

The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Polling in Kashmir

Peaceful conduct heralds democratic renewal

THE high voter turnout and peaceful conduct of the ongoing elections in Jammu and Kashmir, particularly in the Valley, signify a significant step towards democratic renewal in the region after the abrogation of Article 370 and the reorganisation of Jammu and Kashmir in 2019. The heartening turnout of 38 per cent in Srinagar — a leap from 14.43 per cent polling in 2019 — signals faith in the electoral process despite the socio-political complexities of the state-turned-UT. That the 2024 General Election is being held here without any call for boycott after decades is reflective of a growing desire among the people to actively engage in shaping their future.

While traditional parties like the National Conference and the People's Democratic Party continue to play an important role, new political entities have also entered the poll fray. However, challenges persist, especially in bridging the trust deficit between the Kashmiri polity and the Central Government. For the BJP, skipping elections in the Valley and limiting itself to Ladakh and Jammu marks not only a strategic retreat but also an acknowledgment of simmering discontent and the onerous task of reconciling its narrative with ground realities. Despite claims of ushering in development and peace after the abrogation of Article 370, the BJP faces scrutiny over unaddressed grievances, characterised by arrests, media censorship and economic neglect.

The successful conduct of elections should serve as a catalyst for the restoration of statehood, as promised by Prime Minister Modi during his poll rally in Udhampur last month. It is reinforced by the Supreme Court's December 2023 order to conduct the Assembly elections by September. All stakeholders must seize the momentum and work towards building a more inclusive and representative governance framework that addresses the aspirations of the people of the Union Territory.

India-Iran deal

US sanctions no deterrent for Delhi

THE spectre of US sanctions has failed to deter India from signing a 10-year contract with Iran to develop and operate the Iranian port of Chabahar. The deal is expected to enhance regional connectivity and facilitate trade involving India, Iran, Afghanistan and other nations. The long-term contract was signed by Indian Ports Global Limited and the Port & Maritime Organisation of Iran. Located in the restive Sistan-Balochistan province on Iran's southern coast, the Chabahar port will offer Indian goods a gateway to Afghanistan and Central Asia through a road and rail project known as the International North-South Transport Corridor. Importantly, the route will bypass Pakistan, whose relations with Iran have deteriorated in recent months and whose ties with India have been in deep freeze for several years. US sanctions on Iran over its purported nuclear programme have restricted the operations of this port, which New Delhi had proposed to develop back in 2003.

In one fell swoop, India has cocked a snook at Pakistan as well as the US. Reacting to the Chabahar deal, US State Department Deputy Spokesperson Vedant Patel said: 'US sanctions on Iran remain in place and we will continue to enforce them.' Sounding a note of caution, Patel said anyone considering business deals with Iran needed to be aware of the potential risk, especially in terms of sanctions.

However, like in the case of the purchase of Russian oil at discounted prices, India has chosen to prioritise its own interests and not allowed existing geopolitical alignments to become an impediment. Last year, India had used the Chabahar port to send 20,000 tonnes of wheat to aid-starved Afghanistan. It is evident that New Delhi is going all out to make its presence felt in the neighbourhood, even if this ruffles a few feathers. Inevitably, the US will have no option but to let an assertive India have its way.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, THURSDAY, MAY 15, 1924

Amritsar sedition case

SWAMI Onkarananda, a Hindu *sanyasi* working in Amritsar in connection with the Sikh struggle, has been convicted of sedition and sentenced to two years' rigorous imprisonment. The accused, being a non-cooperator, did not defend himself and the Magistrate obviously had to rely mostly on the prosecution evidence. There were two charges — one for making a speech in Amritsar in February last and the other for writing a pamphlet on the Akali struggle. We have not seen the text of the Magistrate's judgment, but it is said in the Associated Press account that he remarked that he found that the accused "had tried in his pamphlet to submit to the public various incidents in a most exaggerated style, magnifying them in a mischievous spirit, in order to incite feelings of hatred and contempt towards the Government and he had strongly exhorted the public to rally round the Akali banner in the Akali agitation." We cannot make any satisfactory comment on this case before the full text of the judgment is published. But we may say something about two points. One is that the accused is a *sanyasi* and the Magistrate could well have realised the fact that the accused did not deserve the severe sentence passed on him. Regard for his education and status in society entitled him to a light punishment. The Swami, who is a Bengali, must have agreed to come and work in Amritsar merely as a labour of love. Religious cause and service of humanity were probably attractions to him — neither political excitement nor personal fame. The second is that he is convicted more or less on one-sided evidence. This, of course, is the fate of all non-cooperating accused.

Many shades of India's Pak policy

This poll season, BJP has tried to lure Congress to extensively react to its charges on nationalism



VIVEK KATJU
FORMER SECRETARY, MINISTRY
OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS

PRIME Minister Narendra Modi recently seized upon remarks made by octogenarian politician and former diplomat Mani Shankar Aiyar to try to show that the Congress had always pursued a timid, if not cowardly, policy on Pakistan. Aiyar's comments were extracted from an 83-minute-long interview, which he gave last month to a video channel. In the interview, he expansively dwelt on his views on the India-Pakistan relations and was critical of the Modi government's approach to Pakistan. Aiyar could have avoided a direct reference to strategic weapons. That would have possibly not given PM Modi political ammunition and avoided embarrassment to the Congress. But then Aiyar would not be Aiyar if he didn't commit such gaffes.

Without naming Aiyar, Modi said at an election rally in Odisha on May 11 that 'Congress people' were seeking to weaken the country's self-confidence by creating fear about Pakistani nuclear weapons. He asserted that those who talked about Pakistan possessing atom bombs were unaware that it did not have the capacity to 'handle' them and wished to sell them, but their quality was such that no one wanted to purchase them. Modi, thereafter, trained his guns on the Congress' 'weak' approach to Pakistan-sponsored terrorism. Taking their cue from Modi, other BJP leaders criticised the Congress for always being soft on Pakistan. On its part, the Congress distanced itself from Aiyar's



OUTREACH: PM Modi tried to save the dialogue process even after the Pathankot airbase terror attack. TRIBUNE PHOTO

remarks. Its spokesperson, Pawan Khera, said Aiyar did not 'speak' for the Congress in 'any capacity whatsoever'. He went on to recall that Pakistan had been dismembered in December 1971. This was an obvious reference to then PM Indira Gandhi's handling of the war which Pakistan had thrust upon India after its army started a genocide in what was then East Pakistan. Khera also referred to India's 'peaceful nuclear explosion' of 1974, undertaken during Indira's rule.

Since the first phase of elections on April 19, the BJP has attempted to lure the Congress to extensively react to its charges on nationalism. The reference to the remarks made by Aiyar, who has no current political relevance, again illustrates this point. However, the Congress has largely and perhaps wisely skirted the issue. Its top leaders have refused to engage Modi on India's Pakistan policy or even on the issue of terrorism. They have stuck to highlighting economic matters such as unemployment and growing disparity between the rich and the poor. They have also focused on the 'threat' to the Constitu-

What put the ties in deep freeze was the Pulwama terror attack of February 2019 and the constitutional changes in J&K in August that year.

tion if the BJP retains power.

It is legitimate for the BJP to rake up the Congress' approach to Pakistan during the elections. It is equally up to the Congress to respond to the BJP's allegations in the manner it wishes to. This is part of the thrust and parry of electioneering. However, even here, it is highly desirable that top political leaders, whether in the government or outside, exercise responsibility and restraint when it comes to strategic issues. These matters are much

too sensitive to be made part of the rough and tumble of campaigning. Indeed, it is a matter of record that political leaders, irrespective of their party affiliations, have contributed in their own ways to India's security, including through the development of the country's strategic assets. This aspect should not be forgotten in the heat of election campaigns.

