refer to the importance of the spirit of the Constitution.

The Constitution is a written document that can be read by all. Does the notion of the spirit invoke something not explicitly stated in the document? Is it an interpretation by some people? Why is it that so many people are suddenly invoking both the spirit and the text of the Constitution today? Does this mean that the spirit is different from the words in the text?

The Constitution is the book of the people. It belongs to each one of us. It impacts each one of our lives, whatever our background. It protects us as well as liberates us. But it is not an easy text to read. How many of us have, and can, actually read that book? It runs to over 400 pages. It is filled with definitions, qualifications and descriptions of various acts. If this is a book of the people and for the people, then should it not be understandable to all the citizens of the country?

The language in it can be deceptively simple, as well as bureaucratically dense. Consider the example of Fundamental Rights. The first two rights under this are the right to equality and the right against discrimination by the State. It is not easy to understand these concepts of equality and discrimination. Firstly, there is ambiguity in the meaning of these words. Secondly, these words are part of sentences and that structure restricts their meanings. Thirdly, these sentences do not seem to match the reality on the ground for millions of citizens. Fourthly, what follows these sentences are qualifications of various kinds.

For the Constitution to become operational, these words have to be interpreted by specialists — lawyers, judges and scholars in these fields. The meaning of words such as equality, justice and discrimination cannot be taken as the popular meaning people may have of them. These become technical words and scholars from different disciplines spend a lot of time (and words!) trying to uncover their meaning.

If this is the case with two simple lines in this book, imagine what it means to read the whole book. Who actually reads it other than lawyers and judges? Forget the person on the street, it would be a surprise if even a frac-

tion of our politicians have read this book. It is for this reason that one can appreciate the importance of the Preamble of the Constitution. On one page, the Preamble lists out the vision of the Constitution. In this sense, the Preamble has rightly been called the spirit of the Constitution. Although this image is attractive, it is also problematic since it reduces the complexity of reading a text to a few core concepts. The meaning of these core concepts in the Preamble such as democratic, justice, equality, fraternity and secular are also deeply contested. Is the Preamble the spirit only because it simplifies a complex text?

We can read the Constitution as a text written in a language and search for its meaning. Or we can discover the meaning of this text without entering into this analysis. The spirit of the text is a way to understand something of the text beyond the meanings associated with the language of the text.

When we encounter a word, we naturally search for its meaning. But the meaning of these words are only more words, and each of these words also have meaning. A word such as secular in the Preamble can be understood linguistically or it can be understood in its spirit. What this means is that our understanding of this term is not restricted to language but to a feeling, to a sense of knowing what it means. Thus, one way to understand the spirit of language is to recognise a domain of feeling and experiences associated with language, not reducible to the meanings of words and sentences. Spirit connotes a sense of escaping from various constraints of meaning when seen from the perspective of language alone.

The word equality can be understood not only in terms of its meaning but also in terms of how it is experienced. This word can evoke a sense of fairness, justice, a feeling of compassion towards all those who are not as fortunate as each one of us. To feel what the text is saying is to have an emotional relation to the text.

So how does one discover the spirit of the Constitution? First of all, the Constitution is a document that is equally applicable to all, which means that the meaning of the words in it have to apply to all equally. How can one understand this collective meaning? It can only be understood when each one of us tries to imagine this meaning from the perspective of others, of all other citizens under one Constitution. It is this imagination of the collective vision that is the spirit of the text.

What is unique to the Indian Constitution is that this vision of the collective is driven from the perspective of those who are the worst-off in a society. The spirit of the word justice can be found when we think about justice not from one's own perspective but from the perspective of those who are denied basic justice in the same society. The spirit of justice is not the technical meaning of the word justice, but the felt feeling when imagined from the perspective of those who are denied these qualities.

So, those who claim that they will protect the spirit of the Constitution will first have to protect the collective vision of all the citizens irrespective of class, caste, religion and gender.

Sundar Sarukkai's recent books include *The Social Life of Democracy* and a novel, *Following a Prayer*. The views expressed are personal



Sundar Sarukkai



The Constitution is the book of the people. It belongs to each one of us SHUTTERSTOCK

{ S JAISHANKAR } EXTERNAL AFFAIRS MINISTER



An FTA with EU is the most complex FTA because there are lot of non-trade issues involved. My expectation is going into the next term... it would definitely be one of our trade priorities



An Indian success story in science and technology

India's achievements in science and technology under Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi is no exception to criticism from the Left-liberal circles. However, there has been significant progress in the Science and Technology (S&T) sector in the last 10 years. Long-term and sustainable financial commitment to S&T is essential as most projects are of a long gestation. Gross R&D expenditure has doubled from ₹ 60,000 crore in 2010-11 to ₹ 1.2 lakh crore last year. The total expenditure of Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) has gone up from around ₹ 3,200 crore in 2013-14 to ₹ 6,700 crore in 2021-22.

Several forward-looking policy decisions were taken by the Modi government to foster this sector. For instance, the 2015 start-up policy has become a key driver of the rapid growth of start-ups in India. Similarly, the recently announced National Research Foundation will be an integrated funding agency (broadly based on the National Science Foundation, United States) with a sanctioned financial outlay of ₹ 14,000 crore over the next five years, or 2.5 times of the amount approved to its previous avatar, Science and Engineering Research Board. Last year, 14 autonomous biotechnology institutes under the department of biotechnology were brought under one apex body (Biotechnology Research and Innovation Council), bringing about significant synergies.

Investment in S&T has resulted in significant enhancement both in quality and quantity of outcomes. In terms of the number of scientific publications, India's ranking went from 7th in 2010 to 5th in 2015 and now 3rd in 2023, behind China and the US. In scientific research, the quality of publications has more value than their quantity. Even on this parameter, India's rank in the Global Innovation Index (based on 80 parameters by the World Intellectual Property Organisation) jumped from 81 in 2013-14 to 40 in 2023.

There have been significant advancements in protecting indigenous technologies in terms of filing patents. India's patent filing has grown significantly in recent years — in 2022, it registered the largest increase of 22%. India is now ranked seventh in terms of resident patent filing. In 2022, 82,000 patent applications were filed in the Indian Patent Office and 34,000 patents were granted. The Indian Patent Office granted over 100,000 patents between March 15, 2023, and March 14, 2024. The Centre has also announced significant concessions on capital gains tax if the intellectual property (IP) generated by Indian entities is monetised, further encouraging commercialisation of IP. The

launch of the Quantum Computing Mission, Semiconductor Mission, India AI Mission, and National Biopharma Mission, further proves India's long-term commitment to cutting-edge technologies.

India now figures in the global telecom standards map with indigenous IP incorporated into "5G and beyond" technologies. The pan-IT project on 5G has indigenously developed 5G systems and technology that has been transferred to the Tata group. Similarly, India's success in developing indigenous vaccines against Covid-19 would not have been possible without the active support of DBT.

As of April 2024, over 127,000 start-ups had been officially recognised — close to 30% more than the number last year. The start-up ecosystem received a boost from a sector-specific funding programme. For example, the number of bio incubators (funded by Biotech Industry Research Assistance Council, DBT) has gone up from six in 2014 to 95 in 2024. Technologies developed with the support of BIRAC have resulted in the launch of over 800 products in the market. Atal Innovation Mission (AIM) is another unique initiative of the Modi government. From inculcating the spirit of innovation in school students (Atal Tinkering Labs) to funding start-ups, it has created and supported an entire innovation ecosystem. Since its inception, more than 10,000 tinkering labs have been established in schools. As of now, 86 incubators and more than 4,000 start-ups are supported by AIM. The participation of women in R&D is also growing. There were 67,441 women scientists in 2020-21 as compared to 42,000 in 2014-15.

These are some examples of how the Modi government inculcated a culture of scientific innovation and entrepreneurship in India. Of course, the demands and aspirations of the society are going to grow significantly. The average R&D spend (as a percentage of turnover) by Indian industry is still lower than in developed countries and there is a significant gap in the participation of Indian women in science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM). Specific schemes have been launched by the government to address both issues.

In the last 10 years, the Indian mindset has become more entrepreneurial. India is not only among the largest consumers of the latest technologies but also an inventor of world-class, safe, secure and affordable technologies.

Vijay Chauthaiwale is in-charge, foreign affairs department of the BJP. The views expressed are personal



Vijay Chauthaiwale

OUR VIEW



Theatre-focused armed forces: Speed up please

Integrated theatre commands should boost India's defence preparedness. We must get the basics of this plan right even as we address the 'command' dilemma of tech-enabled warfare

For efficiency, the form of an instrument must follow its function. This logic applies to India's defence too, which is why there is no valid argument against aligning our armed forces to focus on potential theatres of war. How well we fare could depend on how well we're geared for hostilities on a particular front—be it western, northern or maritime. As a departure from the legacy of different forces armed and trained apart for land, air and sea combat, it may seem disruptive to go in for a theatre-focused overhaul, but a better fighting stance would be worth the effort. This rationale is well understood in policy and defence circles. Yet, the going has been slow. Nearly half a decade after the country appointed its first chief of defence staff (CDS) to oversee this project, reports recently surfaced of a concrete plan for integrated theatre commands (ITCs) to replace the old command system. As proposals go, it is inarguably pragmatic in terms of the leadership roles and command centres it envisages.

Apart from a CDS on top of an apex apparatus for defence, the reported plan would have a vice-CDS appointed of a general's rank (or equivalent) to look after strategic planning, capability development and procurement matters. It also envisions a deputy CDS of a lieutenant-general's level to overlook operations, intelligence and asset allocations. For the idea of getting India's Army, Navy and Air Force into joint formats for action in specific theatres to prove effective, how the chain of command will work is crucial. Under the plan, as reported, all forces assigned to the western theatre facing Pakistan will be under Jaipur's army base as their command headquarters, those braced for China in the northern theatre will be placed

under the Lucknow base, and India's joint sea-facing forces will be commanded by a base in Coimbatore. While the three existing service chiefs will continue to lead their three classic forces designed for land, air and sea warfare, combat operations will be led by top-bracket officers who have a strategic view of an entire theatre in all its satellite-scanned complexity. Who will perform which role is expected to be chalked out later, as also the details of how armaments and other resources will be carved up or shared to optimize their use.

While care must be taken to ensure no reckless moves are made that might expose chinks in our armour, the adoption of a defence shield based on task-oriented ITCs should not be prolonged beyond a point. Crucially, it must not distract our strategists from the challenge of an equipment upgrade and all that it would imply if our forces are pressed into action. The very concept of 'military command' is under debate, globally, and we must keep pace with evolving doctrines. This is not just about taking a posture on nuclear weapons that's strictly in line with their stated purpose. Tech-enabled warfare has shrunk the old gaps between identifying a target, taking a decision, and acting upon it, as AI algorithms can do all three in a flash without any human restraint. This poses a dilemma. Studies on new technologies are usually kept under wraps, but the 'collateral damage' that autonomous weapons may cause is reason enough to deploy these with extreme caution. The extent to which we are ready to tolerate inaccurate AI-led strikes must have a consensus not only among military commanders, but among the rest of us as well. Let's align forces to fend off threats the best way we can, but also aim for utmost accuracy in our use of firepower.

MY VIEW | TIGHTROPE WALK

Organizations must foster trust to win employee commitment

A clear worker preference for instant rewards over deferred gratification should act as a warning



RAGHU RAMAN
is former CEO of the National Intelligence Grid, distinguished fellow at Observer Research Foundation and author of 'Everyman's War'.

In the 70s, Stanford professor Walter Mischel designed the famous marshmallow test, which became synonymous with the relationship between one's ability to delay gratification and long-term success. Two options were given to a group of children under the age of five. They could either eat a single marshmallow placed in front of them immediately, or choose to wait for 15 minutes, after which they would get two instead of one treat. The idea was to see who was able to control the impulse of immediate gratification versus delaying it for a larger prize later. Over decades, follow-up studies on children appeared to confirm that those who waited tended to achieve higher educational attainment, better health and greater professional success. The results were compelling, suggesting that patience and self-control could predict higher scholastic test scores, better emotional well-being and superior social skills, supporting the belief that self-discipline is a key determinant of success.

This construct of deferred gratification found its way into organizations too, suggesting, for example, that young graduates who valued rich experience over higher remuneration options in the early stages of their career would be more successful eventually. The construct's logic also seeped into the reward mechanisms of organizations in the form of variable pay, bonuses,

vested stock options, etc, implying that those who could defer gratification were more valued by employers. It was broadly believed that success was squarely the responsibility of the individual and her ability to defer gratification. However, this interpretation oversimplified the complexities of human behaviour by placing the entire onus on the individual, neglecting crucial socioeconomic and psychological factors that contextualize all decision-making.

The traditional interpretation of the marshmallow test assumed uniform backgrounds and similar 'experienced beliefs' among all participants. It presupposed that the promise of future rewards is universally credible, which may not be true for kids from different socioeconomic backgrounds, and thus failed to appreciate disparities that can influence a child's decision. Children from less well-off homes experience less stability and are less likely to trust that promised rewards will actually materialize. Their reluctance is not a failure of self-control, but a rational response to their 'lived experiences.' This was corroborated by variations of the test that first shaped the children's trust by consistently fulfilling or breaking promises. It was found that those who experienced reliability were far likelier to wait for the second marshmallow, which suggests that trust is a crucial part of the decision to delay gratification.

There are other psychological and emotional aspects at play too. Children raised in nurturing environments where promises are consistently kept are more likely to develop the optimism and patience necessary to wait for greater rewards than those growing up in unpredictable environments.

These implications of experiences with trust or mistrust equally affect adult behaviour in the workplace. Employees who learn to mistrust promises will prefer immediate gratification, influencing their career choices and performance. This preference manifests in a propensity for switching jobs

that offer quick rewards instead of believing employer promises of long-term benefits that require sustained effort, patience, and, most importantly, trust in the employer. This becomes especially important when dealing with a young workforce whose lived experiences may have comprised broken promises. Broken by the doublespeak of politicians, for example, or by the duplicity of role models caught in scams, or by deceitful business interactions or by unfortunate experiences as part of a broken family. When a child sees the two pillars of her world break their promise to each other, it is natural for them to be sceptical of promises.

This should propel organizations, especially those facing heavy attrition, to introspect and gauge the trust index of their leadership and organizational culture as a whole. If employees aren't 'loyal' or don't seem to be reposing much faith in longer-term promises, then the question to be asked is not whether those promises are attractive enough, but whether the lived experiences of employees play a role in their perceptions of assurances. If the organizational culture fosters an environment of intimidation and punitive action, or places physical presence at work above emotional engagement, alignment over innovative action, hierarchy over capability and conformity with the *status quo* over contrarian thinking, then there would surely be some dissonance between what the organization purports and what it actually practices. A dissonance that erodes trust.

In re-evaluating the marshmallow test for today's corporate environments, leaders ought to reflect on how they cultivate trust and commitment. Success is not solely about promising future gratification, but also ensuring that work environments have the consistency and reliability needed to make promises credible. If employees consistently seem to prefer a bird in hand to two in a bush, it's a reflection of the trust index of the organization and its leadership.

10 YEARS AGO



MINT METRIC

by Bibek Debroy

With youth on the rampage,
Flavoured condoms the rage.
Soaked in water, there is magic,
Because the drink gives a kick.
In Durgapur, this addiction is centre stage.

MY VIEW | TRUTH, LIES AND STATISTICS

Why keep data on informal enterprises under wraps?

PRAMIT BHATTACHARYA



is a Chennai-based journalist.

Barely a week goes by these days without an economist or policy wonk debating India's growth numbers. Establishment economists are seen to lambast India's economic statistics one day and defend them the next. Even statisticians have joined the debate, with some of them expressing doubts over the official growth figures. There are three key points of contention: the use of an untested corporate database, the manner in which nominal growth rates are being deflated to arrive at real (inflation-adjusted) growth rates, and the assumptions used to estimate informal sector growth.

Problems arising from the new corporate database have been acknowledged by Bibek Debroy, chairman of the Economic Advisory Council to the Prime Minister. "In comparison with the deficiencies of the ASI (Annual Survey of Industries), the MCA-21 (the new corporate database) gave rise to significant measurement challenges," wrote Debroy in an article co-authored with the

economists Amey Sapre and Aditya Sinha ('Measuring India's manufacturing sector remains a data challenge,' *Mint*, 15 May 2023).

Speaking to *The Economist* recently, India's former chief statistician Pronab Sen argued that the old GDP series (2004-05 base year) may have captured real growth rates more accurately. In an earlier interview to *The Wire*, Sen had argued that India's recent growth numbers were likely to be overestimates because of how informal sector growth was being measured. Sen argued that the post-pandemic recovery had been slower for informal firms. But since the GDP numbers relied on formal-sector proxies to estimate informal-sector activity, these were likely to be overestimates.

Another former chief statistician has expressed disagreement with Sen's view. Writing in *Mint*, TCA Anant argued that the official growth figures may in fact be underestimating informal sector growth (India's informal sector could be adding more value than we know,' 13 December 2023). Anant marshalled wage data from the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) to suggest that the informal sector has been buoyant.

Two former officials of the ministry of sta-

tistics and programme implementation (Mospi), Sanjay Kumar and N.K. Sharma challenged Anant's conclusions, since they were based on nominal wages (without adjustments for inflation). Once nominal wages are adjusted for inflation, wage data indicates "stagnation" rather than buoy-

Till recently, India lacked an annual survey of informal firms. Other than agriculture—for which annual data is available—estimates of informal sector output have typically relied on crude proxies or past trends. National accountants would derive the base-year estimates of value-addition in this sector based on the results of the most recent quinquennial survey of unincorporated enterprises. But growth estimates for subsequent years would be extrapolated from historical trends or proxy indicators.

Hence, the informal-sector growth num-

bers simply reflected the assumptions made by national accountants during the base-revision exercise.

Recognizing this data gap, Mospi rolled out a new annual survey of informal enterprises in 2019. The first round of the Annual Survey on Unincorporated Sector Enterprises (ASUSE) was experimental, and ran from October 2019 to March 2020. Since then, two full-fledged ASUSE annual rounds (2021-22 and 2022-23) have been completed and a third round is underway (2023-24), a Mospi official said in response to a right-to-information (RTI) query by this writer.

However, no ASUSE data has been released so far. While Mospi released a fact-sheet of the new consumer expenditure survey (HCES 2022-23) earlier this year, ASUSE numbers remain under wraps. My queries on whether (and when) ASUSE fact-sheets might be released elicited no response.

The ministry's refusal to release the

ASUSE data is deeply problematic. It defeats the very purpose of such an annual survey: providing timely data on the country's informal sector to policymakers, investors, researchers, startups and ordinary citizens.

It seems plausible that the pandemic hit small informal enterprises harder than large formal firms. But whether informal firms recovered faster or slower in the post-pandemic period can be known with certainty only once ASUSE results are revealed.

It is possible that the ASUSE data will be used for the next GDP base-year revision exercise. Releasing the data ahead of that exercise would give data users a chance to scrutinize this new data-set and provide national accountants important feedback ahead of the base revision. If it is withheld till then, data users could be in for a rude shock when the next base revision occurs.

Perhaps someday in the distant future, Mospi's mandarins will deem it fit to release a quarterly series on the informal sector based on the ASUSE or similar surveys. And maybe that series will be incorporated in the estimation of quarterly GDP numbers. If so, we might get some sense of the dynamism and volatility of India's dual-track economy. Till then, the informal sector will grow each quarter simply by assumption.

While GenAI has the potential to revolutionize content creation, its current trajectory points towards a future cluttered with digital junk. We need government help; it is clear to me that Big Tech will regulate itself inadequately.



THE EDITORIAL PAGE

WORDLY WISE

WE SINK TOO EASILY INTO STUPID AND OVERFERD SENSUALITY, OUR BODIES THICKENING EVEN MORE QUICKLY THAN OUR MINDS. — M F K FISHER

The IndianEXPRESS

FOUNDED BY
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

PAUSE AND PIVOT

Food prices rise, but core inflation remains subdued. As uncertainty persists, RBI is unlikely to pivot on rates

RETAIL INFLATION, AS measured by the consumer price index, eased marginally to 4.83 per cent in April, down from 4.85 per cent in March, as per data released by the National Statistical Office. The decline was driven, in part, by a softening of prices in the fuel and light segment. Core inflation remained subdued, while food inflation edged upwards to 8.7 per cent, from 8.52 per cent the month before. At a time when real interest rates are at levels that can be considered as “excessive”, this continuing divergence between food and core inflation presents a dilemma for the monetary policy committee.

The disaggregated data shows that within the food category, inflation remained elevated across several segments such as cereals, meat and fish, eggs, vegetables and pulses. There are, however, expectations of a good rainfall season this year — as per the India Meteorological Department, the southwest monsoon is “most likely to be above normal”. This would bode well for agricultural production, and also help keep a lid on prices. In the non-food category, inflation remained subdued in most of the segments such as clothing and footwear, household goods and services, recreation and amusement. The uncertainty over the trajectory of food inflation weighs heavily on the MPC — food inflation has now been above 8 per cent for many months. In his comments following the last committee meeting, RBI Governor Shaktikanta Das had said that the MPC must remain vigilant “as uncertainties in food prices continue to pose challenges.” A recent study by economists at the RBI has noted that “high food and fuel inflation can get generalised in the system through inflation expectations,” and that if inflation expectations are not anchored then the “impact of a food prices shock may not be transitory”.

Central banks in major developed economies across the world are yet to begin cutting rates. However, recent events point towards the possibility of a divergence in policy across these countries. In its last meeting, the US Federal Reserve had noted a lack of progress on the inflation front — in March, the consumer price index had edged up to 3.5 per cent, from 3.2 per cent the month before. Commentary from the Fed has led to a reassessment of when the central bank will begin to cut rates and by how much this year. Across the Atlantic, there are indications that the European Central Bank is likely to begin cutting rates in June. And in the UK, recent comments from the Bank of England also point towards the possibility of rate cuts this summer. In India, the RBI expects inflation at 4.5 per cent in 2024-25. However, as there remains considerable uncertainty over food prices, the minutes of the last committee meeting indicate that a policy pivot in the immediate future seems unlikely.

A STEP FORWARD

Framing of charges against Brij Bhushan Singh is welcome, raises hope that the process of justice will take its course

DESPITE REPEATED INVOCATIONS of nari shakti, it sometimes seems that this is no country for women. The inertia that for too long met the accusations of sexual harassment against former Wrestling Federation supremo Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh by some of India’s top women athletes last year, pointed to a sobering reality: The road to justice is pockmarked by formidable odds and many give up the fight halfway, bludgeoned into submission by the unequal power equations. Now, however, the framing of charges against Singh under Sections 354 and 354A of the IPC, by a trial court, raises hope that a step forward has been taken. As wrestler Vinesh Phogat wrote in an article in this paper on Sunday, “Today we can stand without fear, our head held high, look him in the eye, the man we were afraid of for so many years. Brij Bhushan has got the message that we are not going anywhere until women wrestlers get justice”.