As for Aiyar, he has long been an advocate of an uninterrupted dialogue between India and Pakistan. What those who believe in this approach overlook is that no Indian government was able to politically sustain a bilateral dialogue process following an unacceptable Pakistan-linked terror attack. Hence, the view that terror and talks cannot go together is correct. In the interview and in a newspaper article after the controversy erupted, Aiyar's memory has been selective on Modi's Pakistan policy. Indeed, it can be argued that Modi took political risks in pursuing a policy of engagement with Pakistan. Modi and his then counterpart Nawaz Sharif decided during their meeting in July 2015 in Ufa, Russia, on the sidelines of the SCO summit that their National Secu-

ridy Advisors (NSAs) would meet to discuss terrorism and related issues. The Ufa joint statement did not specifically mention the J&K issue. Pakistani Generals reacted with fury. Over the next few months, Modi began to show flexibility and allowed the statement to be set aside because he let the NSAs, accompanied by the Foreign Secretaries, meet in Bangkok in December to discuss a range of issues, including the resumption of the India-Pakistan dialogue.

Two days after the Bangkok meeting, then External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj went to Islamabad for a multilateral meeting on Afghanistan. On its sidelines, Swaraj and her Pakistani counterpart Sartaj Aziz agreed to begin the full bilateral dialogue process, which they called the Comprehensive Bilateral Dialogue. Modi's brief visit to Lahore came after these two meetings. However, the Pakistani Generals did not wish this engagement to move ahead and engineered the Pathankot airbase terror attack in January 2016. Yet, Modi tried to save the dialogue process. He went to the extent of allowing a Pakistani team, which included an ISI officer, to visit India, particularly the Pathankot airbase. It is only after the Uri terror attack of September 2016 that Modi's approach changed. Yet, he did not break ties. Indeed, with Imran Khan becoming Pakistan's Prime Minister in 2018, there was talk of a thaw in the bilateral relationship.

What put the ties in deep freeze was the Pulwama terror attack of February 2019 and the constitutional changes in J&K in August that year. Indeed, Pakistan downgraded ties with India after the changes. It has since then indicated that a dialogue process cannot begin until India reverses the J&K decisions. Hence, Aiyar would do well to dwell on the irrationality of Pakistan's current India approach, but that he will never do.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

The animosity between India and Pakistan is deeply unfortunate and dangerous. — Mohsin Hamid

A bus ride in Kolkata

GOURI SEN

ONE of the blessings of living in Mumbai as compared to Kolkata is that you can travel on a bus in a dignified manner, without being sandwiched between co-passengers, without having to hang precariously on the edge of the footboard or being constrained to cling onto someone in the continued effort to maintain your balance.

Mumbai follows the queue system, and conductors don't allow more than a few passengers to stand aboard. You can relax in your seat, enjoy the passing scenery, and even venture to take a short nap without the least perturbation.

Alas, Kolkata has no queue system. Hence, one's experiences there tend to be rather unfortunate. For two years, it was my lot to travel every day by bus to Kolkata University during the office-hour rush. I eventually got into the habit of accepting with calm resignation three or four buses whisking past my nose without paying heed to my frantic waving. I could, of course, see that there was no space to accommodate even a foot, leave alone my formidable corpus.

However, when after several attempts, I finally managed to climb onto a bus, I invariably reached a stage where I would be condemned as moonstruck if I even faintly cherished the hope of catching hold of the overhead handle to avoid a catastrophe. Was it not enough that I found myself standing place on the footboard?

But usually, I travelled without any mishap, for one could not travel on a Kolkata bus without being closely surrounded by fellow passengers. If necessary, one could steady oneself by holding on to the tail of another's shirt or by pulling at a tie, disregarding the danger of committing murder by strangling the poor man.

At this critical moment, you would hear the booming voice of the conductor, your rescuer: 'Dada, ladies seat charoon' (Brother, please vacate the ladies' seat). The gentleman, who had so far pretended not to see me by suddenly taking an interest in the beauties of nature, would reluctantly and silently vacate it. But his look would be eloquent enough.

But believe me, even then my ordeal was not over. As I neared my destination, I would cast furtive glances behind. My mind would be focused on how I would wrestle my way out through the human barrier. And then suddenly, I would find myself standing on the concrete road once again. I never cared to analyse how I had accomplished that tremendous feat. The struggle I had undergone, however, would be evident from my dishevelled clothes, the uncoiling of my stylish coiffure and my spectacles hanging on the nose at a rakish angle.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

India stood its ground

Apropos of the editorial 'Russian oil'; India's stance on importing discounted oil from Russia amid Western sanctions has proven to be both economically and diplomatically wise. By resisting Western pressure, India safeguarded its national interests, securing significant savings on its crude import bill, which fell to \$132.40 billion in 2023-24. The recent statements by American officials, including US Ambassador to India Eric Garcetti, indicate a reluctant acknowledgement of New Delhi's independent foreign policy. This pragmatic approach not only strengthened India's economic position but also reinforced its standing as a sovereign nation capable of balancing global relationships. India has sent a clear message to the West — it will not be coerced into compromising its strategic autonomy.

GURDEV SINGH, MOHALI

Playing fast & loose with health

With reference to the editorial 'Decoding food labels', the set of guidelines issued by the ICMR once again turns the spotlight on the poor standards of packaged food products in India. It is a well-known fact that firms use all means of advertising, fair or unfair, to lure people into buying their products. And consumers are often taken in by the tall claims published on the labels. Only a tiny number of people actually bother to read the contents of foodstuffs and study how consuming them could affect their health. It is imperative for people to wake up to the threat and not be misled by labels. The medical body is right to flag the issue. There is a need for the authorities concerned to check the menace of misleading advertising or labelling urgently.

VIRENDER SHARMA, SHIMLA

Vax recipients deserve answers

Refer to the article 'Pandemic response and the dilemma of vaccination'; UK-based pharmaceutical firm AstraZeneca has started the global withdrawal of its Covid-19 vaccine, known as Covishield in India. The move comes months after the drug giant admitted in court that the jab caused thrombosis with thrombocytopenia syndrome in some cases. The government has failed to address the safety concerns. Moreover,

amid the ongoing polls, the photo of PM Narendra Modi has been removed from the vaccine certificates, and it has added to the controversy. It is high time that the Ministry of Health took steps to allay the fears of vaccine recipients.

DEEPAK TAAK, PANCHKULA

A triumph for democracy

Apropos of 'In first LS poll after Art 370 abrogation, Srinagar sees highest vote since 1996'; it is a moment of joy not only for the people of Srinagar or Kashmir but for the whole country. By turning out to exercise their franchise in large numbers, the constituents reversed a trend of low polling figures. The fact that the Srinagar Lok Sabha seat recorded its highest voter percentage since 1996 is inspiring. It does not matter which party or candidate wins the election. It is a triumph for the region and Indian democracy.

KRISHAN KANT SOOD, NANGAL

Safety of journalists covering polls

Refer to the news report 'Ensure journalists' safety: Editors Guild'; the letter to Chief Election Commissioner Rajiv Kumar asking him to ensure the safety of journalists covering the Lok Sabha elections has flagged vital issues. A smooth dissemination of information is a sine qua non of democracy. It is also important for ensuring free and fair elections. The letter brings to light the lax attitude of the authorities. The future of democracy hinges on stringent enforcement of the law of the land. The ECI must take the letter seriously and do the needful.

JAGVINDER SINGH BRAR, PATIALA

Equal pay is the way forward

Apropos of the news report 'Cong will end financial distress of women: Sonia'; political leaders are not leaving any stone unturned to fetch votes in the General Election. Former Congress president Sonia Gandhi says the grand old party has come up with a 'Mahalakshmi' scheme to ensure justice for women. However, such schemes are just stopgap measures that will not benefit women in the long run. The only way that those in power can uplift women is by ensuring gender equality in education and equal pay at work.

ABHILASHA GUPTA, MOHALI

Justice for all requires listening to all



ARUN MAIRA
FORMER MEMBER,
PLANNING COMMISSION

A MID a geopolitical churn around the world, institutions of global governance — such as the UN and the World Trade Organisation — stand paralysed. In democratic countries, elected governments are crippled by partisan politics. Courts are grappling with public concerns they are not equipped for.

The Overton Window, also known as the window of discourse, is a model for understanding how ideas change in societies. Politicians are selective about what policy ideas they can support — they generally only pursue policies that are widely accepted in society as legitimate policy options. These policies lie inside the Overton Window. Other ideas exist outside it, but politicians risk losing popular support if they champion those.

World-systems analysis, an approach to social analysis and change, explains the construction of a world system of power and ideas. Immanuel Wallerstein and his co-authors (Randall Collins et al) explain in 'Does Capitalism Have a

Future?' how a world system of dominant ideas and hegemonic power emerges. They say, "One state gains advantage simultaneously in all three forms of economic activity — production, commerce and finance — and gains a significant military edge emerging from its success in a previous struggle. To cap its overall position, it asserts its cultural dominance and its defining version of the geoculture." The hegemonic power then declines with a redistribution of ideas from the periphery to the core when ideas that were relegated to the periphery come around again.

Concerns about inequality, and private versus public property rights, had been pushed into the background by a capitalist ideology of free markets and borderless trade along with private enterprise and minimum government — the Washington Consensus — which swept across the world from the 1990s. Socialism, with the visible hand of the government rather than the invisible hand of the market, and its emphasis on human welfare, was denigrated. The Overton Window has opened again. Concerns about colonialism and inequity among countries have arisen again; also about unsustainable and inequitable economic growth. Alongside these, anger is increasing against politicians within many global champions of democracy — the US, Europe, and India.



DISPARITY: Unsustainable and inequitable economic growth is a pressing concern. REUTERS

democratic states — elected governments and the courts — check and balance each other. They are expected to find solutions to complex problems and provide justice to all. But they are unable to do so. Reforms in India's agriculture sector and the labour laws that affect crores of citizens were passed by a majoritarian Parliament without a debate. The reforms are stalled. A nine-judge Bench of the Supreme Court is re-examining its 1978 interpretation of constitutional rights to private versus public property. The court has also acknowledged the fundamental right of all citizens to freedom from the adverse impacts of climate change. With this, the court has admitted, jurisprudence is entering new territory.

The liberal ideology that individual rights are superior

The rule of law and speedy justice make countries attractive for financial investors and citizens.

to a community's rights, and that every individual has the right to be whatever she or he chooses to be, has grown along with the European Enlightenment since the 17th century. From Europe, it spread around the world. Its ideas accumulated hegemonic power in academia and social and political discourse. Modern science also developed and spread with the European Enlightenment. In modern science, complex systems are broken into parts. Science advances in specialised silos with experts who know more and more about less and less. None understands the whole.

The scientific establishment and governments are guided by knowledge in bits and bytes. Governments, philanthropists and scientists focus on the improvement of bits of systems, with the belief that if

the bits are improved, the well-being of the whole system will improve, whereas the health of complex living systems requires all their parts to be healthy. "Leave no one behind", a strategy for the well-being of all, is based on sound systems science. If any part of a human body is unhealthy, the body becomes unwell even if all other parts are in robust health. Therefore, the right to life of all nature's parts — its trees and plants, insects and animals, mountains and rivers — is founded on sound systems science.

Written Constitutions record the aspirations and norms of a society. The US, French, and Indian Constitutions begin with lofty ideals of fraternity, equality and liberty. Abraham Lincoln said in 1864: "We all declare for liberty; but in using the same word, we do not mean the same thing." Written Constitutions, which courts must follow, state what the will of the people was at some prior time in history. The will of the people changes as ideas of human rights and liberties evolve. Therefore, good democratic governance requires a robust process for those who govern the people to continuously listen to the people. Because people, not courts, shape the norms — the 'unwritten rules' — of their societies.

The rule of law and speedy justice make countries attractive for financial investors and citizens. Investors and citizens have

different needs and may have different expectations of the law. Democratic governance cannot be only a government of the people (elected by them) or a government for the people (providing them welfare). It must also be by the people. Justice for all requires those who govern to continuously listen to all the people.

On top of the pyramid of democratic governance are constitutionally created institutions — the executive and the judiciary. At the bottom is the open public sphere of civil society, the media and the protests on the streets. The public sphere has become more noisy and more divided due to social media. The institutions on top are unable to understand and solve the complex problems the public sphere demands they must.

Citizens with diverse needs must listen to each other to come to a consensus about the type of society they want to create for themselves. Courts and experts within their narrow specialisations cannot do this for them. Democratic governance requires a strong middle layer to hold a democracy together. The missing middle layer in 21st-century democracy is the processes for democratic dialogue among citizens in which they listen to each other and begin pre-digestion of ideas, and convert their contentions into consensus to help the institutions perform their constitutional responsibilities.

Proactive response can keep forest fires under control



SP VASUDEVA
FORMER PRINCIPAL CHIEF
CONSERVATOR OF FORESTS, HP

WILDFIRES, which are triggered by increased temperatures and reduced humidity during summers, are the most common hazard in forests. They annually impact half of the forest area in the country. Forest fires in Uttarakhand have affected more than 1,400 hectares of green cover since November last year. The loss to the forest economy due to fires is much greater than the damage caused by pests and diseases taken together. Besides, the production of noxious gases, a causative factor for climate change, results in serious health hazards.

Wildfires occur when elements of the fire triangle — fuel, air and ignition — come together in a susceptible area. There is a lack of concern about forest fires among communities, society and governments as the loss of life, livestock and property in them pales in comparison to the destruction caused by other disasters. But if associated intangibles —

such as the impact on soil fertility, biodiversity loss, effects on watershed functions, soil erosion, the resultant landslides, greenhouse gases and the consequent climate change — are taken into consideration, the comparative assessed loss would be much more. All possible measures are therefore required to prevent forest fires and to control them immediately if they do occur.

Tackling forest fires through a ban-and-punish approach has not worked, requiring strategies and action plans to be devised in consultation with the active participation of all stakeholders, especially forest-based communities, Panchayati Raj organisations, village-based forest bodies, etc. Forest fire management can be a success when clear lines of individual and institutional responsibilities are fixed through a well-defined policy. Forest departments in states and UTs have to be held accountable for the management of forest fires, with the Union Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change addressing the issue at the Central level. The responsibility of communities and organisations in the prevention and control of forest fires also needs to be fixed.

This would require a shift from the Forest Fire Prevention and Management Framework being followed to the Disaster Management Continuum, as contained in



BACK-UP: Fire-fighters and managers should be provided with modern tools, equipment and gear. PTI

the National Policy on Disaster Management (2009), for better results. The former contains just four stages — prevention, detection, suppression and post-fire management — while the latter lists detailed steps of prevention, early warning, mitigation, risk reduction and preparation to ensure that fires do not occur and to initiate an effective response and carry out rescue, relief, evacuation and rehabilitation operations if they do start.

Under the Disaster Management Continuum, preventive measures such as controlling the burning of the forest floor, maintaining fire lines and cleaning forests need to be initiated before the onset of the fire season. As about 80 per cent forest fires have an anthropogenic origin, local forest-based communities and people in general must be

Forest fires have reached alarming proportions, causing injuries and deaths, and damage to infrastructure and private properties.

made aware of the importance of keeping an ignition source away; it is the best method of preventing forest fires.

Early warning on forest fires helps put effective preventive and preparatory measures in place. 'Forest fire alerts', a satellite-based early warning system developed by the Forest Survey of India (FSI), are communicated through the Internet and mobile phones to officers and field staff of the forest departments and community leaders concerned for necessary action. Further, the 'pre-fire alerts' developed by the FSI — that are based on high temperature and low humidity — can give a warning about a fire a month in advance. These need to be fully operationalised; the measures could be more effective in preventing forest fires.

The forest fire triangle can be

broken through the elimination of one of the sources, most probably by removing combustible material lying in a forest before the fire season, to mitigate the risk of wildfires. The utilisation of such inflammable material for the livelihood generation of local people by manufacturing various commercial products is an ideal option for reducing and mitigating fire risks. Pine needles, the source of fires in Himalayan pine forests, are being utilised through grassroots people's organisations in the hill states of Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand for making marketable products.

Preparations need to begin before the fire season, with preventive and mitigative measures and an early warning system in place. Information made available through pre-fire alerts should be used to initiate preparatory action in the reported fire-prone areas. Local youths with indigenous expertise appointed as fire watchers and forest field staff need to be made ready. Fire-fighters and managers should be provided with modern fire-extinguishing tools, equipment and gear, including fire-resistant clothes, boots, helmets and gloves (which are missing at present) to enable them to tackle wildfires effectively.