The framing of charges against Singh is, of course, only the first step of the wrestlers’ battle. The legal fight that lies ahead is likely to be arduous. Singh’s political clout has ensured that the Kaiserganj seat, from where he has represented the BJP five out of the six times he has been elected to the Lok Sabha, remains in the family: His younger son Karan is the candidate this time. But beyond that, it may be an important moment for the global #MeToo movement whose hard-fought gains seem to have lost traction since it took off in 2017. As with actor and comedian Bill Cosby in 2021, the overturning of the sex-crime conviction of Hollywood mogul Harvey Weinstein by the New York Court of Appeals on a technicality last month was a significant setback. Change, it appeared, would take its time to arrive.

That might well be true. But what gives hope is the persistence of female voices that refuse to be stymied by deterrence, disappointment or intimidation. As with Weinstein’s case, where survivors have affirmed their intention to testify again, in India, too, the women wrestlers have expressed their determination to see the case against Singh through. In France, a secret list of male predators might well become the unlikely curtain raiser at the Cannes Film Festival that is set to begin. If anything, each wave of protesting voices sends out the message that despite its high cost, every tiny dent on entrenched male privilege opens up valuable space in which demands for accountability can be heard and addressed.

RAREFIED DINING

A meal in space for half a million dollars. It’s been in the making

WHAT WOULD A meal for the one per cent look like? If it’s taking place aboard Spaceship Neptune, it might include, as Danish chef Rasmus Munk has proposed, “an edible piece of space junk from a satellite.” Munk, who has collaborated with a Florida-based space startup to launch six diners at a time to 1,00,000 feet above sea level, promises an out-of-the-world experience for \$4,95,000 per ticket. Even by the standards of fine dining, the price is stratospheric.

This latest attempt, which is set to take off in late 2025, is very much in keeping with the ever more extravagant turns that fine dining has been taking, with the actual food on the plate starting to seem besides the point. From the eerie, flesh-coloured “ear” made of jello served to those celebrating their birthday at the Michelin-starred Mugaritz in Spain to the 10-seat Sukiyabashi Jiro in Tokyo which expects diners to follow strict rules while eating sushi (including how to hold chopsticks and how much soy sauce to use), haute cuisine is not just about pushing the boundaries of what people eat, but how many hoops they will jump through in order to do so — and how much they are willing to pay for it. The logical next step for this pursuit of more and more rarefied experiences could only be space.

While the less fortunate 99 per cent might wonder if paying half a million dollars, even for a meal in space, is worth it, the brain behind the operation has a loftier-than-10,000 ft goal in mind. “I want to highlight food as a common thread in our human existence, and it will be truly meaningful to serve it while gazing down at the Earth’s curvature,” Munk said in a recent interview. From an earthbound perspective, that image is its own caricature.



NISHANT SHAH

WHILE I WAS growing up and forming my political consciousness, one thing was repeated *ad nauseam* — you cannot trust politicians. Across party lines and beliefs, it was a truth universally acknowledged that people contesting power will manipulate information, make false promises, slander their opponents, and engage in corrupt information practices. As elections drew near, various sources would also keep reminding us to be aware of rumours, gossip, and baseless information that would often spread unchecked, inciting voters towards certain decisions.

Given that this was an accepted state of things, we have to start wondering why the introduction of deepfakes in our ongoing election cycle is causing so much anxiety. Some of the answers are obvious. We might be used to encountering doctored information, but we had an innate trust in our capacity to sift the truth. There was a belief that we could see through the manipulations, and we had access to alternative sources that could verify and corroborate information that we were unsure about. We also, to varying degrees, had trust in media institutions and regulatory bodies to check, contain, and confirm the truth value of the information coming to us. We were familiar with the media to know when things were changed, edited, or revised. Lies and fakes were a part of the information ecosystem but we also felt confident about the tools, strategies, and collective experience we had, to examine and evaluate the truth of these messages.

The biggest change that deepfakes have introduced is not about the nature of information but about our capability to trust our own judgement of this information. It is important to note that when faced with deepfakes, we are not just being fooled. That would have been an easier thing to deal with — because if we were being fooled, we would find interventions to provide ourselves with information, data, science, and proofs that we can depend upon to verify the information.

Circulation of deepfakes depends on collapse of context and information overload

We are so saturated with information that we have given up trying to find information on our own terms. Information is given to us. When we look for sources to corroborate it, those are also given to us. We do not manage the sources or the contexts of our media consumption. We have outsourced this to algorithms that curate, manipulate, shape, and circulate information based on pre-set logics of profit and engagement. The condition of information overload also means that we are consuming information quickly and at a speed that makes thoughtful engagement difficult.

tion. We would have provided technological solutions and apps to detect the possibility of the fake and show its true nature. Community interventions where people give context, counter the information, and verify and fact-check it — things that we are already doing, would have evened out the terrain. The current state of algorithmic detectors would have sped up the process of fact-checking.

With deepfakes, the focus is often on managing the production, circulation and reception of this information. But the real attention has to be given to an extraordinary condition that we have naturalised over time: A condition where we are unable to trust our own decision on whether something is true or not. Even when we have done all the verifications and come up with an answer, the question remains: Can I trust my analysis of this information? Deepfakes are obviously sophisticated technological wizardry that allow for non-real things to claim reality. However, what is different in this moment from older histories of information falsification is that we have lost the assurance that what we believe is true.

Over the last couple of decades, the emergence of social media as the default platform for consuming information has resulted in two things that have shaken our self-assurance that if we see it, we can believe it. One, is context collapse. It is important to note that we trust information not only because of its content but because of the context within which we receive it. This is a dialogue. It is a relationship. Something that your friend tells you is more trustworthy than what a random stranger shares with you. Somebody who is a certified expert on something might be more credible than a person expressing their opinions. But the age of expertise has collapsed with the flattened context of social-media interfaces. We consume everything through the same interface, with very little attention paid to the source. Even when we know the source, we are not sure if the information is something that they have

analysed or are merely passing along, curated by an algorithm of digital engagement. When the context of our information collapses, we can no longer know how to trust that information and it shakes our belief that we have the ability to discern the fake from the not fake.

The second thing that we have normalised with digital platforms is information overload. We are so saturated with too much information that we have given up trying to find information on our own terms. Information is given to us. When we look for sources to corroborate it, those sources are also given to us. We do not manage either the sources or the contexts of our media consumption. We have outsourced this to algorithms that curate, manipulate, shape, and circulate information based on pre-set logics of profit and engagement. The condition of information overload also means that we are consuming information quickly and at a speed that makes thoughtful engagement difficult. Things pass by in the blink of a scroll, and we work largely on intuition and fragmented impressions, and depend on algorithms of vested interests already defining through headlines and information flows, what the meaning of that information is going to be.

Thus, when the Indian electoral processes are worried about deepfakes, they need to realise that deepfakes can be managed only as long as there is clarity between what is real, what is fake, and what is really fake. As long as we keep on accepting the collapse of context and information overload as our default modes of social media and digital engagement, no amount of regulation is going to stop the circulation of deepfakes. This is because we are now living in an age of suspended judgement, where everything is potentially fake as long as it fools us.

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AVJIT PATHAK

THE RESULTS OF THE CBSE Class XII exams are here. And once again, a group of achievers, I am sure, will emerge as instant “stars”. Their “miraculous” performance in, say, physics, mathematics, chemistry and biology will be talked about and widely circulated through social media. Yet, these “success stories” do not fascinate me. Instead, I am worried that a hyper-competitive and exam-centric education is normalised and allowed to negate the very spirit of libertarian education. In this context, let me raise three issues.

First, here is a system of education that has been corrupted by an unholy alliance of regimented schools and utilitarian coaching centres. As tests and exams have acquired more importance than a creatively nuanced critical pedagogy, the joy of learning seems to have disappeared from the classroom. Ask any good pedagogue or educator, and you will likely be told that a young student needs to have a reasonably relaxed and dialogic space to reflect on science and poetry or history and mathematics. But then, when the system transforms you into a restless warrior continually running after “success” in an endless series of highly problematic and mechanised exams — weekly tests, monthly tests, Mathematics Olympiad, Board exams and the much-hyped standardised tests like IIT-JEE, NEET and CUET — is there any joy of learning? Or, is there any creative surplus needed for deep enquiry and exploration? Instead, the system tends to kill the creativity of the young.

Hence, even if the “topper” manages to get 499/500 in the Board exam, it does not necessarily

FAILURE BEHIND SUCCESS

With CBSE Class XII results out, one must ask: Where is the joy of learning?

essarily mean that she/he has celebrated and internalised, say, a poem by Pablo Neruda, an innovative experiment in the physics laboratory, or, for that matter, an episode from Mahatma Gandhi’s *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*. Education is a deeply qualitative experience. However, the neurotic obsession with the quantification of what is essentially qualitative seems to have killed the joy of learning. No wonder, our “toppers” too function like machines. From schools to coaching centres, or from early morning to late night — they are continually running like a horse.

Second, let us be honest enough to accept that the minds of most of these achievers or “toppers” have already been programmed. Ask them: “What is your aim in life?” Quite likely, most of them will give you a market-driven/standardised answer: “I wish to become a computer engineer or a doctor or an IAS officer”. Seldom do you find a “topper” surprising you by saying that she/he wants to become a filmmaker like Ritwik Ghatak, a social activist like Medha Patkar, a historian like Romila Thapar, or a scientist like C V Raman. Possibly, this homogenisation of aspirations among the “toppers” indicates how the system is manufacturing a bunch of conformists. If education fails to ignite the mind of the young, what do you do with a marksheet like this — Physics: 99/100; Mathematics: 100/100; Chemistry: 98/100; Biology: 97/100; and English: 99/100?

Third, I am not very sure whether we are capable of understanding those whose performances in the Board exam are not so sat-

isfactory. In fact, in this age of inflated marks, you begin to see yourself as a “failure”, even if you get 90 per cent. As social Darwinism is normalised and “success stories” are celebrated everywhere, it is quite likely that those who “fail” will be compelled to live with shame and guilt. These days, many middle-class parents love to see their children as commodities with appropriate “placements and salary packages”, they too would feel ashamed if their children fail to acquire the “winning strategy”.

This is violence that manifests itself in the form of mental agony and even suicidal tendencies among those who fail to win this rat race. It is high time we began to rethink the purpose of education. Possibly, the fundamental objective of libertarian education is to encourage the learner to know and unfold his/her unique traits and aptitudes, and find joy and meaning in the domain of work. However, when schools fail to see anything beyond the official curriculum, and want only standardised, market-friendly and “disciplined” products, many creative minds begin to see themselves as “outsiders”. Possibly, some of the students who have not done well in the Board exam have immense potential in the domains schools are not interested in — say, in creative art. However, a one-dimensional/bureaucratized/dehumanised pattern of schooling destroys many young minds and kills many flowers.

Pathak writes on culture and education

MAY 14, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

SHOOTOUT IN PUNJAB

ONE HOME GUARD personnel Gurmej Singh was killed and two others, including a Railway Protection Force constable, were injured seriously in a shooting incident by three terrorists in Amritsar. Meanwhile, the authorities in Punjab have geared up their law and order machinery to meet the threat posed by a call for a bandh in Haryana and the union territories of Chandigarh and Delhi in protest against the gruesome murder of Ramesh Chander, editor-in-chief of the Hind Samachar group of newspapers.

INDIAN AIRLINES STRIKE

SIX FLIGHTS OF the Indian Airlines in the east-

ern region were cancelled on account of the wildcat strike resorted to by a section of the cabin crew. Only 18 out of the usual 24 flights were planned for the day, taking into consideration the strike by the cabin crew, and the passenger traffic. “We however expect to restore normalcy in our operations and run all the 24 flights from tomorrow morning”, he said.

SIKKIM’S NEW CM

BHIM BHADUR GURUNG, finance minister in the outgoing Bhandari cabinet, was sworn in as the chief minister of Sikkim by the Governor, Homi J H Talyarkhan. Earlier, in the morning, the governor dismissed the Bhandari ministry and appointed Gurung as the chief minister. Gurung said that his government would make

greater efforts in implementing the Prime Minister’s 20-point programme. Three others were sworn in as ministers.

PLA HOSTAGES

IN A FRESH note addressed to Sri Lankan President Junius Jayewardene, the People’s Liberation Army repeated their threat to kill the American couple they are holding hostage unless their demands were met. The National Security Minister, Lalit Athulathmudali, told newsmen that the note was delivered at the office of the assistant government agent. Stanley and Mary Allen were seized from their residence in Jaffna. PLA demanded a ransom of \$2.5 million in gold and the release of 20 suspected separatist guerrillas.



“After many years of complacency, a healthy momentum has finally built up in national-level efforts to address climate change. It is time for that momentum to be used to implement the Act in line with its vision. The costs of complacency can be extremely high for a climate-vulnerable country like ours.” — **DAWN, PAKISTAN**

The employment stories

Data tells many contradictory tales that require careful analysis, not simplistic narratives



LAVEESH BHANDARI AND AMARESH DUBEY

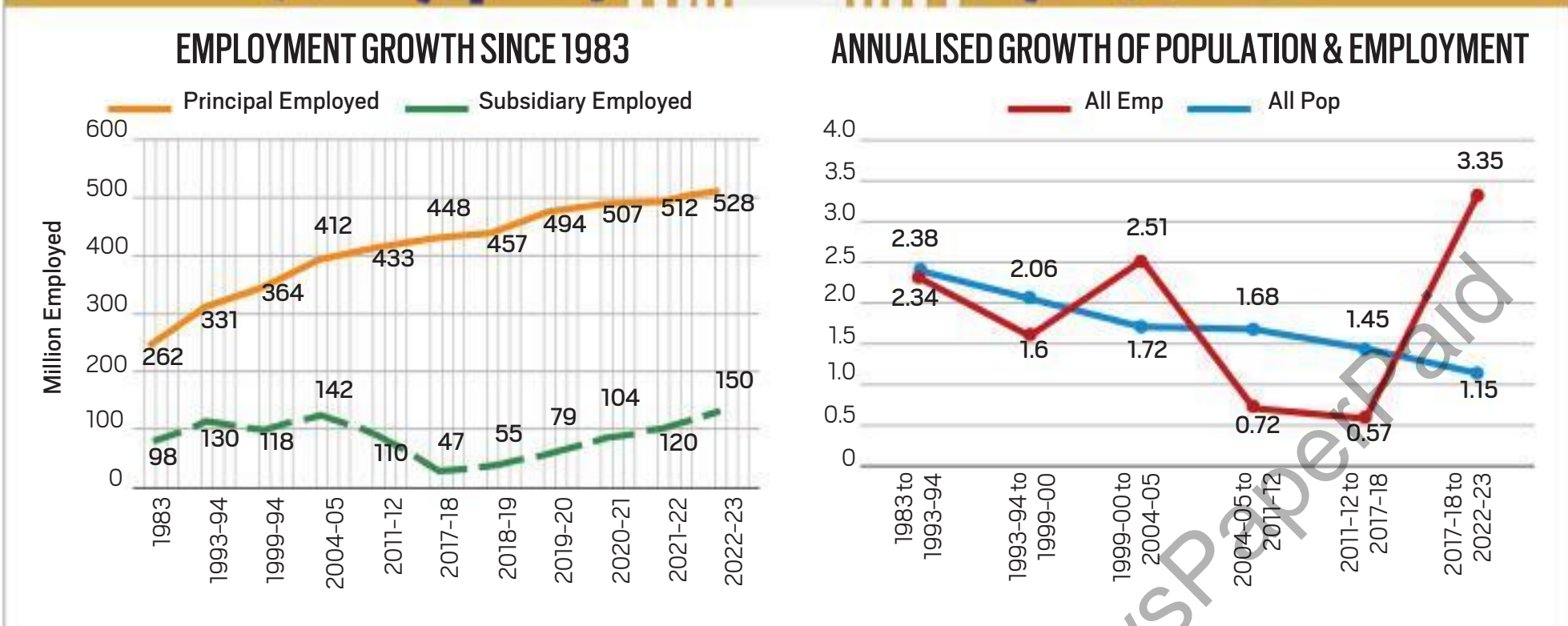
EMPLOYMENT NUMBERS HAVE always been surrounded by many disagreements; perhaps more so in recent times as greater research, rising complexity of work and economy, and poor data made consensus and alignment difficult. The problem, at least in the public discourse, is that the ups or downs in employment figures are frequently and wrongly accompanied by opinions rather than robust research that can identify the underlying causality.

Using NSSO data from 1983 to 2023, we focused on analysing employment figures and their changing nature, as well as disaggregating and unpacking them. We find that since 1983 for every sub-period under consideration, principal employment has grown. There has been no period that has seen any jobless growth. Principal employment measures those working for the bulk of the year as opposed to subsidiary employment, which is predominantly part-time, of shorter duration and is in addition to the principal activity of a person. We, therefore, do not include it in our measure of employment at all and argue that no matter anyone else.

In that period, the fastest increase in employment has been from 2017-18 to 2022-23 when about 80 million additional employment was reported. This translates to about 3.3 per cent growth annually, much higher than population growth during the period. We also find that this growth is very well spread — rural and urban sectors, manufacturing, agriculture, construction and services, age segments, women, etc.

Interestingly, the growth has been highest for women during this period, by more than 8 per cent annually. Also, we find that older citizens (age 60 plus) are entering employed status in larger numbers, at about 4.5 per cent annually. Why are greater numbers of women and older people working? There could be different arguments for this. The most common argument we hear is that there is increasing distress and women and older people have no choice but to work. But there are other possibilities as well. With falling fertility rates, improved access to water, energy, etc., those involved in care- and home-related work now have greater flexibility if they choose to work. In the case of older cohorts, we find that employment in this segment has been growing since the 1980s and could also be reflecting the greater lifespans.

Among economic sectors, though manufacturing and construction grew well at 3.4 and 5.9 per cent annually, higher growth has been achieved in earlier years as well. However, the greatest success has been in agriculture and services. Within agriculture, we obtain results that suggest it is not so much the cropping sector but livestock and fisheries



C R Sasikumar

that may have seen the greatest rise.

A characteristic of this growth, however, is that of total growth in employment of 80 million, a large part or 44 million is for own account workers and unpaid family workers. These are typically self-employed and this form of employment is not necessarily seen as entrepreneurial but a fallback option for those who do not have any other avenues. But note that this is the same segment that was the beneficiary of the massive PMMY scheme (Mudra) that disbursed slightly less than Rs 23 lakh crore among 380 million accounts in the period starting 2015-16 until the end of 2022. Therefore, if there is growth in self-employment, some of it presumably is due to the large government transfers to this cohort. At the same time, such a large increase in Direct Cash Transfers in this period may have also contributed to greater employment opportunities. Deciphering the underlying cause is key to understanding whether growth in this segment is desirable or can be sustained.

We also find a relative stagnation in aggregate wages and salaries in recent years. For the period 2017-18 and 2022-23, the average annual growth of salaries and wages is at 6.6 per cent in nominal terms but barely 1.2 per cent over five years after being corrected for inflation. In other words, while in the aggregate we don't find any wage distress, we also do not see a great improvement in living conditions. This could be for many reasons — if such large numbers enter the workforce, some dampening of wages and salaries is to be expected. At the same time, it could also reflect a deeper issue of stagnating labour productivity.

The greatest success has been in agriculture and services. Within agriculture, we obtain results that suggest it is livestock and fisheries that may have seen the greatest rise. A characteristic of this growth, however, is that of the total growth in employment of 80 million, a large part or 44 million is for own account workers and unpaid family workers.

Whether it is government welfare programmes, changing economic structure, changing demographic structure, or distress that is causing the surge in employment requires more careful analysis. To us, it is evident that there are many contradictory stories playing out simultaneously where employment growth is concerned. Simplistic narratives will do us all a disservice.

The writers work with CSEP. The views expressed are personal

Bail in a broken system

‘Bail not jail’ is the law of the land. In recent years, this principle has been negotiated away by draconian legislation



INDIRA JAISING

A SYSTEM THAT works on exceptionalism is broken. The order granting bail to Arvind Kejriwal raises the question: Is the criminal justice system working as it is intended to?

We live under a system that says we are innocent until proven guilty. “Bail not jail” is the law of the land, we are told, for undertrials. Another sacred non-negotiable principle of the criminal justice system is that the burden of proof of guilt is on the prosecution, not the accused. In recent years, these principles have been negotiated away by draconian legislation in the case of crimes considered “heinous” — the consumption of narcotic drugs, economic offences and terrorism. Apart from saying these offences are “heinous”, there is no clarity on their actual definition, leaving it to investigators, prosecutors and politicians to make decisions about whether there is reason to believe that an offence has been committed before an arrest is made.

Add to this the conditions imposed on judges who should ordinarily be free to decide whether to grant bail or not based on well-known principles of law — for example flight risk and non-interference with the investigation. These “heinous” offences require that the court must be convinced that *prima facie* no offence has been committed. A person is put in a position of being guilty until proven innocent. This deadly combination often makes law enforcement agencies invoke the UAPA when the offence is of causing a riot, or the PMLA, when the offence is that of corruption. The idea seems to be to intimidate judges into denying bail, especially at the level of special court judges, compelling the accused to approach a high court or the Supreme Court.

The most important legal and constitutional issue of our time is the question of the denial of the right to life and liberty by a broken criminal justice system. Some people are prosecuted while others are given immunity from prosecution simply by de-operationalising the lodging of an FIR against a chosen few. It is the political identity of the presumptive accused that seems to determine the decision to prosecute or not, to arrest or not. No court has answered the question: What is the threshold of satisfaction required for the “reason to believe that an offence has been committed”? In a system in which there is no independent prosecution, this often ends up in prosecution that is targeted rather than lawful.

Denial of liberty can only be justified if there is fair investigation and prosecution, fair conditions of detention and expeditious access to justice. None of these preconditions have been shown to exist and yet there has been no judicial inter-

vention to remedy the situation. When the issue of abuse of process is raised, we are told that abuse is no reason to deny the power to act and that individual cases of abuse can be remedied. But when abuse reaches the level of policy, the power itself needs to be denied by a constitutional court, which has no limitations on the power to do justice.

Evidence which is not gathered in scientific and systemic investigation is substituted by the presumption of guilt of the accused. Charges which cannot be proven are substituted with the charge of a “larger conspiracy” which needs “further investigation”. Few investigations are ever closed, leaving open the case for “further investigation” by filing an incomplete investigation to deny default bail. And now, all you need is the statement of an “approver” as the sole evidence of “reason to believe” that an offence has been committed.