If a forest fire occurs despite all these measures, an effective response mechanism has to be in place to immediately extin-

guish it. Rapid response teams equipped with vehicles with water and other material in each forest division/range must be made ever-ready to control a blaze. National and state disaster forces should be requisitioned only when the situation goes out of control.

Forest fires have reached alarming proportions, causing human injuries and deaths, and damage to infrastructure and private properties. This calls for rescue, relief, evacuation, rehabilitation and reconstruction. Those affected by such disasters must be provided with assistance by the disaster management/forest authorities. A physical assessment of the affected area must be replaced with the comprehensive Indian Forest Fire Response and Assessment System to obtain complete information and ensure uniformity. Capacity-building of the stakeholders involved with all aspects of these parameters is an important part of this process, which would improve the forest fire management system.

A shift from the old forest fire prevention and management system to the Disaster Management Continuum would facilitate better strategic management of wildfires. Gaps in the management in each forest division and state have to be flagged every year as a policy decision to devise a better strategy for forest fire management and control.

QUICK CROSSWORD

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ACROSS

1 Immediately upon looking (2,1,6)

8 Subdue (5)

9 Cover completely (7)

10 Obvious (6)

11 Commercial trustworthiness (6)

12 Very stupid person (8)

15 Living in particular place (8)

18 Dependable (6)

20 Link together (6)

21 Bent (7)

22 Scoundrel (5)

23 Push one's luck unduly (5,4)

DOWN

2 Purport (5)

3 Covetous (6)

4 Unsuccessful (8)

5 Regard as comparable (6)

6 Fault (7)

7 To the full extent (3,3,3)

11 King, queen or jack (5,4)

13 Flatter excessively (6,2)

14 Soothe (7)

16 Sweet-sounding (6)

17 Postpone (3,3)

19 Negotiate terms (5)

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

ACROSS: 1 Set sail, 4 Minus, 7 Rock, 8 Headache, 10 With reason, 12 Cerise, 13 Freely, 15 On bad terms, 18 Open door, 19 Deal, 20 Surly, 21 Foresee.

DOWN: 1 Strew, 2 Taciturn, 3 Leeway, 4 Mediocrity, 5 Nick, 6 Specify, 9 Present-day, 11 Nearness, 12 Callous, 14 Far-off, 16 Solve, 17 Pear.

SU DO KU

5 1 4 7

2 4 5 9 1

7 6

9 8 1

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8 5 9 5 7 2

3 8

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

9 6 4 3 1 5 2 7 8

5 7 8 4 9 2 3 1 6

2 1 3 6 7 8 9 4 5

6 8 1 9 2 7 4 5 3

4 2 7 1 5 3 6 8 9

3 5 9 8 4 6 1 2 7

1 9 6 7 8 4 5 3 2

7 3 5 2 6 1 8 9 4

8 4 2 5 3 9 7 6 1

CALENDAR

MAY 15TH 2024, WEDNESDAY

■ Shaka Samvat 1946

■ Vaishakh Shaka 25

■ Jyeshtha Parvishite 2

■ Hijari 1445

■ Shukla Paksha Tithi 8,

■ Vriddha Yoga up to 7.41 am

■ Aashle Nakshatra up to 3.25 pm

■ Moon enters Leo sign 3.25 pm

■ Shridugashtmi

FORECAST

SUNSET: 19:09 HRS

SUNRISE: 05:28 HRS

WEDNESDAY THURSDAY

CITY MAX MIN

Chandigarh 41 23

New Delhi 42 25

Amritsar 40 25

Bathinda 42 23

Jalandhar 41 23

Ludhiana 41 24

Bhiani 43 28

Hisar 42 24

Sirsa 43 27

Dharamsala 33 20

Manali 27 06

Shimla 28 17

Srinagar 26 10

Jammu 38 21

Kargil 20 08

Leh 19 06

Dehradun 38 23

Mussoorie 25 16

TEMPERATURE °C



SACHIN PILOT
Congress leader

“The Ram temple was constructed with the order of Supreme Court. We have always welcomed it but to seek votes in the name of religion is unbecoming of anybody



WANG WENBIN
Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson

The US is, under the banner of overcapacity, suppressing advanced industries of other countries, carrying out protectionism with the excuse of free competition... It's a naked act of bullying



MAMATA BANERJEE
West Bengal Chief Minister

The only guarantee is that Modi is not returning to power. I.N.D.I.A bloc will secure between 295 and 315 seats while the BJP will be restricted to a maximum of 200

Boost to Palestinian cause

The overwhelming support at the United Nations for Palestine to become a full member of the world body is a heartening development in the long fight for justice to the troubled region. India too has joined an overwhelming number of nations in passing a resolution at the UN General Assembly (UNGA) in support of the Palestinian bid to become a full member — a move that would effectively recognise a Palestinian state after the United States vetoed it at the UN Security Council last month. The resolution recommended that the Security Council “reconsider” the matter “favourably”. The 193-member UN Assembly adopted a resolution with 143 votes in favour and nine against — including America and Israel — while 25 countries abstained. The move signalled Israel's growing global isolation amid alarm over the war in Gaza and the resultant humanitarian crisis. The development means that new privileges will be granted to the Palestinian Authority in its current capacity as a non-member observer state. The Palestinian state will no longer be on the fringes. It will be seated with other member states in alphabetical order and can co-sponsor proposals and amendments. Palestinian representatives can also be elected as officers in the plenary and main committees of the UNGA. However, they will not have voting rights. This move is of immense symbolic value, but it does not alleviate the prolonged suffering of the Palestinian people.

Though the support for Palestine to become a full member of the UN is heartening, it does not alleviate their suffering

The grant of full membership to Palestine should take place along with a ceasefire, a big increase in humanitarian aid, and the safe return of Israeli hostages. The international community, especially the Global South, cannot afford the blowback that is emerging from the recurring bouts of conflict in the region. With its university campuses in turmoil, America should see which way the wind is blowing domestically as well. The Palestinian push for full UN membership comes nearly seven months into the war between Israel and Palestinian militants Hamas in the Gaza Strip, and as Israel is expanding settlements in the occupied West Bank, which the UN considers to be illegal. On its part, India has steadfastly stuck to its stand in favour of a two-state solution in the Israel-Palestine conflict. While New Delhi has condemned any terrorist attack, including the October 7 attack by Hamas, it has also called for a homeland for Palestinians. Irrespective of the nature of political dispensation at the Centre, India has always supported a negotiated two-state solution towards the establishment of a sovereign, independent and viable state of Palestine within secure and recognised borders, living side by side in peace with Israel. The situation in the Palestinian territories continues to be grim with over 34,000 people being killed since Israel launched its retaliatory military operation in response to the Hamas attack.

Legacy of minimalist leaders

Minimalistic leadership creates a sense of belonging, leading to increased motivation and shared commitment to goals



VIVECK VERMA

Leaders tend to occupy a dominant space in our public discourses, whether or not they actively aim for it. Owing to their centrality in their respective domains, this predominance seems inevitable. Yet, it is important to note that this significance is accorded by others and not assumed by the leaders themselves.

In fact, heedless self-centering, self-promoting and propagandist leaders end up unleashing a counterproductive maximalism, where the spirit to lead is overwhelmed by the greed of personal gain and clout. This, needless to say, makes for ineffective and shallow leadership which may cause the organisation and its networks to be negatively impacted and disintegrate in the long run. We need to fashion an alternative to maximalist self-gratifying leadership models. A more inclusive and collaborative approach often fosters creativity, diversity of thought and better decision-making, and this can be actualised in paradigms of minimalist leadership where the leaders do not centre themselves. Let us explore this in detail.