Prosecutors must show some consciousness of the fact that our courts have held that the rights of the incarcerated are required to be protected by the state. A state that incarcerates a person is duty-bound to guarantee fair conditions of detention, which includes respecting the right to health of the accused. We have seen the death of Father Stan Swamy who was suffering from Parkinson's disease in custody. The right to health is a guaranteed fundamental right. Recognising this, the Bombay High Court granted bail to Varavara Rao in the Bhima Koregaon case. This judgment was upheld by the Supreme Court, following its own decisions to the effect that all rights not inconsistent with incarcination can be exercised behind bars.

It is time to consider granting prime ministers and chief ministers immunity from arrest while in office, similar to that of governors, or, at least, to have a proper screening process on the necessity to arrest. Judges enjoy immunity from arrest — to do so requires an elaborate procedure of sanctions before any arrest can be made.

The right to form a political party and to promote its agenda is guaranteed to every citizen and is part of the fundamental right to associate and give expression to political speech. Elections are also the time when we exercise our right to dissent from the manifesto of any party. Elections to state assemblies and the Lok Sabha are at the heart of the democratic process, which is a basic feature of the Constitution. This is what justifies the grant of interim bail to sitting Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal. It enables him to campaign on behalf of the party he leads during the current phase of the general elections. Kejriwal's case has once again raised the question: When can it be said that there is “reason to believe” that an offence has been committed?

Kejriwal has got bail but the criminal justice system continues to be broken. On whom does the responsibility lie to fix the system? The question awaits an answer while many live in fear of persecution even as others enjoy immunity. The burden on the SC is high.

The writer is senior advocate, Supreme Court and trustee, Lawyers Collective



MANI SHANKAR AIYAR

What I said, what they heard

My party made me a nobody, now Modi-Shah have brought me centrestage

TO BE TARGETED in the lead editorial by *The Indian Express* (‘A poor debate’, May 13) in the midst of a hard-fought election, for a video clip shot months ago in the context of my recent books is, I suppose, a personal honour. Especially as the Congress has been quick to distance itself totally from my remarks. The clip has been dredged up by the BJP to give life to their faltering campaign, with the sole intention of creating an issue where there is none. And so respectable a newspaper as this one has wasted its breath condemning remarks that had nothing to do with the present contest and by an individual in his individual capacity, as the Congress has made unambiguously clear by not naming me as a candidate, by not giving me any position in the party for a full decade past and by keeping me at arm's length from participating in any election campaign. Indeed, the Congress has refused to let me speak from any Congress platform for the past 20 years. Why do I matter so much as to attract editorial page condemnation?

Only because my consistent advocacy of a structured dialogue with Pakistan is an important national issue. The rationale of my argument cannot be compressed into a clip of a few seconds and then distorted for ulterior purposes. It has been set out at length in numerous articles, my 1994 publication, “Pakistan Papers”, many book reviews and my two recent books, *Memoirs of a Maverick*, whose very title emphasises that my views are not conventional; and *The Rajiv I Knew*, where I write of Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's breakthrough visits to Pakistan in December 1988 and July 1989 and what he

had to say publicly about his vision for good relations between the two countries.

Although my personal views on Pakistan are my own, they accord in close measure with two other distinguished Prime Ministers of India — Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Manmohan Singh. Indeed, it was Vajpayeeji who posted me as India's first consul-general to Karachi (1978-82) and did me the courtesy of invariably coming into the House when I spoke on Pakistan. On one occasion, he went so far as to wonder why I was never included by the Congress when Congress teams were sent to meet him on Pakistan. I applauded Vajpayeeji's persistence in seeking dialogue with Pakistan despite Kargil, despite the attack on Parliament and despite the disappointment of the failed Agra summit.

Manmohan Singh was the first to admit that he was building on Atalji's initiative. He carried forward the Vajpayee opening by creating a secret back channel on which three years of uninterrupted and unintermittible dialogue actually led to an agreement in principle on the way forward in Kashmir and needed no more than the final signature of the two leaders. Our PM was scheduled to visit Pakistan in March 2007 but earlier that month, internal differences between the Chief Justice of Pakistan and the Pakistan president led to the visit being postponed

and eventually the president falling from power. Nevertheless, and notwithstanding the horrendous Mumbai terrorist attack on 26/11/08, not only did Manmohan Singh attempt a resumption of the dialogue with the new Pakistan PM but also continued to use diplomatic channels to keep in contact.

I had, therefore, welcomed PM Modi's invitation to Nawaz Sharif and the decision to resume talks at the swearing-in of the new Indian PM in May 2014. That invitation is referred to in the editorial, but it fails to mention that those talks never took place because the new BJP PM objected to his BJP predecessor, Vajpayee ji, having encouraged Pakistani envoys to bring the Hurriyat into the loop, even to the extent of allowing a Hurriyat delegation to visit Pakistan. It was Modi's sudden decision in the third week of August 2014 to not send the Foreign Secretary for talks in Islamabad because Pakistan's Ambassador had the Hurriyat round to tea that marked the end of any diplomatic dialogue between India and Pakistan by the new government — a halt that has now lasted a dismal decade.

True, as the editorial says, Modi ji made a dramatic stop in Raiwind on December 25, 2015, but while that might have signalled a thaw, ever since a terrorist attack the following month, our relationship has been in the deep freezer. There are many

reasons why the dialogue should be resumed (as urged by all but one of our recent ambassadors to Pakistan) — and, equally, many reasons why it should not. But surely the democratic way forward is first a dialogue in India between the Nay-sayers and the Aye-sayers, and second, the resumption of a dialogue with our neighbour whom we cannot wish away.

That is the context in which I referred in the clip to Pakistan's nuclear arsenal. It is a fact. Nuclear deterrence to prevent nuclear war arises out of dialogue between hostile nuclear powers, as shown by the US and Russia ever since the Soviet Union went nuclear. They have not childishly downgraded their diplomatic relations or refused to talk. What I said even in the clip was to point to Pakistan possessing a nuclear arsenal. My remarks have been distorted both by the BJP and *The Indian Express* to suggest that I was recommending dialogue out of fear. On the contrary, I have always recommended dialogue because we have the strength to be self-confident in such a dialogue and persist with discussion despite differences as the sensible way of finding a via media.

In this election, my own party, the Indian National Congress, had made me a Nobody. Now, Modi/Shah and *The Indian Express* (and the Congress spokesman) have brought me centre-stage. I do not know whether I should thank them for rescuing me from obscurity or ignore them. I have concluded that I should take the middle course by stating my side of the story.

The writer is a former Union minister

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

TELANGANA FIGHT

THIS REFERS TO the article, ‘Three corners in Telangana’ (IE, May 13). The Congress party's resounding victory in Telangana's 2023 state elections has been sparking debates on whether the party can replicate this success in the Lok Sabha elections. However, the extrapolation of state victories to national gains is fraught with complexities, given the multifaceted nature of voter behaviour and regional political dynamics. The vulnerability of BRS does not automatically translate into gains for Congress. It opens a battleground for both Congress and the BJP. If BRS's traditional vote banks, particularly among Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Muslims, find the Congress's state-level performance and promises appealing, they might shift their allegiance. Conversely, a weakened BRS could see its residual vote share swinging to the BJP, especially if the national narrative sways voter perception. **Khokan Das, Kolkata**

DECORUM FIRST

THIS REFERS TO the article, ‘India in the world, a continuity’ (IE, May 13). Political parties, when addressing the public, should uphold decorum and focus on outlining their plans for the citizens of India. The language and allegations used in election rallies nowadays often lack maturity and respect. It's important to acknowledge and appreciate the contributions of past prime ministers to the

nation's growth. Development is a cumulative process that spans decades, and no single party can claim credit for all of it. The ruling party's achievements are built upon the foundations laid by its predecessors. Instead of dismantling past contributions, parties should strive to build upon them for the greater good of the nation. All political parties should prioritise serving the nation over pursuing power and personal agendas. **Ajay Corriea, Vasai**

DEMOCRACY WINS

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, ‘Right to campaign’ (IE, May 11). By granting interim bail to Delhi CM Arvind Kejriwal, the Supreme Court has helped in ensuring a level playing field for the general election. The arrest of a serving CM and a key Opposition leader, amid the election process, sent shock waves among regional parties. The Court is right in both citing the general election as a good reason to grant interim bail and in rejecting the ED's argument that it would be favourable treatment for politicians. By applying the basic principle of granting bail to those who are unlikely to run from justice, with conditions to counter their likely influence over witnesses and to protect evidence, orders granting bail wouldn't call for political reactions and doubts of politicians being unduly favoured. For now, the court has done right to put the interests of democracy over other issues. **Sanjay Chopra, Mohali**

THIS WORD MEANS

XENOTRANSPLANTATION

Transplantation of living cells, tissues or organs from one species to another

THE FIRST person to receive a pig kidney has died two months after his surgery. His family and doctors from the Massachusetts General Hospital, where the procedure took place, did not link his death to the transplant.



Richard Slayman, 62, passed away on Saturday. Reuters

What is xenotransplantation?

‘Xeno’ is the Latin term for ‘foreign’ — xenotransplantation, thus, is the trans-plantation of living cells, tissues or organs from one species to another. In context of humans, “xenotransplantation is any procedure that involves the transplantation, implantation or infusion into a human recipient of either (a) live cells, tissues, or organs from a nonhuman animal source, or (b) human body fluids, cells, tissues or organs that have had *ex vivo* contact with live non-human animal cells, tissues or organs,” according to the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA). This includes trans-plantation of animal organs (like a pig kidney), or use of a pig liver for temporary per-fusion during acute liver failure.

How does it work?

In practice, the actual surgery may not be very different from a regular organ transplant. But, the animal organ selected has to undergo genetic modifications, so that the human body does not reject it. A report from the Harvard Medical School, whose physicians were involved in Slayman’s operation, said 69 genomic ed-its were made to the pig kidney in his case. Gene editing technology CRISPR-Cas9 was employed to “remove certain pig genes that produce sugars with antibodies our immune systems react to” and “add cer-tain human genes to improve the kidney’s compatibility with humans”.

Why are pigs used for this procedure?

Pig heart valves have been used to re-place damaged human heart valves for over 50 years now. This is because pigs’ anatomical and physiological parameters are similar to that of humans. They can be easily, and in a cost-effective manner, bred in farms. A vast variety in pig breeds, which come in different sizes, also means that har-

vested organs can be matched with the specific needs of the human recipient. The first xenotransplantation of a genetically-modified pig heart was carried out in 2022, but the patient died within two months.

What are the complications?

The biggest challenge with a xeno-transplant (like a regular transplant) is to ensure that the human body does not re-ject the transplanted organ. Like in regu-lar transplants, the patient is put on im-munosuppressants, which leaves them vulnerable to other diseases and com-plications. Transplanted organs themselves may carry “recognised and unrecognised infectious agents”, according to the FDA. This can then lead to subsequent trans-mission of diseases among humans, with certain latent retroviruses potentially causing disease “years after infection”.

What is the need for this procedure?

There is a significant gap between the number of transplantations needed by pa-tients and the availability of donor organs. A 2024 article in *Nature* noted: “In the United States alone, there are nearly 90,000 people waiting for a kidney transplant, and more than 3,000 people die every year while still waiting.” There is also some evi-dence suggesting that animal cells and tis-sues may be used to treat certain neurode-generative disorders and diabetes.

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE

AROUND A ROCKY EXOPLANET, SPACE TELESCOPE FINDS ATMOSPHERE

THE JAMES Webb Space Telescope (JWST) has detected evidence of an atmosphere around exoplanet 55 Cancri e, one of the most studied rocky planets outside the so-lar system. The exoplanet, which is 41 light years away, orbits a Sun-like star and is twice Earth’s radius, and eight times as heavy.

A mysterious planet

55 Cancri e was discovered in 2004. At the time, sci-entists thought that it was a gas giant, similar to Jupiter or Saturn. But in 2011, re-searchers found that it is a lot smaller and denser than a gas giant, meaning it is a rocky exoplanet, much like the Earth.

In 2016, scientists noticed that 55 Cancri e was cooler than what they ex-pected for a planet so close to its star — its dayside is still over 1,500 degree celsius — indicating that it probably has an atmos-phere. Multiple theories were floated, and

debunked, about exactly what its atmos-phere was composed of.

Carbon-based atmosphere

The JWST data indicate that 55 Cancri e’s atmosphere is probably rich in carbon dioxide or car-bon monoxide, and has a thickness that is “up to a few per cent” of the planet’s ra-dius. Experts have said more research is needed to deter-mine the atmosphere’s full and exact composition and precise thickness.

Nonetheless, the discov-ery can have deep implica-tions. Being able to spot such atmospheres in Earth-like planets is an important step in the search for life be-yond the Solar System. While 55 Cancri e cannot currently support life as we know it, the presence of an atmosphere provides clues regarding Earth’s distant past, when it too was hot and covered with magma oceans.

ENS



SHUBHAJIT ROY

NEW DELHI, MAY 13

INDIA AND Iran signed a 10-year contract on Monday for the operation of a terminal at the strategically important Chabahar port in Iran.

Chabahar is a deep water port in Iran’s Sistan-Baluchistan province. It is the Iranian port that is the closest to India, and is located in the open sea, providing easy and secure access for large cargo ships.

Union Minister for Shipping, Ports and Waterways Sarbananda Sonowal witnessed the signing of the contract between India Ports Global Ltd (IPGL) and Ports & Maritime Organisation of Iran (PMO) in Tehran.

IPGL will invest approximately \$120 mil-lion to equip and operate the port for the du-ration of the contract, and the two sides will further extend their cooperation in Chabahar thereafter. India has also offered a credit win-dow in rupees equivalent to \$250 million for mutually identified projects to improve in-frastructure related to the port.

Slow start to project

Modern Chabahar came into being in the 1970s, and Tehran realised the strategic im-portance of the port during the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s.

In 2002, Hassan Rouhani, who was Iran’s National Security Advisor under President Syed Mohammad Khatami at the time, held discussions with his Indian counterpart Brajesh Mishra on developing the port, lo-cated 72 km west of Pakistan’s Gwadar port.

In January 2003, President Khatami and then Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee signed off on an ambitious roadmap of strategic cooperation. Among the key pro-jects the two countries agreed on was Chabahar, which held the potential to link South Asia with the Persian Gulf, Afghanistan, Central Asia, and Europe.

The New Delhi Declaration signed by the two leaders recognised that the countries’ “growing strategic convergence need[ed] to be underpinned with a strong economic re-lationship”. For India, Chabahar held im-mense strategic and economic significance, as it provided a route to reach Afghanistan — land access to which had been blocked by a hostile Pakistan.

But the ambitious timelines for the project were undone by India’s growing relation-ship with the United States under President

DAMINI NATH

NEW DELHI, MAY 13

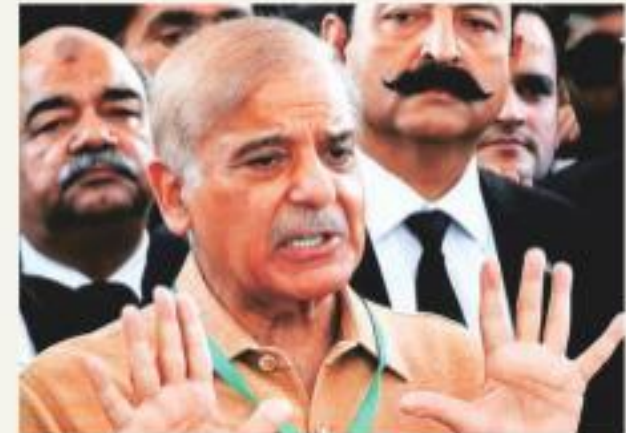
AS VOTES were being cast in the fourth phase of the Lok Sabha election on Monday, the BJP candidate in Hyderabad, Madhavi Latha, was captured on video asking *niqab*-wearing women voters to remove their face coverings so she could verify their identities.

Hyderabad Police registered an FIR against Latha under IPC sections pertaining to undue influence at an election (171C), obstructing a public servant (186), and intent to incite (505(1)(c)), and Section 132 of The Representation of the People Act, 1951 (mis-conduct at the polling station).

Voters who cover their face

While face coverings have been increas-ingly politicised of late, women who wear *ghoonghat* or *niqab* have always voted in India’s elections.

Before the first Lok Sabha election in 1951-52, the Election Commission of India (ECI) worked hard to ensure women became full participants in India’s democratic process — however, many women refused to enrol with their names, and instead asked to be identified in relation to a male member of the family, as the mother of so-and-so or wife of so-and-so. “The reason...was that according to local



Pak PM Shehbaz Sharif on Monday approved a \$23 billion grant to quell the protests, Dawn reported. File

Alleged discrimination

Leaders in PoK have been protesting al-leged discrimination by the government in



The strategic and economic importance of Iran’s Chabahar port will be greatly enhanced by its integration with the planned INSTC corridor (in red).

George W Bush. The US, which declared Iran as one of the “axis of evil” along with Iraq and North Korea, pushed New Delhi to abandon its strategic relationship with Tehran, and the Chabahar project became a casualty.

Progress after 2015

While India spent about \$100 million to construct a 218-km road from Delaram in western Afghanistan to Zaranj on the Iran-Afghan border to link with Chabahar, the port project itself progressed at a glacial pace. But things started to change in 2015 after talks between Iran and the P-5+1 bore fruit.

About three weeks after Iran and the world powers announced their framework deal on April 2, 2015, and committed to fi-nalising a comprehensive deal by the end of June, then Afghan President Ashraf Ghani visited India and stressed the importance of the Chabahar port.

During Ghani’s April 27-29, 2015 visit, he and Prime Minister Narendra Modi agreed to work closely with Iran to make the port project a reality, and to develop it as a viable gate-way to Afghanistan and Central Asia. They agreed that routes additional to the exist-ing ones will provide a major impetus to Afgha-nistan’s economic reconstruction efforts.

Over the next one year, coordination be-

tween the three countries led to the signing of a Trilateral Agreement to establish the International Transport and Transit Corridor in May 2016, when Prime Minister Modi vi-sited Iran. Thereafter, India’s Shipping Ministry worked at a brisk pace to develop the project.

The attitude of the Donald Trump admin-istration towards Iran complicated matters after 2017, but South Block appeared deter-mined to stay the course. New Delhi man-aged to get a waiver from the US for the Chabahar project, citing access to Afghanistan as a reason.

India’s approach also stemmed from the fact that China was aggressively pursuing President Xi Jinping’s ambitious Belt and Road Initiative for massive infrastructure develop-ment across large parts of Asia and Africa.

Developments in recent years

India has so far supplied six mobile har-bour cranes (two of 140-tonne and four of 100-tonne capacity) and other equipment worth \$25 million.

IPGL has been operating Chabahar port through its wholly owned subsidiary, India Ports Global Chabahar Free Zone (IPGCFZ), since December 24, 2018. The port has han-dled more than 90,000 twenty-foot-equi-

alent units (TEUs) of container traffic and more than 8.4 million metric tonnes (MMT) of bulk and general cargo since then.

The port has also facilitated the supply of humanitarian assistance, especially dur-ing the Covid-19 pandemic. Till date, a total of 2.5 million tonnes of wheat and 2,000 tonnes of pulses have been trans-shipped from India to Afghanistan through Chabahar port. In 2021, India supplied 40,000 litres of the environment friendly pesticide (malathion) through the port to Iran to fight locust attacks.

In August 2023, Prime Minister Modi met with President Ebrahim Raisi in Johannesburg on the sidelines of the BRICS Summit, and discussed the pending long-term contract on Chabahar. The two leaders gave a clear political direction to finalise and sign the long-term contract.

Chabahar and INSTC

With the operationalisation of the long-term investment, Chabahar could poten-tially become an important hub to connect India with the landlocked countries of Central Asia and Afghanistan. However, to better realise its commercial and strategic potential, the development of the port must be integrated with the larger connectivity project of the International North South Transport Corridor (INSTC).

The INSTC, which was initiated by Russia, India, and Iran, is a multi-modal transporta-tion route envisaged to link the Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf to the Caspian Sea via Iran, and onward to northern Europe via St Petersburg in Russia.

The INSTC envisages the movement of goods from Mumbai to Bandar Abbas in Iran by sea; from Bandar Abbas to Bandar-e-Anzali, an Iranian port on the Caspian Sea, by road; from Bandar-e-Anzali to Astrakhan, a Caspian port in the Russian Federation by ship across the Caspian Sea; and onward to other parts of the Russian Federation and Europe by rail.

Phunchok Stobdan, a senior fellow at the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA) and a former Indian Ambassador to Kyrgyzstan, wrote in an IDSA issue brief in June 2017 that “INSTC and Chabahar Port will complement each other for optimising Indian connectivity with Russia and Eurasia”. However, the war in Ukraine and the destruc-tion of Europe’s relationship with Russia has since complicated the future of this project.

Why BJP candidate Latha has been booked



Union Home Minister Amit Shah with the BJP’s Hyderabad candidate Madhavi Latha during a road show earlier this month. PTI

custom, women in these ar-eas were averse to disclosing their proper names to strangers... Out of a total of nearly 80 million voters in the country, nearly 2.8 million eventually failed to disclose their proper names, and the entries relating to them had to be deleted from the rolls,” Sukumar Sen, the first Chief Election Commissioner, wrote in his report on the election.

Following a sustained campaign by the ECI over the years that followed, the numbers of women increased steadily on voters’ lists. Today, women account for almost 49% of the electorate.



Identifying women in burqa

Conducting free and fair elections is the ECI’s mandate, which includes ensuring no bogus votes are cast. Polling officers are required to verify a voter’s appearance against the photo on the voter card, if needed.

To ensure this is done while also protect-ing the privacy of the woman elector in *ghoonghat*/ *burqa*/ *niqab*, the ECI has issued standing instructions for Returning Officers of constituencies and Presiding Officers of polling stations:

“If sufficiently large number of ‘par-

danashin’ (*burqa*-clad) women electors are assigned to your Polling Station, you should make special arrangements for their identi-fication and application of indelible ink on the left index finger by a lady Polling Officer in a separate enclosure having due regard to pri-vacy, dignity, and decency.

“For such special enclosure you may use locally available but inexpensive material,” says the ECI’s *Handbook for Presiding Officers*. The ECI’s *Handbook for Returning Officers* says: “The availability of female polling per-sonnel should be examined for appointing Presiding/ Polling Officers in polling stations set up exclusively for female voters or where the number of female voters, especially, par-danashin women is large, there must be at least one lady-polling officer who may fac-ilitate and identify the women electors.”

The action of Madhavi Latha

The responsibility and right to verify the identity of voters lies with the ECI, not a con-testing candidate. Candidates or their polling agents are allowed access to polling stations in the constituency, to ensure that the polling process is conducted without interference. However, they are not permitted to intervene in the voting process.

Madhavi Latha’s action was viewed as in-terference and, therefore, at the ECI’s behest, she was booked by the police.

Pain from Pak’s economic crisis: why are traders protesting in PoK?