Leadership Qualities

It is conceptually significant to note that not all self-promoting leaders are inherently greedy or necessarily bad. Leadership qualities vary based on the context and it is essential to evaluate individuals based on their actions, values and impact rather than a single trait. The problem arises when maximalist leaders tend to be rigid or authoritative, potentially stifling innovation and discouraging open communication. Such leadership, characterised by an individual exerting strong control, making decisions without much input and putting oneself at the centre for applause can lead to a



lack of creativity, since when leaders exclusively dictate, they may miss out on valuable insights and ideas from team members.

Imagine an office where the boss does all the talking and practices stringent control over employees, or a classroom where the teacher makes concepts difficult to intimidate students and self-pedestalise as an intellectual authority figure. The welfare of the employees and the students in these circumstances obviously becomes peripheral in such circumstances and their potential remains unharnessed.

Minimalistic Leadership

Embracing alternative leadership styles, therefore, can promote adaptability, employee engagement and a healthier work environment. To this end, minimalist leadership without self-centering is crucial for fostering a positive and productive work culture. When leaders are present only for necessary things and do not micro-manage and when prioritise the needs and well-being of their team over personal interests, it cultivates a culture of trust, collaboration and innovation. Minimalistic leadership, characterised by simplicity, clarity and a focus on essentials, can be remarkably brilliant in its effectiveness. This leadership style prioritises streamlined processes, clear communication and a strategic approach, fostering a work environment that thrives on efficiency, adaptability and innovation.

Within the folds of this capacious leadership approach, leaders can actively listen to their team members, valuing their multiple viewpoints, rather than imposing a singular order. This inclusivity not only makes employees feel heard and respected but also encourages diverse ideas and creativity. By putting the team first, leaders

create a sense of belonging, leading to increased motivation and a shared commitment to organisational goals.

Additionally, such leaders demonstrate empathy and understanding, recognising the individual strengths and challenges of team members. This compassionate approach builds strong relationships and fosters a supportive environment where employees feel comfortable seeking guidance and expressing their concerns. Consequently, this open communication promotes problem-solving and ensures that issues are addressed promptly, preventing them from escalating.

In terms of organisational performance, leaders who follow this approach often inspire loyalty and commitment from their team. After all, employees are more likely to go the extra mile when they feel supported and valued, leading to enhanced productivity and efficiency. This dedication can also translate into boosted customer satisfaction, as motivated teams are more likely to deliver exceptional service.

Furthermore, this kind of leadership contributes to long-term organisational success. Leaders who prioritise the collective goals of the team over personal recognition or short-term gains are more likely to make strategic decisions that benefit the organisation in the long run. This forward-thinking approach is essential for navigating com-

Heedless self-centering, propagandist leaders unleash counterproductive maximalism, where the spirit to lead is overwhelmed by the greed of personal gain and clout

plex business landscapes and ensuring sustained growth.

Clear Framework

Minimalistic leadership eliminates unnecessary complexities by removing personal egos from professional equations and working for swift resolution of problems. By stripping away redundant procedures and focusing on essential tasks, such focused leaders can create a straightforward and easily understandable framework. This clarity can help team members stay focused on key objectives, reducing confusion and enhancing overall productivity.

Since communication under this approach is not about dominating or subduing others or playing with their egos, it can distil complex messages into clear and concise information. This simplicity can potentially ensure that everyone in the team understands the goals and expectations, fostering a shared vision. This streamlined communication minimises the risk of misunderstandings and encourages a cohesive work environment.

Similarly, in terms of decision-making, minimalist leaders prioritise what truly matters over what matters to them. They avoid getting bogged down by unnecessary details and focus on the critical factors that impact the success of the organisation. This strategic decision-making approach enables quick and effective responses to challenges, contributing to the organisation's agility and resilience.

Finally, minimalist leadership is inherently adaptable. By avoiding unnecessary rules and structures or modes of control, leaders can create a flexible environment where the team can respond promptly to changing circumstances. This adaptability is crucial in today's dynamic business landscape, allowing organisations to navigate uncertainties with ease.

In conclusion, minimalist leadership without self-centering is a cornerstone of a thriving and resilient organisation. Its efficacy lies in its simplicity, clarity and strategic focus since it creates an environment that is efficient, adaptable and conducive to creativity, innovation and desire to propel collective missions forward.

The legacy of minimalist leaders, therefore, can be marked by lasting impact and result in organisational resilience, creating public importance for them as an honour extended by the people whose lives they have positively impacted. This legacy is evident in organisations that continue to thrive, adapt and remain relevant even after the leader has moved on. So, go ahead and script a new chapter in being a leader for this is the era of an empowered and empowering minimalism!

(The author is Founder & CEO, Upsurge Global, Advisor & Adjunct Professor, ETimes College, and Strategic Advisor and Venture Partner, SilverNeedle Ventures)

Letters to the Editor

Shocking

It is heartrending to know the plight of the people crushed under a huge billboard that collapsed due to the strong duststorm that struck Ghatkopar in Mumbai. This incident is certainly the aftermath of the heedless and carefree attitudes of officials. The authorities should feel like kicking themselves for not restricting the installation of illegal hoarding in the crowded city. The State government should take stringent action against the installation of illegal hoardings in the busy thoroughfares.

PRABHAKARAN VALLATH, Kozhikode

Grim situation

The humanitarian situation in Gaza has reached a critical point, with recent reports indicating an alarming risk of famine. UN Secretary-General António Guterres has described the situation as an “entirely man-made disaster.” He has stressed the importance of unfettered access to humanitarian goods throughout Gaza. The international community faces a moral imperative to respond swiftly and decisively. The scale of suffering and the risk of famine demand urgent action to alleviate the plight of Gazans. Complete and unfettered access to humanitarian goods is essential to ensure that critical aid reaches those most in need.

AMARJEET KUMAR, Hazaribagh

Cartoon Today



India in the hotspot

Financial Times

Trading democracy... is a false choice

Are Indian voters ignoring the growing authoritarianism of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government because of the economic prosperity it has brought? A close look at the data suggests a different story.

Dhaka Tribune

MDH faced many US rejections

Popular Indian spice brand MDH has since 2021 seen an average of 14.5% of its US shipments rejected due to the presence of bacteria, a Reuters analysis of US regulatory data found. Hong Kong suspended sales last month.

The Diplomat

Crisis of parliamentary democracy

A remarkable fact about Indian politics since independence is that no party, or pre-poll coalition, has ever won a majority of the nationwide vote in the 17 national elections between 1951-52 and 2019.

The Statesman

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Srinagar's way

In the first election in the Kashmir Valley since abolition of Article 370, some 36 per cent ~ albeit much lower than the national turnout ~ of Srinagar constituency's voters cast their votes on Monday, a stark contrast to the just over 14 per cent voter turnout in 2019. This is a display of heightened democratic engagement, defying the shadows of apathy and fear that have clouded past elections. This increase in voter turnout, while commendable, is more than just a numerical feat. It is a testament to the evolving aspirations of a people long caught in the crossfire of political turmoil. For years, Kashmir's electoral landscape has been marred by low participation, fuelled by a potent mix of violence, boycott calls, and disillusionment with the status quo. However, the spike in voter numbers signals a shifting paradigm ~ one where voices once silenced by strife are finding resonance in the corridors of power. The decision by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party to abstain from contesting in Kashmir speaks volumes about the complexities of the region's political tapestry. At the heart of this electoral resurgence lies a multiplicity of narratives, each weaving a tapestry of grievances, hopes, and dreams. Beyond the rhetoric of autonomy and integration lies a deeper yearning for socio-economic justice. As voters flocked to the polling booths, they carried with them the weight of unemployment, soaring prices, and an uncertain future. The ballot becomes not just a tool for political expression, but a lifeline for a populace grappling with the harsh realities of daily existence.