RAVI DUTTA MISHRA

NEW DELHI, MAY 13

VIOLENT STREET protests in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (PoK) have left a police officer dead and more than 90 injured since Friday, Pakistani media reported.

The violence erupted after about 70 mem-bers of the Joint Awami Action Committee, an organisation led by traders in the region, were arrested during a strike to protest the rising costs of food, fuel, and utilities. Pakistan’s economic crisis and high inflation have resulted in hardships for its people, and a section of traders have been additionally hit by the stopping of trade with India.

The protests in PoK

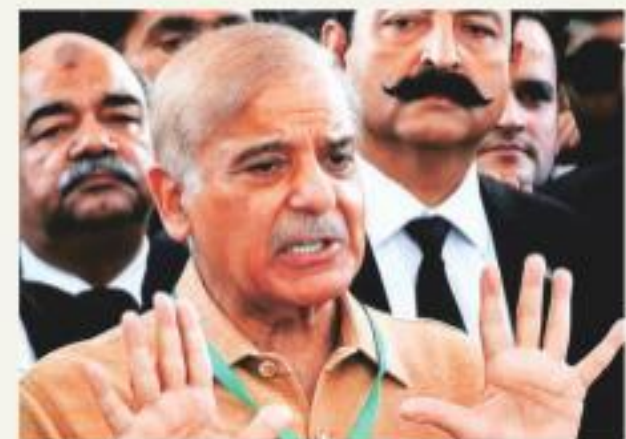
The traders took to the streets on Friday

to protest against high electricity and food prices. There were similar protests against high electricity bills in August 2023 as well.

A general strike halted Muzaffarabad, the capital and largest city of PoK, as public transport, shops, markets, and businesses shut down. A large numbers of protesters broke barricades and clashed with police in the Mirpur and Muzaffarabad divisions.

On Sunday, the paramilitary Rangers were called in to secure government build-ings such as the legislative assembly and the courts.

Pakistan’s economy has been witness-ing extremely high inflation and dismal eco-nomic growth for more than two years due to rising energy costs. Consumer inflation has been above 20% since May 2022, and touched 38% in May 2023, the *Dawn* news-paper reported.



Pak PM Shehbaz Sharif on Monday approved a \$23 billion grant to quell the protests, Dawn reported. File

Alleged discrimination

Leaders in PoK have been protesting al-leged discrimination by the government in

Islamabad in the distribution of power to the area. *Dawn* reported on complaints by the region’s premier Chaudhry Anwarul Haq about not receiving their fair share of the 2,600MW of hydropower produced by the Neelum-Jhelum project.

Haq has also said that his request for re-sources to increase salaries of government employees in the recent budget was not ac-cepted, and that he had been forced to di-vert development funds to pay them.

Collapse of India trade

Traders in PoK were hit hard after India raised customs duty to 200% on Pakistani products such as dry dates, rock salt, ce-ment, and gypsum following the Pulwama terror attack of February 2019. As a result, Pakistan’s exports to India fell from an aver-age of \$45 million per month in 2018 to only

\$2.5 million per month between March and July 2019, *Dawn* reported.

The situation was made more difficult after Pakistan stopped all trade following the constitutional changes carried out by India in Jammu and Kashmir in August 2019. India-Pakistan trade has shrunk to a low of about \$2 billion annu-ally over the last five years, a small fraction of the \$37 bil-lion trade potential estimated by the World Bank.

Pakistan’s economic crisis

Pakistan’s foreign exchange reserves have fallen drastically ever since global food and fuel prices rose in the aftermath of the Russia-Ukraine war. A similar balance of payments crisis crippled Sri Lanka as well in 2022-23, leading India to extend support

measures.

According to the State Bank of Pakistan, the country’s forex reserves fell from a peak of \$20.1 billion in August 2021 to \$2.9 bil-lion in February 2023, enough to cover only a month’s imports. Pakistan imports nearly 40% of its total primary energy supply.

Pakistan’s largely aid-de-pendent economy has an un-derdeveloped private sector, and its stock market has shown very little growth over the years. The country’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP) shrank by 0.17% during FY23. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) re-cently said Pakistan needed gross financ-ing worth \$123 billion over the next five years, and that the country was expected to seek \$21 billion in the fiscal year 2024-25 and \$23 billion in 2025-26.



Neighbourhood First blues

Besides the China factor, immediate neighbours also seek more autonomy in dealing with India

ENGAGING WITH THE neighbourhood has no doubt been a foreign policy priority of the Narendra Modi-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) since it first came to power in 2014. Ten years later, as the ruling regime seeks a third term in office, the challenges of dealing with the South Asian region remain daunting. Besides the growing role of China — whose trade with the region is two times higher than India's — there is the need to address the desire of neighbours to seek more strategic autonomy in their relationship with India. This was underscored by the visit of Maldives' foreign minister Moosa Zameer to New Delhi during which his Indian counterpart, S Jaishankar, stated that the relationship is based on mutual interests and reciprocal sensitivity.

India's relationship with Maldives — a key maritime neighbour in the Indian Ocean with a special place in its vision for Security and Growth for All in the Region — is passing through testing times. There is a pro-China regime change in that island nation with President Mohamed Muizzu formally requesting India to withdraw its military presence from the Maldives. The need for sensitivity is also felt in India's relationship with Nepal. The decision of the Pushpa Kamal Dahal or Prachanda-led government to put a map showing areas of India on a ₹100 currency note provoked Jaishankar to state that such “unilateral measures” by Kathmandu would not change the reality on the ground. The need obviously is to address this festering border dispute through patient negotiations. India's external affairs minister stated that “discussions about our boundary matter (are ongoing) through an established platform” but evidently Nepal is not happy with their pace and progress.

This issue must be addressed expeditiously — much in the same spirit with which the NDA regime resolved the land border question with Bangladesh. A much bigger challenge pertains to normalising relations with Pakistan which has been in deep freeze since 2019. There has been a flurry of signals from Islamabad regarding the resumption of bilateral trade but any response is likely only after a new government is in office in June. To shore up its influence in the region, India needs to make generous and non-reciprocal measures to ensure that neighbours have a greater stake in its growth story. With Maldives, its foreign minister was earlier appreciative of India's decision to renew the quota to allow the export of essential commodities while President Muizzu sought leniency for repayment of loans taken by previous governments. India stood by Sri Lanka in its hour of need and must do the same for Nepal and others that face balance of payments problems with reduced foreign exchange buffers to purchase essential imports like food, fuel, and other items.

India cannot match China in cheque-book diplomacy but it can undertake unilateral trade liberalisation that ensures greater market access for its neighbours. Doing so will blunt the edge of some of their resentment of only registering massive trade deficits with India. The priority of the new government in India must be to trade more with the neighbourhood as its two-way trade declined by 7.6% to \$27.9 billion or 2.7% of its global trade in FY24 (up to February) from a year earlier. The fact that Bangladesh and Pakistan trade more with the dragon is a painful reminder of India's failure to engage more and integrate with the South Asian region.

Qualifying as government debt would bump EU bonds higher up the fixed-income hierarchy when investors are considering where to put money to work. And that wouldn't just be an intra-euro area dynamic; Mohit Kumar, chief Europe economist at Jefferies Financial Group Inc., reckons that demand from Asian and Middle East sovereign wealth funds would increase.

The EU has AAA grades from the major credit-rating companies, yet trades at a modest yield premium to six euro nations — including France, which is rated two notches lower at AA by Standard & Poor's Corp. So, it's easy to see how the momentum for lower borrowing costs for the bloc could build.

Recent comments from German Bundesbank President Joachim Nagel, throwing up the usual roadblocks for increasing centralised EU borrowing, suggest that machinations are afoot behind closed doors to expand its debt programme. While the German constitutional court remains an impediment to mutualised debt, the NextGen programme showed that it's not unsurpassable. A firm German “nein” could become “maybe” if some guard rails are put in place.

The EU debt stockpile risks becoming a stranded asset class, left to wither into runoff. Investors tend not to focus on temporary debt programmes. That would be a waste. The bloc needs to support Ukraine, fortify European defences, and upscale its net zero climate-change initiatives — all existential requirements for the EU's ongoing survival and relevance.

The NextGen platform provides a perfect template, and it's hard to un-invent such a creature. After the EU June elections, repurposing un-allocated commitments from the initial programme with new monies and goals could be the bedrock of the next Commission's five-year term. It's long been part of the EU's common currency project to cement monetary union with mutual debt sales. Its chance of achieving that might be getting closer now that bond index providers are ready to play ball — even before the supporting complementary parts that most sovereign bond markets require are fully in place. The secret sauce of the euro project has always been its adaptability in a crisis. The EU should make good use of the bloc's lengthening list of financial needs to improve upon a half-built debt project rushed through during the pandemic.

ECONOMIC AMBITION

BUILDING COMPETITIVE SCALE OF ENTERPRISE IN TARGETED SECTORS A MUST TO BECOME DEVELOPED NATION

Key to India's 2047 target

AJIT PAI
GAURAV SHARMA

Respectively, lead strategy partner, and director, EY GPS. Views are personal



ble is China. Just prior to India's liberalisation, per capita GDP of China (\$347) in 1990 was lower than India's (\$369). In the next 25 years, China's per capita GDP grew more than 23 times while India's grew under 5 times. The International Monetary Fund projects China's per capita GDP at \$14,037 in 2025, likely crossing the high-income country threshold. Today, China's dominant share in the foundational blocks of global manufacturing like steel, aluminium, APIs, photovoltaic, semiconductor components, automotive, and ship-building have been driven by drastically lower cost, where scale of enterprise has been a key factor. India appears to be the only nation with the size of economy, breadth and depth of labour pool, lower income levels, and diversity of resources that could become a credible participant to de-risk global supply chains.

Many are pointing to India's comparative advantage in services exports that it must maximise focus on and not dissipate much of its resources on manufacturing, where it is not as competitive. This line of thinking is shortsighted. Firstly, growth of manufacturing need not be at the expense of services in an environment of abundant labour, healthy credit growth, and foreign investment. And secondly, de-risking the world's merchandise demand requires a manufacturing participant of sufficient scale to approach the leader. Currently China has ~10 times the capacity of the next economy in sectors such as steel, aluminium, APIs, etc.

India's manufacturing share of GDP likely declined prematurely from a peak of 17.9% in 1995 to 13.3% in 2022 (world average 16.2%), and significantly lower than the highs of China (32.5%, 2006), South Korea (28.2%, 2011), Japan (23.5%, 1995), and Germany (24.8%, 1991). Vietnam and India had similar share of manufacturing in GDP at 17.1% in 2010. Subsequently, India's manufacturing share declined while Vietnam's increased to 24.8% in 2022 and could rise further.

Indian enterprises, and more importantly government at all tiers, must think

Country	Max. growth in per-capita GDP (25 yrs)	Time period	Yrs taken for 10x growth	Strategies adopted to boost growth
South Korea	54x	1965-1989	12	Focus on select sectors, chaebols, debt leverage
Japan	30x	1961-1988	14	Focus on select sectors, innovation, keiretsu
Vietnam	26x	1990-2014	18	Trade driven scale in select sectors
China	24x	1991-2015	16	Investment in foundational sectors, rising up tech curve
Germany	10x	1971-1995	24	Select sector focus, spurring scale via SMEs in value chain
India	7x	1993-2017	38	Liberalisation and gradual globalisation

Source: World Bank, EY Analysis

The EU should burnish its bonds for prime time

NOW THAT THE European Union has sold €513 billion (\$550 billion) of debt, a stockpile poised to reach at least €800 billion by 2026, the bloc should accelerate plans to qualify as a fully-fledged government bond market. Building a proper primary dealer network, augmented by repurchase facilities and a futures contracts, would enhance liquidity, broaden demand from both euro zone and global investors, and reduce borrowing costs for the bloc.

MSCI Inc. and Intercontinental Exchange Inc. have issued consultation papers seeking views on the viability of reclassifying EU Commission issues as sovereign debt rather than supranational bonds. That matters because the latter trade at wider dealing spreads akin to corporate debt, while the former have a broader worldwide investor audience. And while MSCI and ICE are second-tier providers of the fixed-income benchmarks against which portfolio managers gauge performance, such a move would set a precedent that more established index compilers including Citigroup Inc., Bank of America Corp. and Bloomberg LP would likely follow.

The EU had barely €50 billion of bonds outstanding before the pandemic hit; the sudden requirement for massive funding to underpin the economy led to a vast upscaling of borrowing by the commission. This kicked off with the SURE job support programme in mid-2020, ramping up to the wider NextGen €800 billion programme of loans and grants to member states — funded by mutualised debt sales.

Qualifying as government debt would bump EU bonds higher up the fixed-income hierarchy when investors are considering where to put money to work. And that wouldn't just be an intra-euro area dynamic; Mohit Kumar, chief Europe economist at Jefferies Financial Group Inc., reckons that demand from Asian and Middle East sovereign wealth funds would increase.

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The NextGen platform provides a perfect template, and it's hard to un-invent such a creature. After the EU June elections, repurposing un-allocated commitments from the initial programme with new monies and goals could be the bedrock of the next Commission's five-year term. It's long been part of the EU's common currency project to cement monetary union with mutual debt sales. Its chance of achieving that might be getting closer now that bond index providers are ready to play ball — even before the supporting complementary parts that most sovereign bond markets require are fully in place. The secret sauce of the euro project has always been its adaptability in a crisis. The EU should make good use of the bloc's lengthening list of financial needs to improve upon a half-built debt project rushed through during the pandemic.

IFD Agreement: What lies ahead?



PRADEEP S MEHTA
SHRUTI MAHESHWARI

The authors work for CUTS International, a global public policy research and advocacy group

It is imperative for India to actively participate in negotiations to shape the future of international trade in a manner that benefits all stakeholders

PREVIOUSLY IN THIS paper, on India's stance on plurilateral negotiations ([shorturl.at/dhJS7](https://t.me/infleets)), including the Investment Facilitation for Development (IFD) Agreement, we argued that the issues raised in favour of India were to follow the rigid path as in the World Trade Organization (WTO) pacts. These cover the WTO's multilateral character, India's opposition to plurilateral agreements, and its stance on investment issues at the WTO. India needs to think through these aspects carefully.

The IFD Agreement, endorsed by 126-odd, mostly developing, countries, seeks to streamline bureaucratic processes, enhance investment environment, and promote foreign direct investment. It aligns with India's initiatives on ease of doing business, such as the National Single-Window System designed to simplify approvals for investors and businesses.

Despite implementing a range of domestic measures to attract and facilitate inward investment, and support other developing countries, India's non-participation in IFD discussions is rather odd. Moreover, India's stance appears incongruent with its stated goal of attracting more foreign investment, potentially hindering economic growth.

Further, raising objections to the IFD outcome reflects a broader dilemma facing India on the nature of agreements negotiated outside the traditional multilateral framework.

Holding discussions

The practice of holding discussions

at the WTO in less-than-multilateral formats is neither new nor illegal. It is widely acknowledged that such discussions can occur, provided the outcomes are agreed upon by consensus and subsequently incorporated into the WTO framework. However, a point of contention arises when a group of members begins discussions without a multilateral mandate and subsequently seeks to include the outcomes as plurilateral agreements. This challenges both the letter and spirit of the Marrakesh Agreement establishing the WTO. It poses systemic challenges and threatens to undermine the WTO's multilateral character.

We quote from a recent article by noted econocrat NK Singh in this context: “We need Jagdish (Bhagwati) more than ever before for his sanguine advice on two issues. First, in highlighting that trade will remain an important engine of growth. Second, as the world becomes more protectionist and the validity of value-add chains is increasingly questioned, a fresh approach is needed.”

Thinking innovatively

Amid these debates, the critical question is: Can agreements be non-multilateral in character but effectively multilateral in practice? This necessitates a deeper examination of the agreement's impact on a large part of the WTO mem-

bership, focusing on its practical effects rather than its legal nature.

In certain scenarios, negotiated outcomes may indeed exhibit characteristics of “effectively multilateral” agreements. This is particularly true for agreements addressing major issues of concern to a significant portion of the WTO membership — they can facilitate cooperation and benefit a broad spectrum of members without imposing discriminatory measures. We need to think innovatively and devise mechanisms that can breathe life into negotiated outcomes.

Finally, in the context of the IFD Agreement, India's resistance contradicts its claims to champion the Global South's interests and risks sidelining itself from vital negotiations that could benefit developing countries. Many of the affected countries, with whom we spoke and who do not wish to be identified, were quite peeved with India's stand.

To navigate this complex landscape, India must adopt a nuanced approach.

First, given the interlinkages of the issues involved, India should clarify its position on the text of the IFD Agreement and the topic of investment at the WTO more generally, before taking a stance on matters such as the IFD Agreement's incorporation within the WTO framework. This requires a thorough examination of each aspect.

Second, India should engage with the

IFD Agreement while recognising that it does not represent the entirety of the debate on its participation in joint statement initiatives (JSI)/plurilateral discussions at the WTO. Each JSI presents unique challenges and opportunities, which need to be analysed.

Finally, India's arguments for preserving the multilateral character of the WTO may not be valid, as they are accepted under WTO rules. Whatever be India's stand, it should not affect our participation in plurilateral talks.

Talks between any more than two (but less than all) WTO members are effectively “plurilateral” discussions. The focus should be on meaningfully engaging with negotiations as they take place. India should not maintain any in-principle opposition to negotiating in smaller groups. A stand on the manner of incorporation of negotiated outcomes should be taken on a case-by-case basis.

India's objection to the IFD Agreement underscores broader debates surrounding the WTO's multilateral framework and India's role within it. By adopting a more nuanced approach, India can balance its interests with the broader goals of global economic cooperation and development. It is imperative for us to actively participate in discussions and negotiations to shape the future of international trade in a manner that benefits all stakeholders, and our Viksit Bharat programme.

With contributions from Advaiyot Sharma, CUTS International

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Close fight

Four phases of the Lok Sabha election, or voting for 380 constituencies, are over. Now no one says the Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP) is poised to win 400 seats “to reshape the country” in ways not envisioned by the founding fathers. It is now evident that things are not going to plan for the BJP despite pulling out all the stops. The

BJP may end up the loser if the issues of unemployment, price rise, and economic distress have weighed on the voters. Caste census, which is needed to ensure social justice, is one issue that has caught the imagination of Dalits, Adivasis and Other Backward Classes and has the potential to tilt the balance against the BJP. A lot also hinges on the impact of the Congress manifesto on voters. If the Indian

National Developmental Inclusive Alliance romps home, it will be a social revolution and an assertion by the subaltern and the impoverished. —G David Milton, Maruthancode

A bitter pill

The disquiet in the pharmaceutical industry is palpable, having come under intense scrutiny in the last one month over payments made by some

of its representatives to political parties. Hospitals, vaccine companies, and drug-makers have bought electoral bonds. Healthcare companies list a multitude of reasons explaining difficulties in slashing prices. Pharma's bitter pill continues to hit healthcare in a very big way. —Jayanthi Subramaniam, Mumbai

Don't give people any slippery stuff like philosophy or sociology to tie things up with. That way lies melancholy

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

— Ramnath Goenka

INCENTIVISE PARENTS TO KEEP GIRLS IN SCHOOL, AVOID CHILD MARRIAGES

A horrific incident, a 32-year-old man allegedly beheaded a minor girl in Kodagu, Karnataka after their wedding was called off as local authorities became aware of it. The wedding had reportedly been arranged as the couple was “in love”, but both families agreed to postpone the marriage till the girl turned 18 in two years. This angered the groom, who is alleged to have beheaded the girl and made off with the severed head. The incident shines a light on the social acceptance of child marriage and the entitlement bred into some Indian men, which can have fatal consequences for women and girls. It also illuminates the treacherous path trod by social workers in convincing families not to marry off a child while also ensuring the child's safety.

A great deal of awareness has been raised against child marriage in India, and there has been progress. A study of the latest National Family Health Survey shows that the prevalence of child marriage has halved since 1993, when 49.4 percent of the respondents reported they had been married before the age of 18. However, the progress has not been uniform. At present, five states alone—West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh—account for over half the child marriages in the country.

It is clear that economic stress has a clear role to play in exacerbating the crisis. Migration, poverty and even social concerns about children exploring relationships intersect with patriarchal norms to make underage marriage appear to be the best way of ensuring a girl child's safety. However, child marriage is fraught with risk for the girl—it takes a toll on her health and that of her children, as well as on her own education and economic wellbeing. New research suggests that by intensifying poverty and other oppressive conditions, climate-related stressors such as heat waves can also push parents to marry off their daughters young. A holistic approach is essential, one that targets the economic concerns of parents by incentivising them to keep their girls in school, as has been attempted in a few states. It also needs to address structural issues such as the perilous lack of girls' and women's safety, bonded labour and forced migration, which might force the parents towards an unfortunate choice.

INDIA WILL NEED ROHIT, HARDIK TO FLOURISH

MASTER and Commander: The Far Side of the World. The content of the film may not be remotely associated with Indian cricket, but the title does evoke some similarity with the two most talked-about persons in Indian cricket now. As Team India embarks on a journey to the far side of the world to erase the bitter memories of loss at the final of the 50-over World Cup at home last year, the duo will remain the talking point. The captain and his deputy are struggling with form, which doesn't augur well for the team. As we approach the business end of the Indian Premier League and with the first set of players and coaching staff set to leave for the T20 World Cup in the US and the West Indies, things seem to be unstable at the top—literally and figuratively.

Captain Rohit Sharma does not look to be in good touch. After the quickfire starts he gave early in the season, the Mumbai Indians opener has struggled as the IPL has progressed. For an explosive and skilled batter like him, a string of low scores usually reflects poorly on form. His last five scores are less than 20, including three in single digits. And Rohit's deputy Hardik Pandya's all-round miss-hit during the IPL adds to the woes. Pandya has had a forgettable season as Mumbai captain. He averages 18 with the bat and 32 with the ball while going for 10.58 runs per over. What is more disconcerting are the reports of negativity creeping into the camp. Though there were reports that Rohit suggested Hardik as his deputy in the national team, there have been multiple reports suggesting not all was well between the two during the IPL. However, this remains unverified.

What's heartening is that Virat Kohli, Jasprit Bumrah, Kuldeep Yadav and Suryakumar Yadav seem to be in good touch. Yet, to end India's trophy drought, they will need their captain and vice-captain to flourish. India head coach Rahul Dravid might be on his last leg. With very little time between the IPL and the World Cup, the captain, vice-captain and the coach must focus on the future. The captain and vice-captain must start afresh—for India to succeed, all machines must be strong and well-oiled. For we will depend on the two to steer the ship home.

QUICK TAKE

LET IT BE A SOLID PLAN

CALLING the mountains of untreated solid waste in Delhi “horrifying”, the Supreme Court on Monday asked the central urban affairs ministry to meet with the capital territory's municipal bodies and formulate a plan to tackle the problem at the earliest. We hope this will be a plan that other city and state governments, who are facing the same challenge, can learn from. In another indication of its evolving climate jurisprudence, the court also reiterated that such a condition directly affected the fundamental right to live in a clean environment. The judiciary's pressure on the legislature and the executive on this front is not showing any sign of abating.

ON the 25th anniversary of the commencement of Operation Vijay, I feel it's time to energeise the national conscience and institutionalise memories of the eventful time. We are referring to the year 1999, when the Pakistan Army's ambitions, out of sync with reality and lacking any sense of military clarity, led it to a catastrophic military operation. This was an attempt to capture some Indian territory in the high-altitude district of Kargil to pressure the Indian Army to vacate Siachen glacier. It resulted in horrific casualties for both armies.

Such events tend to be forgotten by the following generations. Till an emotional connection exists, relatives and associates revel in the heroism of our resistance, the tenacious fight-back and unwillingness to give up an inch of national territory. Yet, we are notorious for harbouring convenient memories. A quarter century later, not many will recall the events of May to July 1999 and how India turned the tide after being initially surprised by the rogue Pakistani action.

There are lessons from Kargil and other such Pakistani misadventures that need to be enshrined in such a way that Pakistan never risks them again. Understanding our adversaries is the key. There are some characteristics which the Pakistan Army and its leadership possess that may never change; the Indian public needs to be aware of these. The Pakistan Army is an entity independent of civilian control. The generals govern without being in government, thus remaining shorn of responsibility for their actions. These actions may never be in consonance with national interests. They are often executed to satisfy personal ego and without ‘thinking through’ the full impact and implications of their actions.

To take an example from the current situation, any intelligence analysis that takes Pakistan's ongoing economic woes and impact of climate change to draw conclusions on the near impossibility of it triggering something of a tactical, operational or strategic nature to gain some advantage over India would be unrealistic. Options drawn with application of rational military thinking fly in the face of historical irrationality, which has usually been the nature of the Pakistani military doctrine. Yet, it may also be incorrect to imagine intrusions and occupations that are given the imaginary colour of ‘Second Kargils’. This became an obsession with some senior commanders of the Indian Army for many years, but is thankfully well behind us. We just need to be alert and

There is a need to document the Pakistani Army's misadventures along the Line of Control. Even today, it tells Pakistan's citizens that it controls Siachen glacier

LESSONS FROM KARGIL, A QUARTER CENTURY LATER

LT GEN SYED ATA HASNAIN (RETD)

Former Commander, Srinagar-based 15 Corps. Now Chancellor, Central University of Kashmir



SOURAV ROY

our vigil needs to be professional at all times, not only in campaigning seasons.

By creating shadows of intrusions and mass infiltration on the LoC, what Pakistani military commanders managed to temporarily achieve was a defensive approach in some Indian military minds. Even Jamaat-ud-Dawah leader Hafiz Saeed borrowed a leaf from Pakistan's disinformation when, in 2011, he directed his cadres to attempt mass infiltration into Kashmir in suicide mode, in an effort to impose caution on us and cow us down. Fortunately, this was quickly overcome, but it's a trend that can always return if irrationality is applied by the Pakistan Army once again. *Quid pro quo* of higher intensity against Pakistan Army action is what quiets the Pakistan Army,

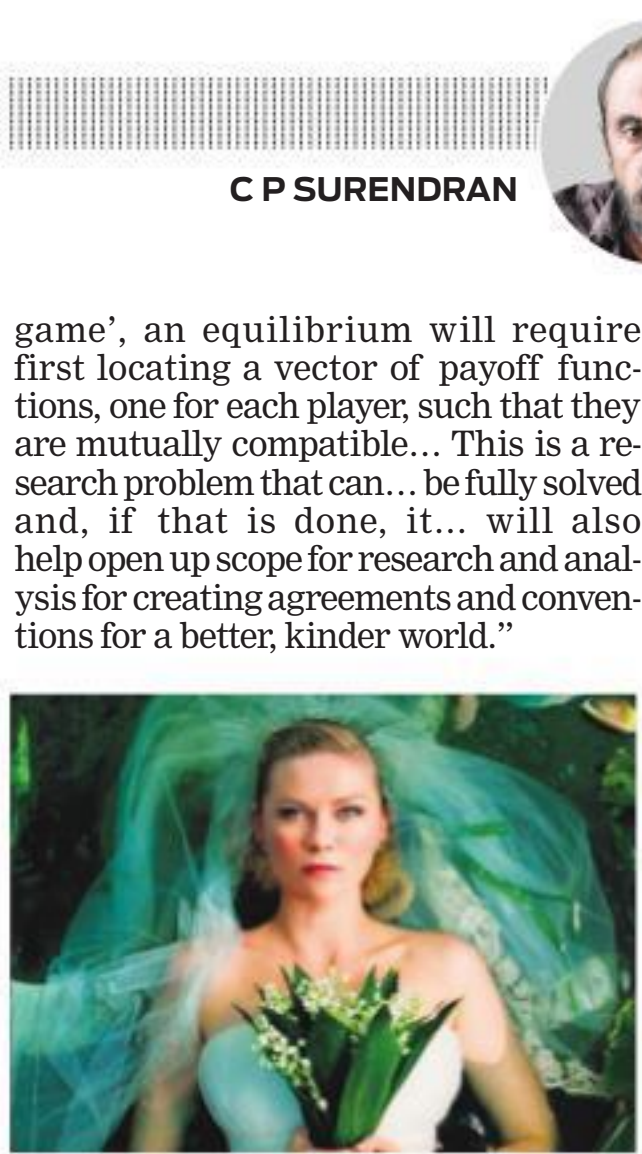
and the Indian Army must always cater to that. Lower levels of creeping calibration as response rarely help.

As a practice, the Pakistan Army does not realistically document challenges at the LoC and lessons from Indian response, because it would reveal the reality of its own irrational adventurism, the lack of professionalism and also unnecessary bravado that ends in no achievement. In the absence of information, there is thus a propensity for future generations remaining ill informed, misled by misinformation relating to such bravado. The flip side is that it is also to our advantage, as subsequent generations of Pakistani officers and soldiers will rarely be aware of the ferocity of Indian responses at the LoC. Nothing, of all that has happened on

CAN RATIONALITY CURE HUMAN ILLS?

C P SURENDRAN

Poet, novelist, and screenplay writer. His latest novel is *One Love and the Many Lives of Osip B*



WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Lars von Trier's movie *Melancholia* suggests the female unconscious can be as chaotic as the male one. In contrast, economist Kaushik Basu's latest book, *Reason to be Happy*, suggests using game theory to improve human lives. Trier might be winning the argument on rationality

Basu's entire book rather endearingly rests on the hope that *homo sapiens* is a rational animal species. Trier would not agree. But the very first chapter of Basu's book has a subsection called *Melancholia*, a title Trier would approve. In it, Basu talks about a dark period when he was 18, which lasted for over a year, never to return. He jells in with the world.

Basu believes that collective behavior can be organised for the better if game theory is sophisticated enough, and everybody gets their payoffs. On the other hand, Trier's movies are about the rogue individual, the planet *Melancholia*. An individual who will not play by the rules of the game, and so threatens the order. In the movie, the planet finally crashes

into Earth. On a literal dimension, Trier is saying our entire existence, a blue speck spinning in a universe spanning 93 billion light years across, is endangered. On another level, he is saying the melancholic (or the misfit true only to herself) will wreck the system as well as herself. Either way, game theory will not work for Trier, because insanity is the essence of human brilliance.

If we look around, Trier seems to be winning the argument. A few weeks ago the irrepressible Sam Pitroda mentioned the possibility of bringing back an inheritance law to redistribute wealth. He was pilloried. The ‘invisible hand’ of the collective of all persuasions was immediately at work. In a world intelligently designed by, say, a Basu, the thing to do would be to come up with a game model of inheritance and see if the pay-offs contribute to everyone's happiness. But instead of debating the issue, we dismissed it with the violence characteristic of *homo sapiens*, most of it directed personally against Pitroda, the equivalent of Justine in the Trier movie.

The system cannot co-opt such radical ideas because it cannot survive them. The group, always amorally survivalist, must always sacrifice the individual. It is not as if the world does not have the resources to solve the basic problems of humanity; it is just that the system becomes meaningless in its present intentions.

The reason why Basu's model of the world will not work is that humans are not rational. In groups, they obsessively look for order in systems as a kind of guarantee. Often, destruction in the form of a war is the result. You see, the order itself is not necessarily rational. Or ethical. It is only what it is.

Melancholia is not a planet. It is Justine. The Justines among us. The system will always penalise her. Which is why she is on a collision course. Either way, in the long run, the game itself is programmed to self-destruct.

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

the LoC in the last 50 years and more, has been adequately documented on our side, too. Such documentation can act as a deterrence in the minds of the adversary, projecting clearly the potential of all adventurism meeting inevitable doom.

General Pervez Musharraf had a personal grudge about his abortive efforts at Siachen glacier in his capacity as the commander of the Pakistan Special Service Group and how the Indian Army neutralised all his efforts in 1987-88, denying even a toehold on Saltoro Ridge. In 1999, as he planned his operations against the Indian Kargil Brigade, the Lahore Yatra came as a spoiler. His obsession about the Kargil-Siachen link got the better of him and he triggered the occupation of the winter-vacated positions of the Indian Kargil Brigade. Fortunately, Pakistani authors such as Nasim Zehra and Air Commodore Kaiser Tufail of the Pakistan Air Force have called his bluff and adequately castigated him in the public domain.

What has been insufficiently documented and brought to notice of the current generation of media and civil society in Pakistan is the great bluff about the status of Siachen glacier. It needs to be told and retold to the current generation of Pakistan civil society how its army unnecessarily triggered the crisis by attempting cartographic aggression and sending patrols and mountaineering expeditions into an area over which it clearly did not have jurisdiction. When India put counter-claims to project the Saltoro watershed, a Pakistan military adventure was correctly anticipated by India. During 1978-84, claims and counter-claims flew until India obtained confirmed information that Pakistan was about to launch an occupation on or around April 19, 1984. We beat Pakistan by six days, launching Operation Meghdoot on April 13, 1984 and occupying the glacier and the Saltoro Ridge that virtually guards the glacier from the west and south.

The Pakistan Army ensured a perception that it still occupies Siachen. A second loss of perceived territory after East Pakistan (Bangladesh) would not have made it very popular. It has stuck to the narrative and the people of Pakistan believe Siachen is in their hands. The Army makes films to show how it is occupying Siachen while being miles away from the landmark glacier.

In the end, it is all about information and getting it to the right quarters. The effect of it will be even more telling 50 years later.

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

MAIL BAG

WRITE TO: letters@newindianexpress.com

Political considerations

Ref: *SC levels the playing field with interim bail to Kejriwal* (May 13). On the face of it, the release of Delhi CM Arvind Kejriwal as head of a party on interim bail for electioneering looks like the SC is carrying out natural justice. There cannot be two opinions that the government has bungled in arresting him when polls were round the corner. But in the absence of any point of law, the SC's enthusiasm in releasing him could also be seen as smacking of a political partisanship. **P Mangalachandran, Kannur**

Correct decision

The editorial is a befitting reply to the politicians who created confusion among the public. Even Home Minister Amit Shah twisted the matter and said Kejriwal asked for bail, which was not the case. The SC gave the correct decision to create a level playing field. **V O Harindranathan, Chennai**

Villainous qualities

Ref: *The most beloved villain among Indian epics* (May 13). The character of Ravana is a mix of valour, devotion and obdurate viciousness, with womanising on the side. He didn't learn anything from his defeats at the hands of Vali, the Vanara king. He inherited more qualities of an asura from his mother's side. **Ramalingeswara Rao, email**

Mental battleground

The article brings out the adorable qualities of Ravana. His devotion to Lord Shiva was incomparable. In the same person there are both *devas*, the good aspect, and *asuras*, the bad one. Sigmund Freud, a German psychologist, said ego is the battleground where the superego and the id constantly fight. **P Prema, Thanjavur**

Market tremors

Ref: *Don't read too much into market volatility* (May 13). The stock market is so sensitive that a statement from a politician can create tremors. The PM not talking about economic policies and focusing merely on an individual, his party and family in the background of the opposition talking more about employment and wealth redistribution is definitely a concern. **A G Rajmohan, Chennai**

Merging Kashmir

Ref: *Protests in PoK, posters demand merger with India* (May 13). If East Germany and West Germany could be united in 1989 by destroying the Berlin Wall after a peaceful revolution, why can't Pakistan-occupied Kashmir be united with India by breaking the Line of Control? Obviously it cannot be done just like that since Pakistan won't easily allow this proposal. **P Victor Selvaraj, Palayamkottai**

Caught in Electoral Choppy Waters

But volatility is being counterbalanced

Markets are caught in electoral turbulence with volatility spiking ahead of the results. Sensex and Nifty had run up in anticipation, and are now in choppy trades. Comparisons with previous poll years is fraught because markets tend to deliver outcomes with weak correlation to poll results. A host of factors weigh on stock performance. Most are driven by economic undercurrents, and politics merely adds to volatility. Investors, particularly those making systematic investments in MFs, have some extra cushion to ride out the big market moves. A medium-term investment horizon also provides similar comfort. Where Nifty will settle by end-2024 depends more on global market conditions than on how the numbers stack up in Lok Sabha.

India's economic outperformance is unlikely to be unduly affected by political outcomes. Fiscal policy is on a path to correction after unanticipated surges due to Covid and a subsequent energy shock.

CAD has also corrected satisfactorily with a downturn in the commodity cycle. Inflation is on course to reach its target, despite episodic spikes in food inflation. There are signs of revival in rural consumption and in private investment. Production incentives and bilateral trade agreements are beginning to show up in manufacturing exports as services exports have slowed.

The global environment is also not too challenging. On current indications, the world economy seems to have avoided a deep recession despite areas of concern such as China's weak recovery and the risk of geopolitical tension spilling over into energy prices. India's over-dependence on domestic demand acts as a buffer against trade fragmentation, but it's vulnerable on account of its energy imports. Capital markets are not signalling undue alarm over the global situation and risk of capital flight is limited. Foreign investors may have taken some money off the table in anticipation of volatility over election results. Then again, foreign investments in India's stock markets are being counterbalanced by rising exposure of Indian households.

What Football Says About Competition

Competition is hardwired in all competitive sports. But a competition can be rendered mediocre if the outcome is a 'foregone conclusion'. Which is why this season, international football has been so rich. Take English Premier League that's going into its last leg with Arsenal and Manchester City neck to neck in the title race. Across the channel, Champions League has also thrown up the finest to reach the final, but without the 'same old, same old' algorithm at play. This time, CL 'giants' Real Madrid are pitched against 'giant killer' Borussia Dortmund. In EPL, two top sides are duelling it out to the end. This is unlike last year's 'monopoly' when City claimed the crown, with Arsenal No. 2 by a distance. It was only in the latter stages of this year's tournament that Liverpool fell out of contention, and marquee sides like Man Utd and Chelsea made to languish behind the likes of Aston Villa and Newcastle. This is what makes EPL the most exciting football league in the world.

Borussia Dortmund ploughing through the CL final on June 1, after beating fellow German giants Bayern Munich and others deemed 'Europe's best', has also catalysed the tournament. The irony isn't lost that in Germany's domestic league, Dortmund languishes at No. 5, with relatively unheralded Bayer Leverkusen having already won their first Bundesliga title, significantly ahead of 32-times winner Bayern. This, too, is good for the league.

You don't have to be Serena Williams to know that 'competition ignites passion, determination, and the pursuit of excellence'. On the economic front, we have tasted the consequences of a competitive playing field in the post-liberalisation era. Having strong opponents makes the game stronger, whether it's football or democracy.

JUST IN JEST
Aesthetically opposite of the fictional cannibal, Trump can also be a fanboy

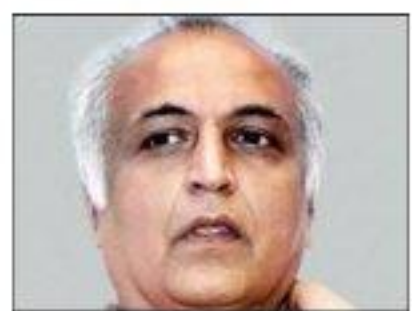
Hannibal Lecter, Impeccable Anti-Hero

Some of America is aghast that their favourite person to dislike, Donald Trump, has praised Hannibal Lecter, the fictional character created by Thomas Harris. On paper — and in the films where the inimitable Anthony Hopkins plays the inimitable cannibalistic serial killer with impeccable taste — singing hosannas to a supervillain at an election rally is, at best, confusingly provocative, at worst, confusing. 'Has anyone ever seen "The Silence of the Lambs"? The late, great Hannibal Lecter. He's a wonderful man,' said MAGA's brand ambassador, where MAGA could well be 'Make America Gastronomic Again'. 'He oftentimes would have a friend for dinner. Remember the last scene? Excuse me, I'm about to have a friend for dinner,' as this poor doctor walked by... But Hannibal Lecter. Congratulations. The late, great Hannibal Lecter, Trump added before jumping into an anti-immigrant tirade. The confusing messaging actually sounded Bidenesque.

But coming back to the man himself, Lecter, or rather his depictions by Harris, Hopkins, and later by Mads Mikkelsen in the aesthetically joyous TV series, Hannibal, is, indeed, a glorious anti-heroic creation. Mikkelsen treats the psychotic killer as a fallen angel, Lucifer, in the finest suits and grand surroundings. If Milton fell for his devilish charms, why can't Donald?

With online retail increasingly the default option, offline shopping needs to be far more experiential

Our Malls Need to Be Melas



Madhavan Narayanan

Last week, real estate consulting firm Knight Frank released its report, 'Think India Think Retail 2024'. It has an ominous warning for shopping malls across the country. 'Ghost shopping malls with vacancy rates of 40% or more rose from 57 in 2022 to 64 in 2023 across eight major cities, with larger shopping centres preferred for an outing, and online shopping taking away some old retail charms,' states the report. There was a 238% y-o-y increase, it added, in the gross leasable area (GLA) of all shopping centres in prime Indian markets in 2023, even as ghost malls rose in number.

Big retail in India needs reinvention. The mall as a massive real estate complex is an American idea that goes back to a combination of consumer boom, timescape, landscape and culture that suited the West rather than India. Mall culture is changing in the West itself.

If an American works five days a week, with kids to raise and without help at home in sparsely populated cities, the mall may still be the place to catch a movie or for shopping. However, land costs and rentals were not real issues in the US, compared to disposable incomes that generated suitable demand.

That is not the case in Indian metros. Here, land is scarce, and demographic explosion and technological change are redefining lifestyles. If you are a mall-inclined metro shopper, chances are high that you have a conference call to attend. You can catch that movie on Netflix and shop online to save time, energy and money, and use some of that saving for a getaway to a resort



Fair trade isn't just about shopping

rather than get stuck in traffic.

However, there is another India that is looking for affordable consumer retail and refreshing experiences. Here is where the idea of 'affordable luxury malls' comes in. And that may not necessarily be about 'retail' or 'shopping' at all, though retail therapy is not going away anytime soon.

One desi idea to solve the ghost mall puzzle is to think about the vast millions of aspiring Indians and the way they manage low budgets for better lifestyles. It's time to think of the mall more as a melas ground, much akin to rural Indian fairs.

People visit melas to buy stuff, just like in shopping malls, but there is a whole load of service offerings, not to speak of the sheer experience of going to a buzzing place with what in Delhi one calls 'raukh shaunkh', or

razzle-dazzle. It is a curated affair; more like a boisterous melas than a modern mall, but with escalators and air conditioning.

Writing in Wired in 1998, Nicholas Negroponte foresaw the 'disintermediation' of retail. 'What will finally save retail is the shopping experience itself. This will certainly include architecturally interesting settings, with every salesperson a Cindy Crawford, a theatre- or museum-like experience that makes you feel special.'

That is why in India, the mall needs to go the melas way. Some malls are doing just that. Two NCR examples could suffice.

► This ghost mall is closer to the heart of New Delhi and is located in a residential area. But it has probably fallen between the two stools of snobbishness and being situated in an 'ordinary' location. It has no movie theatre, but is built like a luxury mall. It survived with large liquor shops for a while, but these looked more like warehouses than upmarket outlets. You cannot scale up these things.

► The mall in Noida is smarter, and serves as a model for others. There are makeshift stalls/tents outside selling

second-hand books, bhel puri and boutique items at affordable prices. You can wander in to buy local designer outfit brands trying to look global, and then catch a movie or have a meal in the food court.

There's also a trampoline park where parents pay money to watch their kids jumping in joy. A nearby mall has a huge gaming arcade. Some have bowling alleys. But uniquely Indian ideas — such as street magicians or mehndi artists — may make more sense than bowling alleys.

In a 1998 Harvard Business Review article, 'Welcome to the Experience Economy', B. Joseph Pine and James H



What will finally save retail is the shopping experience itself, with every salesperson a Cindy Crawford [who] makes you feel special — Nicholas Negroponte, 1998

Gilmore discussed stores drawing consumers in by offering 'fun activities, fascinating displays, and promotional events' — labelled 'shoppertainment' or 'entertailing', something that combines entertainment with retailing. It even remarked audaciously, 'In the full-fledged experience economy, retail stores and even entire shopping malls will charge admission before they let a consumer even set foot in them.'

This is the opposite of the current state in India, where even footfalls in a mall are considered good enough to presume conversions resulting in sales. Two ironies stand out in all this:

► The mall boom started in India roughly alongside the internet, with retailers not realising how the latter would challenge the former.

► Long before HBR spoke of the experience economy, rural India did the same at lower costs with melas. Vocal-for-local could now mean a blast from the past so we can return to the future for urban settings.



THE SPEAKING TREE

Violence and Beauty

NARAYANI GANESH

Splendid works of art are inspired not only by positive aspects of life and nature; they are also born of the dark side of life. For example, the recent splash of colour, of aurora borealis, the Northern Lights, has resulted in rainbow brushstrokes across a vast sky canvas, worldwide. Northern Lights are normally visible only in the upper reaches of the northern hemisphere at certain times of the year; a popular tourist attraction in Scandinavia. Suddenly, these multi-hued lights have broken free, becoming visible in many countries of Europe and in America, in the UK and in Ladakh, India. The cause is solar flare-ups gone rogue, creating violent solar storms. To protect us, the earth's magnetic field deflects the flare particles back to the sun; the ensuing reaction brings on the spectacular celestial show.

War-time poetry is known to tug at the heartstrings, and evoke deep reflection on why we are such a violent species. Bloggers' outpourings on their search for inner peace while suffocated by negative events are lyrical essays and poems that give expression to deep self-doubt and for some, later, self-discovery and illumination.