Amidst this electoral engagement, it is imperative to recognise the multifaceted nature of Kashmir's challenges. The decision to revoke Article 370 in 2019, followed by a stringent lockdown and the detention of opposition leaders, cast a long shadow over the democratic process. While some view these measures as necessary steps towards restoring "normalcy," others see them as a betrayal of Kashmir's aspirations for semi-autonomy. However, amid the cacophony of competing narratives, one thing remains clear: the need for dialogue and reconciliation. Now, more than ever, is the time for inclusive governance and a reimagining of democracy that transcends ideologies. As the dust settles on yet another chapter in Kashmir's tumultuous history, one thing becomes clear: the path to peace and prosperity is fraught with challenges, but these are not insurmountable. By embracing the diversity of voices that make up the fabric of Kashmiri society, we can pave the way for a future where democracy is not just a fleeting promise, but a lived reality for generations to come. In the shadow of the Himalayas, a new dawn beckons ~ a dawn fuelled by the collective aspirations of a people determined to chart their own destiny, one ballot at a time. One hopes that Srinagar will show the path to voters in the remaining two Lok Sabha constituencies in Kashmir Valley that vote in subsequent phases of the election.

Creating Safeguards

In recent discussions between India and the United States, the topic of alleged assassination plots against separatist activists has emerged as a point of contention. While India denies any involvement of state actors, the gravity of these allegations cannot be overlooked. However, in navigating this delicate situation, it is imperative to tread carefully to avoid straining bilateral relations. The backdrop against which these allegations unfold is the longstanding issue of separatism, with some factions still advocating for Khalistan. While the movement has largely died within India, its echoes persist on foreign soil, particularly in the United States and Canada. The recent allegations of assassination plots against separatists, allegedly linked to Indian state actors, highlight the complexity of addressing such transnational challenges. In light of these developments, there is pressing need for constructive dialogue and proactive measures to prevent the escalation of tensions between India and its international partners. One avenue for addressing these concerns is through the establishment of legally enforceable bilateral treaties between India, the United States, and Canada. Such treaties could encompass provisions that prohibit the harbouring or support of separatist activities aimed at destabilising India's territorial integrity. Additionally, they could outline mechanisms for cooperation in investigating and prosecuting individuals involved in such activities under the jurisdiction of the respective countries' legal systems. By formalising these commitments through bilateral agreements, India, the United States and Canada can demonstrate their collective resolve to uphold the principles of sovereignty, security, and mutual respect. Moreover, such treaties would serve as a safeguard against allegations targeting India resurfacing. These strain diplomatic relations and undermine trust between nations. Furthermore, the establishment of robust diplomatic channels for communication and coordination would facilitate the swift resolution of any emerging issues. Through sustained dialogue and cooperation, India and its international partners can address shared concerns while fostering a climate of trust and mutual understanding. Amid the complexities of international relations, it is essential to recognise the shared commitment to upholding sovereignty and territorial integrity. As India navigates its relationship with North American countries, it must remain steadfast in its adherence to the rule of law and respect for sovereignty while these countries must be treaty bound to respect India's territorial integrity. By fostering a climate of transparency and cooperation, all three countries can work together to address the underlying problem of separatist movements and promote dialogue and reconciliation between them. This commitment to constructive engagement is crucial in charting a path forward. The recent allegations surrounding assassination plots against separatists underscore the need for proactive measures to prevent the escalation of tensions and uphold the principles of justice and accountability. By pursuing legally enforceable instruments, India, the United States, and Canada can mitigate the risk of future incidents and strengthen their cooperation in addressing transnational challenges. Through constructive dialogue and collaboration, they can chart a path towards a more stable and secure future for all.

The Middle Path ~ I

Without the aid of the sword, Buddhism carried its message of peace and goodwill to barbarous hordes of the most populous parts of Asia and civilized them. 'How a religion which taught,' says Max Muller, 'the annihilation of all existence, of all individuality and personality as the highest object of all endeavors, could have laid hold of the minds of millions of human beings...is a riddle which no one has been able to solve.' But the riddle is by no means insolvable if due regard is paid to the spirit of tolerance that characterizes the religion of the Blessed Teacher

Only once in his life, said Rabindranath Tagore, did he feel like prostrating himself before an image, and that was when he saw the Buddha at Gaya. Through the mighty pen of Tagore, his homage to the Buddha, the living image of Indian culture in Java, Bali, Siam, Burma, Japan, China and other places abroad, has been eternal undimmed by the lapse of time.

The festival of Buddha Purnima falls on the full moon day of the fourth lunar month, in the month of Vaishakha (May). Though it is celebrated mainly as the birth anniversary of Gautama Buddha, the founder of Buddhism, it is on this particular day that he attained Bodhi (Enlightenment) on the banks of the river Niranjana, Bodh Gaya, Bihar, under a pipal tree which has since been called the Bodhi Tree.

He was neither in favour of extreme austerity in religion nor extreme enjoyment of worldly life. His was a Middle Path which could be followed by householders. On the eve of his death, Buddha in his last exhortation to his disciples pointed out that decay was inherent in things and one has to strive for salvation with diligence. Working for salvation requires observance of moralities such as non-violence, continence, non-lying, non-stealing and abandonment of luxury, hankering after wealth, animal sacrifice and similar other practices.

Practicing what he preached, he worked incessantly for 45 long years for the good and happiness of all to his last moment. The most notable characteristic of the Buddha was his absolute purity and perfect holiness. He was so pure and so holy that he should be called the 'Holiest of Holies'. He was the perfect model of all the virtues he preached.

Among religions, Buddhism is the only one that breathes a spirit of unbounded generosity and compassion for all beings. It has always shrunk from inflicting pain, even in self-defence.

Not only did it teach that knowledge without benevolence is barren, but it carried out this teaching so consistently in practice as even to endanger its own existence.

It has always deprecated war between nation and nation. It has constantly discouraged capital punishment. It sought everywhere to abolish bloody sacrifices.

Without the aid of the sword, Buddhism carried its message of peace and goodwill to barbarous hordes of the most populous parts of Asia and civilized them. "How a religion which taught," says Max Muller, "the annihilation of all existence, of all individuality and personality as the highest object of all endeavors, could have laid hold of the minds of millions of human beings... is a riddle which no one has been able to



solve".

But the riddle is by no means insolvable if due regard is paid to the spirit of tolerance that characterizes the religion of the Blessed Teacher.

Of Buddhism alone can it be affirmed that it is free from all fanaticism. Its aim being to produce in every man a thorough internal transformation by self-culture and self-conquest, how can it have recourse to might or money or even persuasion for effecting conversion? The Tathagata has only shown the way to salvation, and it is left to each individual to decide for himself if he would follow it.

Accordingly, the Buddhist kings of the world have been the most tolerant and benign. Emperor Asoka, though an ardent Buddhist himself, showered his gift on the Brahmins, the Jains as well as the Buddhists. The Buddhist kings of Ceylon in the Middle Ages were kind and considerate to the followers of the other faiths that prevailed then in their country. The Pala kings of Bengal, who were zealous Buddhists, bestowed gifts also upon the Brahmins.

A tangible way in which a religion manifests its actual influence upon civilization is art. Wherever Buddhism has prevailed, artistic pagodas, vast viharas and beautiful stupas have come into existence.

The finest buildings in Japan are the Buddhist temples. The beauty and charm of the frescoes of Ajanta caves serve as monumental proof of the wonderful inspiration which the religion of the Tathagata imparted to art.

Not only for the arts, such as architecture and sculpture, painting and engraving, is India indebted to Buddhism, but also for science and culture in general. The best era of Indian med-

icine was contemporary with the ascendancy of Buddhism.

The ancient Brahmins might have derived the rudiments of anatomy from the dissection of animals in sacrifices. But the true school of Indian medicine rose in public hospitals established by Asoka and other Buddhist kings in many cities.

In the spirit of a true Buddhist, Nagarjuna (the fourteenth patriarch) popularized the science of Ayurveda by teaching it without reserve to all classes

without distinction of caste.

All sciences and arts were studied in the chief centres of Buddhist civilization, such as the great Buddhist university of Nalanda.

According to the great orientalist Theodore Benfey, the very bloom of the intellectual life of India, whether it found expression in Buddhist or Brahminical works, proceeded substantially from the Dharma, and it was contemporaneous with the period in which Buddhism flourished.

When Buddhism took root in China, it started a new development and gave a great impetus to Confucianism. Wherever Buddhism entered the life of a people, it always gave them refinement and embellishment.