Militancy in Kashmir Valley gave birth to budding poets and writers who poured their angst into poetry and prose, creating awareness and making a deep impact. Love songs that sear one's heart are created when lovers separate, yearning to meet again. Thus, it is that violence too gives birth to beauty though one would wish for happier outpourings.

Chat Room

Guarantee New Poll Flavourite

Appropos the news report, 'Now, AAP Offers Kejriwal Ki Guarantee' (May 13), this general election has seen a new trend of poll promises giving way to guarantees. They don't make a difference — unless they are legally binding and the entire Cabinet is punished by jail term if it fails to fulfil them. People are anyway bored with the repeated guarantees of free electricity, travel, education, healthcare, etc. We need new guarantees such as free air travel, farmers' own MSP, 1 litre free petrol every day, 1 LPG cylinder free every month, free two-wheeler and smart phone for students, along with no examination and zero attendance, free car for homemakers, etc.

O PRASADA RAO
Hyderabad

Sunshine Plan for Free Electricity

This refers to the Edit, 'Net Metering Key to Rooftop Sunshine' (May 13). Implementation of the PM Surya Ghar: Muft Bijli Yojana needs an integral approach. There will be no significant benefit from additional effort in sta-



tes that give free power. There will be no accounting for production, consumption and feeding the grid without exhaustive rollout of a net metering system. The conflict of interest among stakeholders on account of different perspectives based on investment and stake in long-term PPAs need to be resolved through macro-level planning.

VIJAY MULLAJI
By email

Anderson to Bowl A Historic Innings

Appropos the news report, Anderson to Play Last Test vs West Indies at Lord's (May 12), when James Anderson retires after the forthcoming Lord's Test, an era will come to an end. He will be the last player who has played in the pre-T20 era. It is interesting to look at the players who marked the end of cricketering eras of Test matches. The last 19th-century cricketer was Wilfred Rhodes. The last pre-WWI cricketer was Frank Woolley. The last pre-WW2 cricketer was Denis Compton. The last pre-ODI cricketer was John Traicos. The last 20th-century cricketer was Rangana Herath. Next will probably be the last pre-IPL player:

T R RAMASWAMI
Mumbai

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

ChatGPT SHAIRI OF THE DAY

In the land of CBSE exams,
Election results are for the clams.
Classes 10 and 12,
How they're merry as elves,
Now, they'll party and dance in their jams!

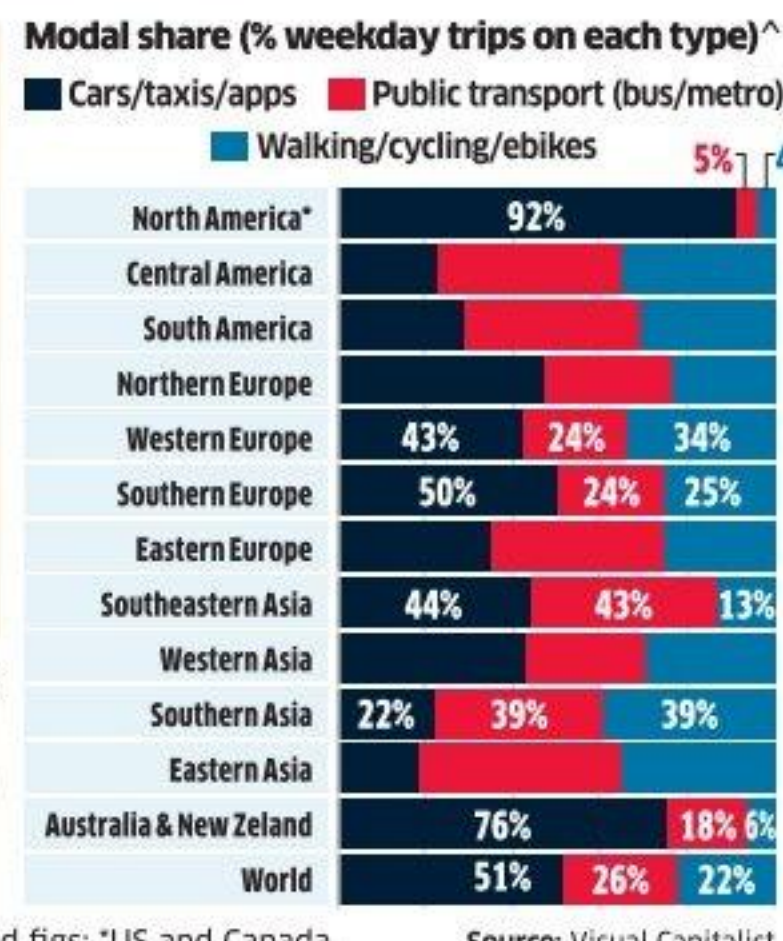
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Moving Around

How do people get around in cities? According to a research paper, 'The ABC of Mobility', accessed through ScienceDirect, people heavily rely on cars in the US and Canada. For cities in Asia, public transport contributes to a substantial share of journeys. A global snapshot...

Note: Data gathered via surveys, which focused on primary transport mode used by a person for each weekday trip; data from 800 cities across 61 countries

*Africa included in world figs; *US and Canada



Bell Curves

R Prasad



I'm no stranger to these run chases. I've done my fair share of the rat race.

Connoisseur of Quantity



Ashish Gupta

James Harris Simons, founder of Renaissance Technologies, was a pioneer of quantitative investing (QI) across asset classes. While he was less famous than some of his peers like Charlie Munger and Warren Buffett, he was equally, if not more, successful in investing, outperforming markets with an amazing level of consistency.

The popular statistic floating around is that \$1,000 in his signature Medallion Fund — known for its consistent gains and only accessible to Renaissance's owners and employees — in 1988 would be worth \$42 mn today, compared to \$40,000 if invested in S&P 500 and \$1.52,000 in Berkshire Hathaway shares over the same period. Today, Renaissance manages \$106 bn in assets. As estimated by Forbes, Simons' net worth equates to \$31 bn.

Simons was a leading philanthropist who gave away billions during his lifetime to support medical and science research and teaching. His journey had been exciting and intriguing. A maths genius, he was only 23 when he received his PhD from the University of California, Berkeley. Subsequently, aside from teaching at prestigious universities, he worked as a breaker of Soviet codes at the Institute for Defense Analyses, a position he held until he had divergent views on the Vietnam War.

However, it wasn't until his 40s that he took an interest in financial markets, more specifically in applying mathematical and sta-

tistical principles, thereby bringing to the fore a novel method of investing — QI, a process that relies on mathematical and statistical models to identify investment opportunities.

Simons' firm, Monemetrics, later renamed Renaissance Technologies, started out by successfully taming the currency and commodities markets. Later, the firm ventured into equity investing, which was traditionally a domain of brokerages, investment houses and MFs that relied on a tried-and-tested combination of company research, experience and instinct to beat the markets.

Unsurprisingly, Simons and his quant approach espoused a lot of curiosity and scepticism from the industry, only to be proven right when his performance cemented his reputation and place in the industry. While Simons revealed little about his secret sauce, a few guiding principles from interviews he gave and books written on him and the company give clues:

► Data discipline is important The firm collects data from various sectors and sources of varying frequencies, which are then 'cleaned' to address

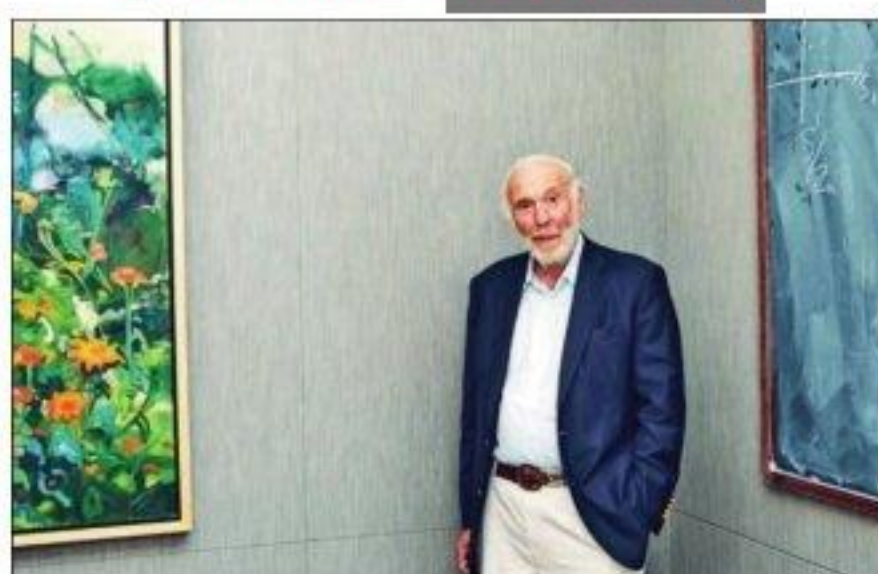
various anomalies. Signals are then discovered and analysed by identifying patterns and trends in them. However, discipline is the key once put into practice, as there is little interference in trading systems based on one's judgement on how the markets will behave.

► Chinks in markets and human behaviour These will never be completely efficient. While markets are reasonably close to being so, the company leverages consistently exploiting small anomalies arising from emotional human behaviour. The latter tends to be emotional during periods of stress, and it isn't surprising that a significant share of Simons' gains came from trading these volatile 'emotional' markets.

► Risk management is key Given the plethora of strategies, asset classes and securities invested in, risk management becomes critical. The firm focuses on sizing and uses advanced risk management models to evaluate and manage risk, which, in turn, helps it make more informed decisions.

Simons was also a champion of technology, the need for constant innovation and the importance of having a strong team, all of which are applicable irrespective of the style of investing that one is pursuing. Thanks to him and others, QI drives almost a third of Wall Street trading operations today. Even traditional investment firms have begun to integrate some of this methodology to augment their processes.

In India, QI is quite at a nascent stage, with a few 'quant fund' launches over the last few years. As we pay our respects to Simons, we should also incorporate his discipline of investing in our investment process.



The quant artist

BULLET TRAIN

Kotaro Isaka

Nanao can't escape this thought: if it happened once, it can happen again, and if it happened twice, it can happen three times, and if three times, then four; so we might as well say that if something happens once, it'll keep happening forever. Like a domino effect.


Five years ago, on his first job, things got way hairier than he expected, and he had muscled to himself. If this happened once, it could happen again. There must have been some kind of binding power in his idle thought, because his second job was a disaster too, and his third. Always a total mess.

'You're overthinking it,' Maria had said on multiple occasions. Nanao gets his jobs from Maria. She describes herself as basically just an agent, but Nanao doesn't think that's all there is to Maria. Words floated through his mind like epigrams. I prepare the food and you eat of it, You command and I obey. Once he asked, 'Maria, why don't you do any jobs?' 'I've got a job.'

'I mean a job. You know, like in the field. That kind of job.'

Translated from Japanese by Sam Malissa

The writer is CIO, Axis AMC



A thought for today

Politics is the mechanism by which societies make difficult choices among things that are often hard to compare

JEFFRY FRIEDEN

Subsidy With Benefits?

Free bus rides have triggered debate, subsidies rest on calculation that positive spin-offs exceed costs

Women increasingly constitute an important vote bloc for many political parties. Carefully tailored subsidies are integral to political strategies to appeal to women voters. Of interest here is the impact of free bus rides for women in states such as Karnataka and Telangana beyond immediate political benefits. What are its larger consequences?

An executive of L&T, which has a 65-year concession on Hyderabad metro, observed that there's been gender redistribution between bus and urban rail transport. Women have moved from metros to buses, while men have switched to rail because of overcrowding.

Transport, the subsidy magnet | Public transport is globally one of the most frequently subsidised areas. Luxembourg, one of the richest countries, has made all public transport rides free, including that of tourists. There's a reason here. Transport is viewed as an input which complements a socially desired objective such as people taking up jobs. For govts, transport subsidy is seen as a positive externality, where the cost incurred by the state provides indirect benefits.

Migrant trains | Indian Railways incurs its largest passenger subsidy on second class and sleepers. Chock-a-block trains along the so-called migrant routes justify this subsidy as it is essential to move people from labour surplus regions to areas where there's a demand. The economic benefits of this include a boost in consumption taxes in home regions of labourers.

Complex interplay | These are examples of supply side subsidies. It's hard to gauge their unintended consequences and not always do the poorest get subsidised. To illustrate, a 2012 study of Greater Mumbai based on a random sample of households by Cooper & Bhattacharya showed that 45% of the surveyed walked to work. They also happened to be the poorest in the sample. Mumbai's rail and bus subsidies went to slightly richer households. But without those subsidies, the city's economic expansion is likely to have been curtailed.

Govts and externalities | Fiscal allocations of govts are hugely influenced by their assessment of externalities. A lot depends on what really matters. Delhi Metro (DMRC), jointly owned by GOI and Delhi govt, made losses for 10 straight years up to 2022-23. Other than changing the city's transport dynamics, DMRC has also earned carbon credits, an important benefit in a city with poor air quality.

The jury's out on free bus rides for women. The truism is that there will never be a consensus on subsidies.

Haryana Hurricane

BJP again faces Jat angst while Congress smells a comeback and JJP looks at a possible split

Haryana's politics is witnessing interesting twists and turns in the wake of three independent MLAs withdrawing support to the BJP govt. While this means that CM Nayab Saini's govt is technically in minority – 43 MLAs in the effective assembly strength of 88 – BJP is confident that a sizeable number of ally-turned-rival JJP's MLAs will support it in a floor test. However, this distracts from BJP's Lok Sabha campaign in the state that was anyway proving to be challenging.

JJP & Jat angst | Jat resentment against BJP has been building since the Jat quota agitation of 2016. This angst was sharpened further by the 2020-21 farmer protests. JJP's decision to support BJP after the 2019 assembly polls was seen as a betrayal by the community notwithstanding benefit to party MLAs. Therefore, a split in JJP cannot be counted out.

Polarised politics | Over the last decade, Haryana's political narrative has been dominated by the divide between Jats and non-Jats. BJP has clearly sought to consolidate the non-Jat vote that includes Punjabis, Baniyas and Sainis. But reverse consolidation of the Jat vote isn't guaranteed given factionalism within Congress and Modi's nationalist appeal.

National plus local | With assembly polls in Haryana slated for Oct, the ongoing LS poll campaign is reflecting local issues. The Agnipath scheme of army recruitment has significantly affected Haryana's youth. Plus, there hasn't been any recruitment of college teachers in Haryana in the last five years, while no vacancies have been filled in govt Group C category in the last 3-4 years. These could significantly affect BJP's performance in the LS election.

Congress comeback? | BJP had swept Haryana's 10 seats in LS 2019. But with the slow disintegration of JJP, Jat angst and rising unemployment in the state, Congress will feel confident of a comeback in Rohtak, Sonapat and Sirsa. However, much will depend on the party keeping its own flock together.

Trinidad diary

Desis will find it far but feel right at home

Shinie Antony

Trinidad and Tobago – a nation of two islands in the Caribbean – is far, far away if you live in India, the journey so long you feel you were born and brought up in a plane. Every road in the capital city of Port of Spain goes past the Savannah, a 260-acre park that is their largest open space. This is where everyone comes to lime, which is Trini for 'chilling'. TT dollars look like toy money, so brightly coloured are they. The cabbie will play calypso, soca, chutney or steelpan music; jetlag will confuse you into thinking you are on the dance floor but paralysed waist down.

Life here revolves around the annual carnival, during which they wear costumes called 'mas' and have stick-fighting competitions and dance the limbo where bending backwards is everything. For over a decade now the carnival is followed by a vibrant and crackling literature festival, despite not much of a publishing industry here. They take their slam poetry seriously, mounting the contest on a Bollywood scale, with themes this year ranging from domestic abuse and alien visits to the 'it's complicated' relationship between Trinidad and Tobago. The islands are *do jism ek jaan*, but have separate tourism brochures.

Colonised by the Spanish and then the British, a history of indentured labour has mixed up Portuguese and Chinese with Indian heritage. Everyone claims an Indian ancestor; you run into a Bahadur or Sanatan. Doubles and potato pie are the younger and runny versions of our very own chole-bhature and aloo-puri. The national dish is perhaps bake and shark, a kind of fish burger, while ripe mangoes are divided into Julie and Starch. There is a harmless looking pepper sauce, which the average Trini will drown all his food in but sets your tongue on fire and makes you do the disco out of sheer agony. Trinis will smile benignly and on the eve of your departure gift you with a dozen bottles of this sauce, which mixes scorpion and red chillies, and is as fatal as it sounds.

'Goodnight' is a greeting here, not a farewell. Most men and women sport dreadlocks. One poet proudly told me he got his locks from a feminist, because he won't have it any other way. The high crime rate – gunshots and carjacking are routine – is offset by beautiful beaches. If one must get killed there is no spot more scenic.

Dalit Search For New Political Home

Disaffection with Mayawati changed UP's Dalit politics, now divided between Ambedkarites and Hindutvawadis. BJP's not riding a 'wave' but anti-BJP Dalit politics is fragmented

Sudha Pali

The Dalit identity politics that reigned supreme in UP in the 1990s was built around a Dalit-led political party. It is now giving way to broader demands for social justice and economic advancement, particularly among poorer non-Jatav Dalits. Disaffection with Mayawati, who many feel failed to fulfil their economic aspirations, underlies this Dalit search for a new political home.

BSP's loss, whose gain? | BJP has been drawing large dividends from this disaffection. Its new redistributive politics, combined with promises of development and cultural recognition under the banner of subaltern Hindutva, which enable an upper caste party to mobilise lower classes, has been drawing in a growing number of Dalits.

A number of sub-regional Ambedkarite organisations, like Bhim Army led by a young Dalit, has also emerged as once-dominant BSP, which once consolidated UP's Dalit movement, has become mired in an existential crisis.

Dalit assertion still remains strong. But it is now fissured along class, ideological and sub-regional lines, divided into Ambedkarite pro-BSP and Hindutvawadi pro-BJP Dalits, each further fragmented.

Azad's limits | Bhim Army, formed in 2015 in western UP, and Azad Samaj Party, created in 2020 in Saharanpur district, are the most significant of the political fragments that disillusionment with BSP has created across the state.

Both were founded by Chandrashekhar Azad, a Jatav lawyer, human rights activist and Ambedkar devotee. He is a creature of the new Dalit politics in UP. Born in a village to a schoolteacher, he first made headlines in 2016, when he mounted 'The Great Chamars of Ghadkhauri Welcome You' board at his village's entrance; then again, after his attempted murder in 2021.

Azad gained popularity among Jatav youth by fighting atrocities, holding cycle yatras to advance Ambedkar's ideas and establishing schools for Dalit children. His movement has momentum and he has been named by *Time* magazine as one of the world's 100 emerging leaders. For now, however, his Bhim Army, which is not yet 10, remains confined to western UP.

Then there are Ambedkar Jan Morcha (run by Shravan Kumar Nirala in Poorvanchal) and Bahujan Mukti Party (under Daddu Prasad in Bundelkhand), two smaller BSP-breakaway organisations, led by former BSP leaders. These too have only a local presence.

BJP's protections | As for BJP, Dalit support for the party is complex, impacted as much by protests against upper-caste atrocities committed against Dalits as by pragmatic preferences. Smaller Dalit sub-castes have long preferred parties that could protect their lives and property from local dominant castes, primarily

many votes end up being cast for BJP.

Is growing support for BJP a tactical matter, a response to a declining BSP? Or does it mean the movement of Dalits toward Hindutva? The Hinduisation of smaller sub-castes, such as Balmikis, has actually been underway since the late 19th century in UP. But in the post-Independence decades, it proceeded quietly. Today, it is an explicit societal and political project, reflected in election results.

Nagina's rectangular contest | This time INDIA alliance has brought Congress and SP together in UP. But Mayawati's refusal to join in has created a multi-cornered contest, which is further helping BJP. This was on vivid display in Nagina, a reserved constituency in western UP with 21.4% SCs who voted in the first phase. It witnessed a rectangular contest among BSP, BJP and INDIA alliance, plus Azad, who also entered the fray.

Will Dalits vote once again for BSP, which won the seat in 2019, but with SP in alliance, or will the Dalit vote be fractured between BSP, Azad and BJP to the latter's advantage? Or, will Dalits prefer INDIA alliance, joining hands as in 2012 with Muslims, who constitute 43.04% of the population? Will the presence of Muslims lead to Hindu consolidation, with Dalits also opting for BJP?

Dalit's fear and confidence | These possibilities must be viewed against a striking lack of pro-Modi enthusiasm and local issues gaining importance in western UP, which may well explain the lack of voter energy in the earlier phases. Equally significant among Dalits is the fear of any constitutional change that would endanger reservations and other benefits secured for them by Ambedkar.

A more confident Dalit community, armed with the modicum of recognition and political empowerment they gained under BSP, is now expanding its political ambitions. But space for revival of older Dalit parties or for new organisations to build a movement has shrunk. Dalits who in 2019 voted for the BSP MPs, who have since abandoned the party, will most likely continue to join BJP. The longer BJP under Modi continues as the governing dispensation, the greater the possibility of incorporation of Dalits into the Hindutva-fold. But, if new-gen Dalit leaders espousing an anti-Hindutva agenda succeed in converting the community's anger into votes, we may witness a new wave of Dalit assertion.

The writer is a political scientist

UP votes on May 20 (14 seats) in the fifth of its 7-phase polls

Modi Vs Patnaik-Pandian & The Quiet Odia

Odisha polls began yesterday. Puri temple politics, political debut of Naveen's trusted aide & BJP vs BJD welfare rhetoric make it a fascinating electoral battle

Ashok Pradhan@timesgroup.com

Voting for 21 Lok Sabha seats and 147-member Vidhan Sabha elections got underway yesterday – over four phases – on the backdrop of a failed coalition attempt between incumbent BJD and principal opposition BJP. An unusual camaraderie between the two has transformed into intensely contested electoral battles. Congress, a distant third, is relevant mostly in tribal southern Odisha.

Naveen Patnaik's return will make history – India's longest-serving CM. If BJP wins the 147-member assembly, Odisha will for the first time see a saffron party form govt. BJP was junior partner in Naveen-led govt from 2000 to 2009.

BJP's aggressive campaign saw its tally increase from one LS seat in 2014 to eight in 2019; its vote share leapt

from 16.9% to 38.4% in five years. Yet, it couldn't dent BJD in the assembly, winning only 23 seats (32.5% votes), while BJD won 112 seats (44.7%). The state also witnessed split voting with many opting for BJP in LS and BJD in Vidhan Sabha.

Frenemies | But BJP and BJD relations turned more than cordial the past five years. Naveen unquestioningly supported BJP at the Centre. In return, BJP went easy on the regional party, Modi praising Naveen's governance in Rajya Sabha in Feb 2022.

Modi and Amit Shah have held no

political event in Odisha in the last five years. Weeks before the election schedule, PM visited twice – in Feb and March – but refrained from criticising Naveen, calling him "dear friend" and "Odisha's popular CM".

In March, talk of a possible BJP-BJD coalition gained ground – an unusual pact had it happened between a party and its main opposition – would've instantly vacated opposition space to Congress's advantage. Hectic parleys ended on an abrupt note with BJP saying it couldn't agree with BJD on the matter of 'Odia Asmita' (self-respect), which over the past two months has unfolded into a key poll issue.

Pandianomics | BJP and Congress have both targeted Naveen's close associate, bureaucrat-turned-BJD politician VK Pandian. Pandian joined Naveen as his private secretary in 2011. In his fifth term as CM, Naveen introduced his 5T governance charter, which stands for 'teamwork, technology, transparency, time and transformation'. Pandian was appointed its chief.

Over time, most departments were brought under 5T. After opting for early retirement last year, the IAS officer took a political plunge and was given cabinet rank. Also BJD's star campaigner, second only to Naveen, he is the only senior campaigning statewide. BJP's made Pandian its prime target, alleging govt's been "outsourced" to an outsider, given Naveen age. If BJD does well, Pandian will earn political legitimacy. Its failure will be seen as Pandian's 'unacceptability' among people.

Temple twist | Naveen put unusual focus on uplift of places of worship leading up to Puri's 12th century Jagannath temple. These were first regarded as complementary to Modi govt initiatives such as Kashi Vishwanath corridor.

But, inauguration of the ₹800cr Puri

heritage corridor project in Jan around the same time of the Ayodhya inauguration, was dubbed by BJP as an attempt to divert people's attention for political gain. BJP has objected to razing ancient mutts as part of the Puri project – as an act that erases history. As polls kick off, BJP has intensified its 'fault finding' in Naveen's Puri exercise.

Scheme for scheme | Despite BJD's unwavering support for Modi govt on controversial issues, Naveen chose not to implement the Ayushman Bharat health insurance. Instead, Odisha rolled out Biju Swasthya Kalyan Yojana offering cashless treatment up to ₹5L per family (₹10L for women). BJD's made the scheme's 'success' a major poll plank. As a counter, BJP's targeted BJD for not implementing Ayushman Bharat.

In its Odisha poll manifesto, BJP's pledged to buy paddy at ₹3,100 per quintal, around 40% above current MSP – a significant move in the largely agrarian state where paddy's the main crop. BJD has promised free electricity upto 100 units, Congress has pledged 200 units free and PM Surya Ghar is BJP's free power scheme. BJP's promise of ₹50,000 cash voucher for women and BJD's pledge of ₹20,000cr support to women SHGs are other competing promises.

Congress draws attention to BJP-BJD 'tacit understanding' – similar to its Telangana approach last year, where the party talked up the BRS-BJP relationship ahead of the assembly election. Mega crowds at rallies aside, the electorate remains uncharacteristically quiet. Question on everyone's mind is whether Naveen's juggernaut will continue to roll, or will a saffron surge stop him?

Odisha votes on May 20 (5 seats) in the second of its 4-phase polls

Calvin & Hobbes



'Quantum Physics And Vedas Illuminate Reality'

Vishal Rao

Quantum physics has long been a source of fascination and wonder, given its profound insights into the fundamental nature of reality. Spirituality, on the other hand, elaborated by ancient texts such as the Vedas, has captured the human imagination for millennia, providing a robust framework for making sense of the universe and our place within it. While these two domains may seem disparate, their intriguing points of connection merit a deeper exploration.

Quantum physics, the study of matter and energy dynamics at the smallest scale and the lowest level of granularity, has plausibly challenged conventional notions of reality. It also discusses the key role of consciousness in shaping reality. The double-slit experiment suggests that particles behave differently when observed as if

they are responsive to consciousness. Similarly, the Vedas propose that consciousness is not a by-product of the material world but a fundamental aspect of reality, implying that the material and the spiritual are deeply entwined.

The introduction of quantum physics added a new dimension to the erstwhile perceived notion that reality is independent of observations. Quantum physics tells us that particles can exist in multiple states simultaneously, quantum superposition, and can affect each other instantaneously over vast distances, quantum entanglement. The idea that our thoughts and observations can influence the world around us resonates with defining concepts of spiritual literature. Additionally, the notion of a unified, interconnected reality aligns with many spiritual

philosophies that emphasise the oneness of all existence.

The Vedas, ancient Indian scriptures forming the core of Hindu philosophy, are a rich tapestry of wisdom and insights that have left seekers mesmerised since time immemorial. Within the Vedas, one finds descriptions of reality that bear a striking resemblance to certain aspects of quantum physics. These texts explore the nature of reality and consciousness, proposing that Brahman forms the core of all existence, the ultimate eternal, unchanging, and all-pervading Reality. The concept of *maya*, imperfectly translated as illusion, speaks of the idea that the everyday world we perceive is not the ultimate reality but only a manifestation shaped by consciousness and perception.

Just as quantum particles influence each other across the expanse of space,

the Vedas teach that all beings are intrinsically connected within the fabric of Brahman. This perspective encourages a sense of universal responsibility and harmony, highlighting the significance of each action and its ripple effects throughout the cosmos.

The notion of God in many spiritual traditions is often that of an omnipresent force, an ultimate source from which all things emerge and to which all things return. This is not entirely dissimilar to the idea of a unified field in quantum physics: a fundamental field from which all forces and particles arise. While science does not use the language of divinity, the search for a 'Theory of Everything' that unites all physical laws into one framework could be seen as a scientific parallel to the spiritual quest for understanding the divine order.

The convergence of quantum physics and spirituality urges us to probe deep into the interconnectedness of all things.

Sacredspace


The only way to live in the midst of inharmonious influences is to strengthen the will power and endure all things yet keeping fineness of character and nobility of manner together with an everlasting heart full of love.

Hazrat Inayat Khan

FIRST COLUMN

THE RISE OF ROBOTS

Robots are emerging as the next frontier, but can they replace humans?



SHAINY SHARMA

Various research and studies have shown that the next frontier in Artificial Intelligence is the Robots. Much more added to it are the big names- Jeff Bezos, Microsoft and many others who are investing in human robots according to people with knowledge of the situation, as part of a scramble to find new applications for the so-called AI Technology. Undoubtedly, robots have increasingly become an integral part of our lives in this century, impacting various aspects of society, industry and everyday activities. The robots have revolutionized in many key sectors be it industrial, healthcare, agricultural, transportation or any other. The science of robots is revolutionizing day by day and scientists are making innovations in robots. Research studies show that by 2050, robots will overcome human beings as they will develop strong intellects.

Many developing nations are involving the use of robots. In the industrial sector robots are performing the tasks such as assembling, welding, painting and packaging in factories thereby increasing efficiency, precision and productivity. In the healthcare sector, robots can perform tasks such as surgery, patient care, rehabilitation and medication dispensing with great precision and even provide support and assistance to elderly or disabled individuals. Talking about the automobile industry, autonomous vehicles- including cars, drones and delivery robots, are transforming transportation and logistics while self-driven car makers are promising to make transportation safer, more efficient and accessible to people who are unable to drive. In the agricultural sector, agricultural robots such as drones



and automated harvesters can help optimise farming practices by monitoring crops, applying fertilizers and pesticides precisely and thereby harvesting crops efficiently which ultimately improves yields, reduces labour costs and minimizes environmental impact. Not only these but the robots are doing jobs and servings in restaurants too. The robots have taken down the responsibility of the pizza boy in pizza shops and even are performing tasks such as customer service, cleaning, and inventory management. They enhance operational efficiency and provide novel experiences for customers. Robots are indeed reshaping various aspects of everyone's lives, from how individuals work to how they interact with technology and each other. Today, educational robots are gaining an advantage in classrooms over teachers, engineering, and other STEM concepts in a hands-on manner.

Overall, robots are transforming the way we live, work and interact with the world around us. With advancements in robotics technology continuing to expand their capabilities and applications, the question of whether robots will replace humans in various tasks and roles is a complex one. While robots and automation have the potential to replace humans in some repetitive and routine tasks, they also create new opportunities and roles for humans in other areas. However, many tasks and roles require human creativity, empathy, and problem-solving skills, which are difficult for robots to replicate.

There is no denying the fact that the evolution of robots will profoundly impact society, offering new opportunities for innovation, collaboration, and improving quality of life. However, it will also raise the important ethical, social and economic considerations that must be carefully addressed with time. As robotics technology continues to advance, it will further transform society and open new possibilities for innovation and human-machine collaboration.

(The writer is an educator, views are personal)

The plight of unwed mothers of Kolam tribe

The stigmatisation of ‘Kumari Matas’ in the Kolam tribe highlights their struggle for social acceptance and economic empowerment



Kolam, a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) of the Dravidian race is known for its unique culture, language, indigenous knowledge and matrilineal society. They reside predominantly in the Yavatmal, Chandrapur, some parts of Amravati, Wardha and Nanded districts of Maharashtra and in some parts of Adilabad of Telangana. They have historical roots in Andhra Pradesh and later migrated to the regions of Vidarbha and Marathwada. This Proto- Australoid tribe is often highlighted for its unwed mothers. As per the reports of The Indian Express, there are at least 45 registered unwed mothers, and over 450 unregistered unwed mothers only in the three blocks named Maregaon, Pandarkawada and Jharjhamini of Yavatmal. Being a matriarchal society, the Kolams of Yavatmal have always celebrated womanhood. They celebrate the first mensuration of girls; they worship ‘Gabhuri’, the mother Goddess as their main deity to uphold their matriarchal societal roots.

However, the situation is changing. Though the unwed mothers have been renamed as the ‘Kumari Maata’ due to their assimilation with mainstream society yet due to their rising inclination towards the male-dominated society, patriarchal tenets are growing in these traditions. Therefore, the position of women is also declining consequently and those unwed mothers who used to live a normal life previously are now considered ‘Bad character women’. There are various case studies and stories of women of the Kolam tribe where the elite in the society or financially stronger like contractors, outsiders visit the areas for work purposes, establish physical interactions with the women in their communities and refuse to marry them when they are expecting a child. Women are frequently conned by marriage promises because they are socially, emotionally and economically vulnerable. The woman is held liable for the premarital pregnancy, whereas the responsible males are excluded from this process.

THE KOLAM TRIBE, CLASSIFIED AS A PARTICULARLY VULNERABLE TRIBAL GROUP (PVTG), IS GRAPPLING WITH A SIGNIFICANT ISSUE OF UNWED MOTHERS, EMPHASISING THE URGENCY FOR INTERVENTIONS TO TACKLE THEIR COMPLEX SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL STRUGGLES

Most of these Kolam women work as agricultural labourers, construction labourers and other low-wage activities due to which it becomes very easy for the traders and other outsiders to abuse them physically. For example, according to Deshpande (2016) “border districts of Maharashtra, such as Chandrapur, Gadchiroli, Bhandara, Buldhana, Amravati, Nagpur and Gondia too have unwed mothers, the numbers in Yavatmal are higher because of its proximity to the chilli fields of Telangana, where work (for the poor) is available throughout the year. A number of unwed mothers say they were lured by neighbouring state's men who promise marriage but left when they became pregnant.” Some of them get pregnant while being a minor whereas others are due to their backwardness. Though in most tribal societies, giving birth to a child is a biological phenomenon and hence considered pious but yet due to the assimilation with the conventional societies they are also recognizing childbirth as a structural process where the consent of society, kin and kith is necessary. These structural changes are pushing unwed mothers toward various other socio-cultural and economic problems.

The most important among these is that unwed mothers are not accepted within the community nor do they find any other groom, as they are considered obscene. As a result, for the entire period of life, they serve as a single mother due to which the pressure of childbearing increases among them. The problems are more serious as being unwed mothers they often face disgrace in the newly constructed norms of patriarchal society. Sometimes they need to

leave the village and stay in the outskirts whereas in many cases the other women are not allowed to talk to them or join them for any occasion, as they are believed to be malignant due to their premarital physical relations. The consequences are economic and occupational also. As a daily wage labourer, their leisure time is very little but being single mothers they need breaks for breastfeeding and childcare due to which they face pay cuts. Sometimes they need to pay a fine to the panchayats also for their “misconduct”.

These unknown pregnancies among the women of Kolam are a crucial issue. These indicate the lack of awareness about contraceptive measures, education, economic weakness and social vulnerability that often attract these women to fake marriage conversations and other luring proposals. As per the report of Sant Gadge Baba Amravati University (2018-2019) in Yavatmal, “28.84 per cent Kumari Matas are in the age range of 26 to 30 years. 36 per cent Kumari Matas having education up to Fourth standard, 67.30 per cent Kumari Matas are belonging to ‘Kolam’ caste, 82.69 per cent are homeless. 51.09 per cent are pregnant due to outsiders, 82.07 per cent children of Kumari Matas are admitted in the school by furnishing the name of mother only, 92.30 per cent had delivery at home, 61.63 per cent getting help from Government schemes”.

The subject is more critical as many of them are uncounsed because most of them do not come forward to speak due to socio-cultural stigma and thus their stories remain untold. This has again a negative impact on them as their complete family details are not mentioned in the Government records like ration cards, Aadhar

cards, etc. which deprives them of getting the benefits of many Government schemes that can make their life easier.

As per the report of Pune Times Mirror, “a survey of such victims is conducted every year by a woman and child development (WCD) officer with the help of Anganwadi workers and a junior protection officer at the taluka level.” Further, the Anganwadi workers help these unwed mothers by teaching them the methods of nutrition and hygiene. The Bombay High Court has already directed the state to the need for the rehabilitation of young unwed mothers among the Kolam tribe. The Government of Kerala is also running a similar kind of scheme called “Snehasparsham” which offers unwed mothers ₹1000/- per month to lessen the financial burden of these economically vulnerable unwed mothers. The need of the hour is to initiate some projects and schemes for them so the Kumari Matas of Yavatmal can be included in the parameters of Government benefits at a large scale.

The infrastructural facilities like schools and primary health care centres, are the basic needs of these regions. Endeavours should also be taken to open basic schools and training centres for vocational courses like sewing, beautician, etc. The awareness about Self-Help groups can make them financially independent through various micro-level businesses like horticulture, bee-keeping, jelly-making etc. Further, documentation of unwed mothers can give them a social identity and make them live a life of dignity and self-respect.

(The writer is Vice Chancellor, Central Tribal University of Andhra Pradesh; views are personal)

Kejriwal's bail: Unveiling political prophecies post-release

The Delhi CM's release sparks controversy with ominous predictions and bold political statements, fuelling nationwide debate on democracy's future

Persons accused of criminal cases getting arrested and the courts granting them bail is nothing new. Even if the person happens to be the reigning chief minister of a State or a former union minister of finance, the bail does not absolve the accused of the charges. The Supreme Court order that released the Delhi Chief Minister on bail from the custody of the Enforcement Directorate says it is a provisional arrangement so that he could participate in the election campaign as the Lok Sabha poll comes once in five years.

So far, so good. But what came after the Delhi Chief Minister was released on bail needs to be analyzed threadbare. On Saturday, he worshipped at Lord Anjaneya



Temple and addressed a press meeting. What he said during the press meeting is shocking and capable of causing fear in the minds of the people. He said if the BJP wins the 2024 Lok Sabha election and comes back to power, Prime Minister Narendra Modi will send all Opposition leaders to jail. Kejriwal also claimed that Amit Shah is being groomed as the next Prime Minister as Modi is likely to retire in 2025

when he turns 75. Yet another disclosure made by the Delhi Chief Minister was that Yogi Adityanath would be removed as chief minister of Uttar Pradesh within two months of the BJP coming back to power. The national and international media are celebrating Kejriwal's bail and his prophecies. A major section of the media forgot the fact that they were the ones to give running commentaries of Live events without joining the game as players. The media in Kerala and Tamil Nadu are on Cloud Nine reporting that there is going to be a change of Government at the Centre after 4 June 2024. Well, let's leave it to the voters who are in the process of electing their representatives. It is good to see

that doubts about tampering the electronic voting machines have taken a stage and the Opposition leaders have started working on the modalities of Government formation. Saturday's press meeting by the Delhi Chief Minister took one to 2019 when the same had claimed that if the BJP wins the General Election and returns to power, there would not be any more elections in India. “The 2019 General Election would be the last poll the country will see if Narendra Modi returns to power,” these were the words of Kejriwal in 2019. After the 2019 general election, Narendra Modi returned to power with a larger majority and the country saw regular elections to all the State assemblies that completed their

mandatory five-year tenure. Though the claim fell flat on all fours, neither the media that flashed Kejriwal's warning about the “last” general elections nor our political pundits remembered the same. Once the results were announced and the BJP was returned to power, that became the news, and everything else was forgotten (at least till 2024). Yet another battlefield has been opened by the Opposition and that is the One Nation, One Leader concept, the brand new slogan coined by Kejriwal. Wasn't it George Santayana, the Spanish-American philosopher who said in 1863 that “those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it”? Narendra Modi, I am sure

does know this adage quite well and hence there is no possibility of following the slogan coined by Kejriwal. The entire media in the country is unanimous in their opinion that elections are the festivals of democracy. But the festivals will certainly lose their charm if they are fueled by half-lies and full lies. One is at a loss to understand the logic behind the claim by certain leaders that the BJP government would subvert the Constitution! Who derailed the Constitution much against the order of the Supreme Court that the basic structure of the Constitution should never be tampered with. It was in 1976 that then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi altered the preamble of the Constitution by incorporating

the words secularism, socialism etc. India survived as a nation from 1947 to 1976 without the terms secularism and socialism in its Constitution. B R Ambedkar, the architect of the Constitution, was totally against the inclusion of these terms when it was drafted for the first time. It was after the introduction of these terms that communal riots and terrorism peaked in India. Accusations and allegations are fine because they add to the intensity of the campaigning. But baseless allegations rob the beauty of the election process. Interestingly, the leaders named by the Delhi chief minister as potential victims of the Modi regime are not saints or beatified ones. Reports from Delhi say that Kejriwal

was summoned eight or nine times by the ED for questioning in connection with money laundering. The Chief Minister chose to ignore the same with contempt. He might not know the truth that the reigning Prime Minister cooperated with the Supreme Court-appointed Special Investigation Team under the chairmanship of R K Raghavan, a former CBI director to grill him about the Gujarat riots. For 19 hours, the then Gujarat Chief Minister sat through the grilling and answered all the queries they asked. That is what we call honesty and integrity. People still hope that Kejriwal too is honest.

(The writer is special correspondent with The Pioneer; views are personal)

The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Russian oil

US dimbdown vindicates India's stand

INDIA'S decision to buy highly discounted Russian oil despite Western sanctions has paid off in diplomatic as well as economic terms. Amid the Russia-Ukraine war, the US and its allies have realised that they cannot browbeat New Delhi, with its independent foreign policy, into toeing the Western line. US Ambassador to India Eric Garcetti has claimed that Washington allowed New Delhi to buy Russian oil to 'ensure that the prices did not go up globally'. This is virtually an admission that the US chose not to antagonise its close ally and fellow Quad member. Garcetti's remarks are in consonance with US Treasury Assistant Secretary Eric Van Nostrand's statement last month that the US had not asked India to cut Russian oil imports.

Resisting intense pressure, India has managed to strike a fine balance between its growing proximity to the US and its time-tested trade ties with Russia. With India being the world's third-largest consumer of crude oil — its import dependency is more than 85 per cent — New Delhi's approach has been guided by national needs. Commendably, India's crude oil import bill fell to \$132.40 billion in 2023-24, down from \$157.50 billion in 2022-23. The purchase of Russian oil at a good discount largely helped the country make significant savings.

New Delhi has made it clear that it won't let its ties with the US and other Western nations impact its enduring engagement with Russia. External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar put it plainly at the Munich Security Conference in February: 'Different countries and different relationships have different histories... We are not purely unsentimentally transactional...' This policy of eschewing unidimensional relationships in the emerging multipolar world order is expected to stand India in good stead. Moreover, it seems to have finally dawned on the West that India can't be taken for granted on any matter with international implications, be it the war in Ukraine or Gaza.

Decoding food labels

ICMR warns against misleading claims

FOOD labels mention the contents of packaged products. But can they be taken at face value? Flagging the issue of misleading claims on labels that can adversely impact consumers' choices, the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) has issued a set of dietary guidelines.

It points out the glaring example of the deceptive nature of 'sugar-free' foods. While these products may seem like a boon for diabetics or those watching their weight, they could be loaded with fats, refined cereals and hidden sugars, significantly altering their nutritional profile. Similarly, packaged fruit juices may have a meagre 10 per cent fruit pulp, with the rest containing added sugars and other additives. The guidelines underscore the importance of scrutinising labels beyond the attractive health claims. Terms like 'natural', 'whole grain' and 'organic' may not guarantee such qualities in the product. Manufacturers often exploit these terms to capitalise on consumer preferences for healthier options, while the actual contents may fall short of expectations. The ICMR also questions the nutrition claims — terms like 'low calorie' or 'high fibre' are vague assertions unless backed with concrete facts.

Unfortunately, the ICMR's advisory does not specifically address the needs of food allergy patients. For example, accurate labelling of gluten-free products is crucial to managing celiac disease and ensuring the wellbeing of the patients as even traces of gluten in foodstuffs can trigger adverse reactions in them. The medical body must advocate greater transparency and adherence to regulatory standards in gluten-free labelling. Misleading food labels contribute to the perpetuation of faulty dietary patterns, exacerbating obesity and other problems. The ICMR's call to action is clear: consumers must exercise caution and diligence while making healthier choices for themselves and their families.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, WEDNESDAY, MAY 14, 1924

Prison reform in India

IN our first article on the subject published in *The Tribune* of the 11th, we had occasion to say that by far the most important factor that counts in the moral degradation of our long-term prisoners is the complete absence of human touch in the administration of Indian gaols. This means two things: The classification of prisoners inside the jails takes absolutely no notice of the requirements of the individual convict, the strata of society from which he comes or of his antecedents. Secondly, no attempt is made on the part of the jail staff to combine in their treatment of convicts discipline with kindness, firmness with gentleness, and forgiveness for petty human failings with strict justice. It is not, unfortunately, for the prisoners as well as for society to which he returns after serving his term of imprisonment considered any part of the duty of warders, jailors and jail superintendents to watch the lives of their charges with a view to reclaiming them and giving them again a chance to rise above their circumstances. The prisoners are looked down upon with loathing and contempt by those who surround them; no wonder gradually, although in most cases unconsciously, the iron enters into their souls and turns them into brutes, hardened to all feelings of shame and lost to all ideas of decency and self-respect. It has often been asserted by the authorities and their supporters that all those armchair critics who talk of abolishing the use of brute force in bringing back the criminal to a normal condition will soon revise their ideas if, but once, they were taken inside the jail and allowed to see things for themselves.