In his book '*Things Japanese*' Prof. Basil Hall Chamberlain says "All education was for centuries in Buddhist hands, as was the care of the poor and sick. Buddhism introduced art, introduced medicine, moulded the folklore of the country, created the dramatic poetry, deeply influenced politics and every sphere of social and intellectual activity. In a word, Buddhism was the teacher under whose instruction the Japanese nation grew up".

Buddha's will, wisdom, compassion, service, renunciation, perfect purity, exemplary



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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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America must introspect

SIR, Please refer to today's report "US assembly approves resolution granting Palestine new rights and reviving its UN membership bid".

The UN General Assembly (UNGA) convened in New York on Friday for an emergency special session on the Gaza crisis and, by a large majority, passed a resolution upgrading Palestine's rights as an Observer State, without offering it full membership.

The overwhelming global support for Palestine was accompanied by a request to the UN Security Council (UNSC) to favourably consider its request for full statehood.

With this resolution, Palestine will enjoy more rights at the UN, though it will not get the right to vote or stand for elections to UN organs.

However, the grant of full membership to Palestine should take place along with a ceasefire.

The 25 nations that abstained and the nine, led by the US,

that said 'no' failed to undermine the support extended by 143 nations.

The world, especially the Global South, cannot afford the blowback that is emerging from the recurring bouts of conflict in the region.

Last month, the only opposition to a UNSC resolution on statehood for Palestine came from the US. With its university campuses in turmoil, America should see which way the wind is blowing domestically as well.

Yours, etc., Khokan Das, Kolkata, 13 May.

OUTRAGEOUS

SIR, Apropos the news report "If TMC challenges CAA, I'll take care of them" (May 14), I would like to ask if BJP's national executive member Mithun Chkraborty considers himself as the guardian of Kolkata?

What kind of threat does Chkraborty want to contemplate

in case the people challenge the CAA? Will his party let loose a reign of terror to give effect to the Act?

The statement made by Chkraborty is outrageous and the candidate for whom he has been so vocal should be cautioned by the EC.

Yours, etc., Arun Gupta, Kolkata, 14 May.

RETURN OF POK

SIR, This refers to your report "POK will become part of India, says Jaishankar", published today.

External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar has made a big statement on Pakistan-occupied Kashmir. Jaishankar said that every political party in the country is "committed to ensuring that PoK (Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir), which is a part of India, returns to India."

He stated that "the PoK issue has come to the front of people's thinking" after revocation of Article 370 in Jammu and Kashmir, which was considered a diffi-

BENGAL FAMINE

SIR, The Statesman must be thanked for publishing the article, "A tweet and fleeting thoughts of past horrors" (8th Day) on date.

The writer has presented a detailed and meticulously crafted analysis of the horrific Bengal famine of 1943. She has provided a remarkable insight into the mind of the then editor of The Statesman, Ian Stephens and the dilemma that he was going through.

The writer has also mentioned about the role played by Winston Churchill, who had engineered the famine.

What makes this piece even more important is showcasing the "blood-chilling" photographs that were published in the 22 August 1943 edition of The Statesman that shook the conscience of the world.

Yours, etc., Anupam Neogi, Kolkata, 12 May.

cult decision.

There is no doubt that the Indian Army is more advanced and better equipped than the Pakistani Army but we cannot ignore the fact that Pakistan is a nuclear state and any attempt to take back POK through force can result in a full-fledged nuclear war in the Indian sub-continent.

It is obvious that no one will want to see two nuclear powers going to war.

In fact, under such a situation, China will take the strategic advantage and will completely support Pakistan to destabilise India.

Yours, etc., Deba Prasad Bhattacharya, Kolkata, May 14.

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Bogged down by inflation

The benchmark equities index plunged below the 6,600 level last Thursday as dismayed investors dumped stocks on news that the Philippine economy expanded by a lower-than-expected 5.7 percent in the first quarter.

Economists and market analysts had expected the growth in Philippine economic output to accelerate to 5.9 percent in the three months to March, buoyed by a burst in infrastructure spending by both the government and the private sector.

Thus when the growth in gross domestic product (GDP) clocked in at just 5.7 percent, slower than the 6.4-percent expansion in the same period last year and falling short of the government target of 6-7 percent, there was a collective groan of disappointment.

More worrying is the growing sense of foreboding that persistently high inflation and the policy rate of the Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas staying at 6.5 percent are causing growth engines to sputter, raising doubts that the full-year projection of a 6 to 7 ~ percent growth ~ already a downgrade from the original target of 6.5-7.5 percent ~ will be achieved. The biggest source of worry is the drag on consumption, which powers as much as 75 percent of the Philippine economy.

National statistician Dennis Mapa noted that private consumption expanded by just 4.6 percent in the first quarter, a slowdown from the 6.4 percent posted in the first three months last year and also the slowest quarterly

PHILIPPINE DAILY
INQUIRER

expansion since the 2.6 percent growth in the third quarter of 2010, not including the extraordinary contraction during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Inflation was the main culprit, with the rise in the prices of basic goods and services accelerating for the third straight month in April to 3.8 percent, a tad faster than the previous month's 3.7 percent.

Clearly, high prices stoked by the impact of the El Niño climate phenomenon and geopolitical tensions that contributed to elevated oil prices in the world market have caused Filipinos to tighten their belts and hold back on purchases to conserve their resources, ultimately leading to economic growth falling short of expectations.

Key rates staying higher for longer at 6.5 percent have also depressed investors' mood, prompting a number of them to pause or postpone aggressive expansion until rates come down from their 17-year highs.

Secretary Arsenio Balisacan of the National Economic and Development Authority acknowledged as much, saying that the moderated growth in local demand reflected "the less favorable business sentiment."

On the contrary, Balisacan is waxing optimistic, underscoring that the 5.7-percent growth in the first quarter despite considerable headwinds kept the Philippines' position "as a leading force among Asia's emerging economies."

The Philippines' first quarter GDP growth was the same as Vietnam's and surpassed that of other major economies such as China at 5.3 percent, Indonesia at 5.1 percent, and Malaysia at 3.9 percent, although slower than India's projected growth rate of 6.2 percent.

Indeed, despite "several shocks" since the start of the year, from El Niño to geopolitical tensions and elevated borrowing costs and prices of basic goods, the Philippine economy has managed to grow at a more than decent pace.



In deep crisis, our world is faltering

BHARAT DOGRA

Nearly 300 million people worldwide need urgent humanitarian help this year but all indications are that a majority of them may not be able to get it, or else may get only a small part of what is needed.

Gaza provides the most glaring example of rapid escalation of the humanitarian crisis within just a few days due to entirely avoidable causes. Here it was not a question so much of the international community's failure to send adequate help as of artificial barriers being created for the people who need this help to access it. Truckloads of food and other provisions were simply held up at the borders for days while a large number of people including children were on the verge of starvation. As the hunger and medical crisis escalated sharply, the most important UN agency taking care of people in urgent need of help faced sudden budget cuts.

Sudan is another country where the humanitarian crisis has worsened very quickly during the last year, with thousands dying and nearly 8 million people getting displaced, sometimes being forced to take refuge in neighboring countries which already have humanitarian crises of their own. All this largely because two generals could not get along and, along with their forces and weapon supplies, amassed by plundering the resources of the country, plunged the country into another civil war.

In 2023 the world spent \$2400 billion on military expenditure. During the same year the UN's Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) tried to raise \$57 billion for people facing humanitarian crises all over the world. This was just about 2.4 per cent of the world's military budget. However, it could actually raise only about \$ 20 billion. This amount-



ed to just 0.8 per cent of the military expenditure of the world.

This was less than one third of what a single country (the USA) provided by way of military assistance. This was only 2.2 per cent of the overall military budget of the USA of around \$900 billion.

The funding shortfall of almost two-thirds was the biggest shortfall that OCHA has ever experienced, at a time when billionaires are adding more to their wealth than ever before.

David Beasley, Chief of the World Food Program, stated in September 2021 that while at the height of Covid, billionaires were adding \$5.2 billion per day to their wealth, 24,000 people were dying due to hunger every day.

According to UN data, 9 million people die in a year from hunger, under-nutrition and related causes (2.5 million of them in the age group 0-5).