OPINION

Lessons from a Himalayan village

Uttarakhand is repeatedly witnessing devastating consequences of unsustainable development



AVIJIT PATHAK
SOCIOLOGIST

RECENTLY, I visited a remote Himalayan hamlet in Uttarakhand — not as a typical tourist in search of temporal relief from the unbearable heat, but as a wanderer, a seeker or a student of life. Well, I am aware of my addiction to the privileges associated with my urban/metropolitan existence. I have tasted the fruits of modernity, development and a market-driven economy. Yet, I have no hesitation in saying that this time, this silent Himalayan village taught me three important lessons that my modernity or university education could seldom offer.

First, it was really great to feel, realise and internalise the power of silence. Think of the noise associated with our urban/metropolitan existence — the noise of thousands of vehicles running ceaselessly through our imperial expressways and flyovers and causing massive carbon emissions; or the noise of television channels, loud music and constant bombardment of WhatsApp messages causing some sort of psychic pollution. Or, think of the fetish for speed we have begun to worship in our times. We are continually running after some sort of over-consumptionist mode of living. Is it that we are afraid of silence? But then, as I move around this village without any 'goal', I begin to realise the beauty of the art of doing nothing. And this relief from my hurried existence makes me realise the beauty and power of silence. The snow-clad peaks, the whispers of pine trees, the rhythmic play of butterflies and tiny yellow flowers,



CLIMATE CRISIS: Kedamath was ravaged by flashfloods and landslides in 2013. istock

the slowness in the movement of an old lady walking through the rhythmic curved path, and the mystic presence of the fold of mountains: everything around me tends to detox my mind. I become light — free from the noise inside. This inner richness tends to free me from the practice of over-consumption that destroys the earth.

Second, I learn the art of relatedness. In the achievement-oriented/hyper-competitive/professional world, we often carry the heavy burden of our egos — our degrees and diplomas, our official powers and salary packages, or our wealth and status. And these egos disrupt the rhythm of holism, interconnectedness and a network of organic relationships. However, in this Himalayan village, as I find myself amid the majestic mountain peaks, the dense forest filled with extraordinarily graceful trees, the vast sky not yet blocked by huge towers and gigantic skyscrapers, and the chirping of birds (something that seems to have completely disappeared from our cities), I realise that it is futile to exist as a solitary, egotistic and possessive individual. I feel that I am

It is sad that the legacy of Sunderlal Bahuguna and Chandi Prasad Bhatt has almost been forgotten in the hill state.

not different from this entire ecosystem. To borrow Walt Whitman's poetic wisdom, "I contain multitudes"; and I cannot live meaningfully if, instead of merging with the rhythm of nature, I seek to manipulate and conquer it through the arrogance of neoclassical economics and the cult of consumerism. In a way, it activates my ecological consciousness.

Third, I learn the futility of competition. As I look at the garland of trees, I realise that there is no standardised notion of 'perfection'; in fact, each tree is unique and has its own story to tell. The gentle anarchy I experience as I walk through the Himalayan forest makes me realise the hollowness in our quest for standardised/homogenised aspirations (say, all beauty queens look similar; or, all our school 'toppers' want to become doctors/computer engineers). In fact, this striving for a 'perfect' and standardised notion of beauty and excellence has created a neurotic culture that causes psychic anxiety and restlessness because of constant comparison with others. In the natural world, there is no competition. A butterfly does not compete with a leopard; a tall pine tree does not want to touch the Nanda Devi peak; and the valleys and the peaks know the beauty of their coexistence.

Yes, my walk through the Himalayan path tends to make me a seeker or a wanderer. I begin to appreciate the value of these three lessons that no modern university can teach me —

the power of silence, the spirit of holism or inter-connectedness, and the beauty of gentle anarchy. I begin to appreciate a mode of living that cherishes minimalism and simplicity. Well, I know that pragmatic economists and development experts would remind me of the limits to my 'poetic romanticism'. Uttarakhand, they would assert, needs jobs and employment opportunities for the young; it needs roads, hospitals, electricity and other modern amenities. In other words, Uttarakhand needs what is valorised as 'development'. The mushrooming growth of fancy hotels, resorts and 'second homes' for rich people from Delhi and Mumbai; the unplanned urbanisation and resultant deforestation in the places like Bhimtal, Bhowali, Nainital, Almora and Mussoorie; the destruction of fragile mountains for building the Char Dham highway to enable affluent 'pilgrims' to drive their SUVs; and the environmental impact of a series of hydropower projects — Uttarakhand is repeatedly witnessing the devastating consequences of this sort of 'development' in the form of flashfloods, landslides, earthquakes and forest fires. It is sad that the legacy of the likes of Sunderlal Bahuguna and Chandi Prasad Bhatt, who strove for a pro-people, ecologically sustainable and life-affirming mode of development, has almost been forgotten in the hill state.

The climate emergency is here. It is quite likely that global temperatures will rise by at least 2.5°C above pre-industrial levels by the end of this century. And we are already living with the consequences — deadly floods, wildfires, droughts, heatwaves and new diseases. Let Uttarakhand not imitate this mode of development. Instead, the lessons I have learned from this silent Himalayan village, I pray, should give us some insights for saving our earth and healing our tormented/violent selves.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

The world is reaching the tipping point beyond which climate change may become irreversible. —Kofi Annan

Surjit Patar, a poet for all seasons

PRITAM SINGH

SURJIT Patar's death has been mourned not only by the global Punjabi community but also by the lovers of poetry in many other languages into which his works were translated. An Odia scholar said she was planning to collaborate with Patar to translate his poetry into Odia, but his death had dashed her hopes. Patar sahib and I got connected and eventually became friends when a Punjabi academic, Amandeep Kaur Brar, invited me as a keynote speaker and him to preside over a seminar on Punjabi language and culture.

I met him last during a visit to Punjab in 2023. We talked for hours, discussing the relationship between intellectuals and poets. He admitted that he did not understand some of the economic concepts mentioned in my articles but was able to sense the feelings behind the arguments. He shared an amazing insight — in every intellectual, there was a poet who provided the emotional power for the intellectual endeavours. I stated that his poetic sensibilities enabled him to sense the feelings behind economic concepts. I told him that I considered poets to be the soul of any society and that any intellectual exercise was bound to be influenced by the soul-stirring power of poetry.

I brought it to his notice that during the farmers' agitation against the three farm laws enacted by the Central Government in 2020, his poem 'Eh baat niri enni hi nahin...' (this dialogue/struggle was not merely that) had played a key role in helping me understand that this was not merely a protest against marketing and farm prices but an existential struggle against the attack by agro-business corporations on agrarian culture, civilisation and ways of life.

I finally understood that this struggle was an epochal one and not an ordinary agitation over economic demands. I was convinced, therefore, that it could not be defeated — and that is precisely what happened. His poem, I said to him, was an intellectual breakthrough which demonstrated the complex interplay between poetic expression and intellectual pursuits. He seemed visibly touched. He gifted me a signed copy of his latest anthology of poems. We hugged each other affectionately and promised to spend more time together during my next trip to Punjab.

I will never meet him again but will keep in touch with him through his poems. Those meetings will acquire new and, perhaps, higher meanings.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Relief for AAP, Opposition bloc

Apropos of the editorial 'Kejriwal on poll trail'; voters don't want a criminal to be treated with kid gloves. But they do feel outraged when tainted politicians evade arrest by joining the ruling dispensation. By granting interim bail to Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal with some reasonable restrictions amid the Lok Sabha elections, the Supreme Court has risen to the occasion. The SC has restored a level playing field, upholding the integrity of the electoral process. The development has brought fresh momentum to the AAP and INDIA bloc campaigns. This could be a game-changer in the ongoing polls.

ROSHAN LAL GOEL, LADWA

Criminalisation of politics

With reference to the editorial 'Kejriwal on poll trail'; after being released from jail, the AAP national convener, who has been accused in the money laundering case related to the alleged liquor policy scam, returned to campaign for his party. Politicians who face incarceration must be ineligible to participate in Assembly or Lok Sabha elections. The Supreme Court's decision to release the Delhi CM so that he could campaign for his party amid the General Election reflects a disturbing erosion of democratic values in our country.

JAGDISH BANYAL, UNA

Consumer safety goes for a toss

Apropos of the article 'Pandemic response and the dilemma of vaccination'; a concerning trend persists in India — from vaccines to food items, unsafe products are marketed to millions, endangering their lives. The safety concerns about AstraZeneca's Covid vaccine, MDH and Everest spices, Patanjali health products, certain baby foods and genetically modified crops are valid and raise serious questions about consumer safety. The fact that such products have been in the market for so long shows that profits have been prioritised over public health. There is an urgent need for more stringent regulations to ensure the safety of consumers.

ANKUSH MAHAJAN, PATHANKOT

Maintaining high standards

Apropos of 'A parting shot by yours seditiously' (*Nous Indica*); in this age of fake narratives, it has become a Herculean task for any news organisation to maintain high standards of journalism. Yet Rajesh Ramchandran, a bold editor, reminded us why this daily is known as the 'voice of the people'. His front-page editorial on the Lakhimpur Kheri incident is a testament to his style of fearless and impartial journalism. He is not one to bow down to political parties. Thanks to his able leadership, the newspaper saw a growth of 125 per cent from the pandemic's nadir. Hopefully, his successor, senior journalist Jyoti Malhotra, will carry on the legacy of the paper with the same professional integrity.

BIR DEVINDER SINGH BEDI, SANGRUR

He spoke truth to power

With reference to 'A parting shot by yours seditiously'; I have been reading Rajesh Ramchandran's columns for quite a while. I always found his write-ups and his analysis of political and social issues quite informative. It is remarkable that he never hesitated to criticise the ruling regime over its policies or actions. He always seemed to have in-depth knowledge of whatever subject he wrote about. I am one of the many readers who will miss reading his take on burning issues in our country. Ramchandran has been a brilliant editor and an excellent columnist. The mainstream media needs more editors like him.

RANJEET NANNER, BY MAIL

Voice of the people

Refer to 'A parting shot by yours seditiously'; under the responsible editorship of Rajesh Ramchandran, *The Tribune* maintained its journalistic standards, continued its pursuit of truth and ensured accurate reporting of facts in news stories. Editors like Ramchandran are the reason the paper is known as the 'voice of the people'. His leadership ensured that the paper lives up to Walter Lippmann's quote, "There can be no higher law in journalism than to tell the truth and shame the devil." His contribution to the newspaper has been immense, and we look forward to more of his works.

HARJIT SINGH, MOHALI

Stories of fidelity to the oath, loyalty to comrades

LT GEN BALJIT SINGH (RETD)
MILITARY COMMENTATOR

READING exhaustive narratives of the Kargil War in *The Tribune* over the past month, I was reminded of a phone call that came one morning in the summer of 1999. Even before I could say hello, an excited voice said: “*Jai Hind shaab, aap aur memshaab theek hain?*” The voice did seem familiar, but to avoid embarrassment, I asked: “*Aap kahan se bole rahey ho?*” His response, with a controlled chuckle, was: “*Shaab, main Som Bahadur STD booth Kargil main hoon. 3/3 GR (Gorkha Rifles) ne peak capture kar liya, shaab!*” He was on cloud nine, but much to my disappointment and his helplessness, the connection snapped all too soon.

Back in 1981, when my brigade, inclusive of 3/3 GR, was moved to establish a permanent presence in north Sikkim, Lance Naik Som Bahadur Punn was my affable *sahayak*. And it had been an article of faith ever since for this comrade-in-

arms to get in touch every year. By 1999, he was a battle-blooded, proud havildar. Som Bahadur's call reminded me of the legend of Pheidippides from 490 BC, when the Persian army had invaded Greece. Out-numbered 10 to one, the Greeks sought help from the neighbouring Sparta, but to no avail. However, their deity Pan so spurred the soldiery to “...take heart, laugh Persia to scorn, have faith in the temples and tombs...” that they inflicted a crushing defeat on the invading Persians. And Pheidippides, a champion runner, set out on 40-km non-stop run from the battlefield of Marathon back to Athens. When he reached there, he informed anxious fellow citizens gathered at the Acropolis: “Rejoice, we have won!”

Another Kargil narrative came from Lt Sanjay Barshilia of 286 Medium Regiment, who on June 7, 1999, after two nights of a gruelling climb, had teamed with a detachment of 4 Jat atop Point 5299 (17,385 ft above sea level) to commence the interdiction of enemy reinforcements and logistics by artillery fire. A narrow horizontal niche cut into an ice-face about 50 metres below that hilltop, where four men could curl up at any one time, was their sole communal sleeping shel-



BATTLEFIELD: It is in the nature of warfare that every soldier in battle enjoys in equal measure the grace of angels and the dictums of destiny. TRIBUNE FILE PHOTO

ter. But sleep remained elusive because the sleeping bags tended to be damp due to frequent sleet sprays and the night temperature dipped below 10°C. Cooked food and water were supplied by night ferries daily, but were sufficient only for one meal a day.

However, this young man had a job at hand and the vantage hilltop proved an excellent perch for directing artillery fire on enemy locations with a telling effect. It was not long before the enemy retaliated in equal measure, best



Lt Barshilia was awarded the Sena Medal for his dedicated leadership and gallantry.

narrated by Sanjay thus: “You fire a round at him, and sure enough, you can expect him on your location in precisely one minute. The game was dangerous, but all of us enjoyed it immensely... It was a tremendous feeling for all of us at the post, more so for myself, who had the fortune of experiencing combat at a young age and from such a close distance. It was a dream come true.” Befittingly, he was awarded the Sena Medal on August 15, 1999, for his dedicated leadership and gallantry.

In November 2023, I had

an unbelievable chance meeting with a veteran of two wars — he was part of the Indian Peace-Keeping Force (IPKF) in October 1987 during the Sri Lankan civil war and also present at Kargil in 1999. On an errand to an establishment, the gatekeeper greeted me with a smart salute, but with his left arm, and that prompted me to enquire about his antecedents. Within minutes, it emerged that this Napoleon-sized Suraj Lama was a veteran from the elite 10 Para Commando and was among the first members of the ill-fated heliborne mission to land upon the Jaffna University stadium, where they received a horrendous reception by LTTE combatants.

However, born under a lucky star, Lama survived not just the Jaffna onslaught but multiple battles till the cessation of the war across the length and breadth of Sri Lanka. Much as I admired and respected his unique combat experiences, I was driven to a guarded cross-examination. But the moment he mentioned that he was part of that platoon of 13 Sikh Light Infantry battalion which had perished within minutes of touchdown upon mother earth to the last man but one, it was my turn to shake hands and salute Lama.

It is in the nature of warfare that every soldier in battle enjoys in equal measure both the grace of angels and the dictums of destiny. So, Lama sailed through three bloody years with the IPKF in the Lankan war, but on the penultimate day of the war in Kargil, in the blink of an eye, he was knocked out cold, airlifted to Leh Military Hospital and regained consciousness three days later.

For five-and-a-half years, he remained bed-ridden and partially wheelchair at the Army Hospital (Research and Referral), Delhi Cantonment; AIIMS, New Delhi; and the Command Hospital, Chandimandir, where his service as a havildar was terminated with 100 per cent disability pension. His left leg and right arm were severely damaged, but undaunted he drives a scooter and a car confidently. He cannot climb up steps, salutes with his left hand and clicks heels at attention in a ramrod posture — always with a broad, infectious smile.

And that brings me to the classic *A Matter of Honour* by Philip Mason, which opens with the unwritten credo of the Indian Army: “Fidelity to an oath, loyalty to comrades and calm under crises, without which qualities an Army is nothing...”

Concerted efforts needed to deal Maoist insurgents a death blow

MP NATHANAEL
FORMER IG, CRPF

RECENT encounters between the security forces and Maoists have had a debilitating effect on the Naxalite movement.

Twelve Maoists were killed after a fierce encounter with the joint forces, comprising commandos of CoBRA (Commando Battalion for Resolute Action), the District Reserve Guard (DRG), Special Task Force (STF), the Bastariya Battalion and the CRPF (Central Reserve Police Force), in Pedia forests in Bijapur on May 10, taking the toll of Maoists this year to 103.

On April 16, in one of the biggest encounters in recent years, 29 Maoists were killed when a combined force of the Border Security Force and DRG raided their hideout in the forests adjoining Binagunda and Koragutta villages of Kanker district bordering Maharashtra. Among the dead were Maoist leaders Shankar Rao and Lalita Meravi, who together carried a reward of Rs 8 lakh on their

heads. Sophisticated weapons like AK-47 rifles, INSAS rifles, carbines and a huge haul of ammunition were recovered.

Thirteen Maoists were killed in an encounter with the combined forces of CoBRA, CRPF and the Chhattisgarh Police in Kendra-Karcholi forests of Bijapur district on April 2. Among the weapons recovered were a light machine gun, a 303 rifle, three under-barrel grenade launchers, a 12-bore gun and a huge quantity of ammunition and explosives.

With greater pressure exerted on their hideouts in forests, the Maoists are on edge, coming out in large numbers to surrender lest they get killed in encounters.

As many as 18 Maoists of Bhairamgarh and Malanger area committees, including three women, surrendered before the CRPF and the Dantewada Police on April 24. Earlier, six Maoists of the Dandakaranya special zone committee surrendered before the Andhra Pradesh Police on April 22. Sixteen others surrendered in Bijapur on April 30, followed by over 30 more in Dantewada on May 5, taking the total number of surrendered Maoists to nearly 200 this year. Over 800 Maoists have surrendered in the past two years, while 125 have been arrested.

Though all left-wing extremism-affected states



CRACKDOWN: Arms and other items recovered by security personnel after an encounter with Naxalites in Chhattisgarh's Bijapur district last week. PTI

have their own surrender policy in place, the Chhattisgarh Government is formulating a new policy that may lure many more Maoists to surrender in the days ahead.

The fact that the security forces have gained an upper hand in recent months is evident from the figures of casualties among Maoists this year. The death of 103 Maoists this year, killed in various operations till May 10, far surpasses last year's toll of 22. In 2022, the figure stood at 30. The number of Maoists killed was 65 in 2019, 36 in 2020 and 47 in 2021. The security forces have enough reasons to gloat over the success achieved this year, though they lost six of their men. As of May 10, a total of 21 civilians had died

Development, the biggest enemy of Maoists, has gained a firm foothold in the areas dominated by them.

in Maoist violence this year, while 41 others had lost their lives last year.

The credit for the success achieved in various operations goes to the intelligence agencies that shared accurate, specific and timely information about the movements of Maoists with the security forces. Hitherto, intelligence inputs were either lacking or vague. How would one explain that intelligence agencies were caught off guard when a combined force of CoBRA, CRPF DRG and STF of Chhattisgarh Police personnel was attacked by over 500 Maoists near Tekulagudem village along the Sukma-Bijapur border on January 30? Three CRPF men, including two from CoBRA,

were martyred in the attack, while 15 were injured.

The penetration of the security forces into the citadel of Maoists in Abujmad area has unnerved them, forcing them to shift. Nearly 200 new camps have been established by the security forces since last year in Chhattisgarh, where Maoists called the shots. With 17 other forward base camps in Abujmad area, the Maoists find themselves confined to limited areas. This has not only instilled confidence and a sense of security among the villagers but also proved conducive to the easy flow of intelligence inputs to the security forces. It has cut short the time for the forces to rush to any location on receipt of intelligence inputs and reduced the risk involved in travelling long distances.

Development, the biggest enemy of Maoists, has gained a firm foothold in the areas dominated by them. Villagers now have access to better health and education facilities. The construction of roads, which was almost impossible in these areas, is finally happening in these villages and connected cities. According to the Ministry of Home Affairs, 9,356 km of roads have been laid in these areas in the last eight years. Several security personnel, mostly CRPF, sacri-

ficed their lives guarding the roads and the navvies while they were being laid. Maoists tried to obstruct the construction of roads by killing contractors and workers, planting IEDs, attacking the forces and setting machines on fire.

Now that the Maoists are on the back foot, it is time for the security forces to hit them hard through incessant operations based on specific and accurate intelligence inputs. The Maoists are now believed to be reduced to just about 2,500 in strength. With their morale low, the thrust must be on arranging large-scale surrenders.

Latest reports indicate that Maoist movements have been observed in Kerala, Uttar Pradesh and Karnataka, which must coordinate with other Maoist-affected states for intelligence inputs and ensure that they do not get a foothold. The revival of Maoist violence in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana cannot be ruled out, as most of their leaders happen to be from these states. Concerted and sustained efforts to crush the Maoists will prevent youngsters from joining their ranks and thus dry up their sources of recruitment. The day may not be far when the nation will rejoice that the citadel of Maoists has finally crumbled.

QUICK CROSSWORD

ACROSS
1 Begin a voyage (3,4)
4 Deprived of (5)
7 Sway from side to side (4)
8 Worrying problem (8)
10 Justifiably (4,6)
12 Cherry red (6)
13 Without restriction (6)
15 Mutually hostile (2,3,5)
18 Unrestricted admission (4,4)
19 Transaction (4)
20 Churlish (5)
21 Be aware of beforehand (7)

DOWN
1 Scatter loosely (5)
2 Uncommunicative (8)
3 Allowable deviation (6)
4 Inferior quality (10)
5 Small notch (4)
6 Mention expressly (7)
9 Modern (7-3)
11 Proximity (8)
12 Unfeeling (7)
14 Distant (3-3)
16 Find answer to (5)
17 A tree-borne fruit (4)

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION
Across: 1 Olive branch, 9 Uranium, 10 Curio, 11 Butt, 12 Keep it up, 14 Ribbon, 16 Terror, 18 Talented, 19 Goal, 22 Moist, 23 Ambient, 24 On the agenda.
Down: 2 Leapt, 3 Void, 4 Bumper, 5 Accepted, 6 Curator, 7 Rubber-stamp, 8 Copperplate, 13 Topnotch, 15 Bullion, 17 Nevada, 20 On end, 21 Able.

SU DO KU

EASY

FORECAST

SUNSET:	TUESDAY	19:08 HRS
SUNRISE:	WEDNESDAY	05:29 HRS
CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	39	23
New Delhi	41	26
Amritsar	39	21
Bathinda	41	23
Jalandhar	38	21
Ludhiana	39	23
Bhiwani	42	26
Hisar	42	24
Sirsa	40	26
Dharamsala	29	15
Manali	17	03
Shimla	27	13
Srinagar	24	09
Jammu	35	19
Kargil	19	09
Leh	18	06
Dehradun	39	22
Mussoorie	24	15

CALENDAR
MAY 14TH 2024, TUESDAY
■ Shaka Samvat 1946
■ Vaishakh Shaka 24
■ Jyeshtha Purnimika 1
■ Hijari 1445
■ Shukla Paksha Tithi 7, up to 4.20 am
■ Ganda Yoga up to 7.25 am
■ Pushya Nakshatra up to 1.05 pm
■ Moon in Cancer sign
■ Jyeshtha Sankranti
■ Gandmoola start 1.05 pm