While this is a figure often quoted to describe the extremely tragic implications of hunger in any typical year in recent times, OCHA, WFP, FAO and related UN agencies have not provided the data on deaths tak-

ing place in the areas most affected by hunger and humanitarian crisis. While they provide data on people who are facing emergency situations in various areas in any given year, next year they generally do not tell us how many people perished there. Their reports merely tell us how many will face crisis and emergency situation in the next year for which resources have to be raised.

If the number of deaths is more closely monitored in the worst-affected regions, this could help to alert the world to its responsibilities regarding the areas of humanitarian crisis in more effective ways. However, it is well known that much more needs to be done to take more help to the people of the worst-affected areas in countries like Sudan, South Sudan, Somalia, Ethiopia, Angola, Democratic Republic of Congo, Chad, Niger, Nigeria, Yemen, Syria, Palestine region, Afghanistan, Myanmar, Haiti and some others.

The UN Under-Secretary General for Humanitarian Assistance Martin Griffiths has stated very sadly, "Throughout the year 2023 humani-

tarian agencies had to make increasingly painful decisions, including cutting life-saving food, water and health programming."

An OCHA document says that the big shortfall of funds last year led to inability to reach people in the most desperate situations—

- In Afghanistan 10 million people lost access to food assistance between May and November 2023;
- In Myanmar, more than half a million people were left in desperate living conditions;
- In Yemen more than 80 per cent targeted for assistance could not get proper water and sanitation;
- In Nigeria only 2 per cent of the women expecting sexual and reproductive services and gender-based violence protection received it.

Here it may be mentioned that even the \$ 57 billion projection of the budget needed for 2023 by OCHA was meant to cover only a part of the people actually needing humanitarian assistance. The actual funds received were less than the funds received in the previous year (something that is very rare), despite the big crisis situations appearing and then deteriorating rapidly in places like Gaza and Sudan. Hence OCHA and its partners could reach only 38 per cent of those who had been targeted to receive urgently needed help.

While expressing his serious concern at this situation, Griffiths also quoted the World Food Program (WFP) as stating that a one per cent cut can put 400,000 more people in serious food insecurity.

Discouraged by this situation, OCHA with its 1,900 partner organizations has asked for only \$46 billion for the year 2024, compared to its call for \$57 billion in the previous year.

This is despite the fact that the

number of people needing humanitarian assistance has increased this year to 300 million. OCHA has cut down its ambitions and it is now trying to provide humanitarian assistance to only 180 million people (in 72 countries) out of these 300 million. Last year it was able to provide life-saving assistance to 128 million people, according to its own data.

Isn't it a very serious and tragic situation that the most important humanitarian assistance organization has to cut down even its objectives and targets (from already lower than needed levels) at a time when the number of people affected by humanitarian crises have increased significantly.

The world appears to have enough for increasing military and weapon budgets, or for overloading the treasures of billionaires, but not for meeting the most urgent needs of those in the greatest distress. What makes this situation even more unjust is that those worst affected by the humanitarian crisis are also the victims of several long-term injustices and are caught up in terrible circumstances which appear more and more to be beyond their control. Women appear to be suffering particularly severely although they have often made significant contributions to peace and normalcy efforts.

Clearly many more efforts need to be made at several levels in non-partisan ways to take more help to areas of humanitarian crisis, including substantially improving the funds position of OCHA and its partner organizations. At the same time there is an equally important urgency to improve non-partisan efforts to bring peace and stability to many of these areas devastated by civil strife and war.

(The writer is Honorary Convener, Campaign to Save Earth Now. His recent books include Protecting Earth for Children, Planet in Peril and A Day in 2071.)

OCCASIONAL NOTE

THE departure from India of Sir Montagu de Pomeroy Webb deprives Karachi of its leading light and the business and political world of India of a virile and interesting personality. Sir Montagu Webb came to India thirty-four years ago, twenty-six of which he has spent in Karachi, in the well known firm of Forbes, Campbell and Company. He has watched over every interest of Sind and Karachi with remarkable vigilance and success, and has identified himself so whole-heartedly with the city of his adoption that for a long time to come it will be difficult to think of the two apart. Sir Montagu Webb's fiscal views may have been unorthodox - the more books he wrote about them the less attention did they receive from serious economists - and his attitude on the salt tax controversy antagonized many of his European friends and well-wishers. In spite of these failings Sir Montagu Webb made an admirable public man - fearless, indomitable, and, above all, never out of temper. He took hard knocks with the same cheery philosophy that he showed when inflicting them, and he grudged neither time nor energy in any of the numerous causes which he made his own. His departure is a heavy loss to Indian commerce and politics.

NEWS ITEMS

DIAMOND MAKING

FORTUNE ON FRUITLESS QUEST

SPEAKING at a meeting of the Royal Microscopical Society, London, last night, Sir Charles Parsons said he been trying to make diamonds for twenty years, and had spent £20,000 on experiments. He had come to the conclusion that nobody had ever made a diamond and that consequently the claims of Moissan, the great French chemist and our Sir William Crookes were exaggerated.

MORE EXCAVATION FINDS AT FOLKESTONE

MORE discoveries have been made at the Roman site on the East Cliff at Folkestone, which is being excavated. A series of rooms defined by low stone walls has been exposed, in addition to a number of other walls and a substantial semi-circular bastion.

There is no doubt that the remains will cover a considerable area of ground and the find is one of the most important archaeological discoveries in recent years in this country. Under the pickaxes and spades of the twenty workmen a plan of the settlement is being rapidly revealed. The walls are in an excellent state of preservation.

Relics of life of those who lived in the settlement about 1600 years ago are being discovered, including ornamental pottery, metal instruments, tiles, bones and oyster and mussel shells. Oysters were regarded as a great delicacy by the ancient Romans as they are by modern Englishmen and are often found among the Roman remains in Britain.

LEONARDO DA VINCI

ANTICIPATIONS OF MODERN INVENTIONS

Dr, Charles Singer, lecturing at the Royal Institution on "Leonardo da Vinci as a Man of Science." said that Leonardo's work in science was essentially of the "individualistic" type. His was a Solitary intellect without peer or companion, working out the problems which appealed to him in the loneliness of his own chamber.

It is amassing what an area was covered by his scientific suggestions and investigations. Over and over again he preceded modern inventions, and even conceived the uses to which modern inventions might be put. Thus in a manuscript now at Holkham Hall, he tells us that he has thought of "a machine by which men may stand under water. I will not, however," he says, "divulge it because of the evil nature of men, for they would use it for murders at sea by sinking ships, together with those in them. Nevertheless," he continues, "I will freely impart another device which is not dangerous, since the mouth of the tube by which the submerged person breathes is above the water." The passage is illustrated by a diving apparatus of a practical and modern kind.

BIRD WITH A THUMB

A REUTER message from New York states that a determined effort to capture the hoazin bird will be made by the University of Pennsylvania expedition to South America.

A member of the expedition said that the hoazin was noted for its coyness. Few have been caught alive.

When young the hoazin shows rudimentary traces of a thumb and index finger on the wing, and young birds climb up the stems of reeds to their nests, using their wings as if they were clawed hands. The size of a pheasant, the bird is not uncommon in British Guiana.

Dependence on parents must end

KIM SEONG-KON

It is nature's law that children leave their parents when they enter adulthood. Whether we are talking about humans or animals, there comes a time when children leave their parents and become independent. No one can expect to live with his or her parents or children forever.

Traditionally in America, when your child turns 18 years old and enters legal adulthood, your parental duties and responsibilities are finally over. Your child becomes independent by either leaving home for college or getting a job. In past generations, when children entered college, American parents would help with tuition only. At that time, nearly all college students had to work part-time for their living expenses.

These days, things have changed. Reports say that many American parents are now supporting both tuition and living expenses for their children attending college. Reports also state that some young adults in their 20s or 30s still live in their parent's homes nowadays due to financial reasons. People say that we are now living in a strange era when the children's generation is poorer than their parent's generation.

In South Korea, the situation seems much more serious. Tradition-



ally, Koreans find it difficult to cut the umbilical cord, and Korean parents think that they should continue to support their children financially even after they become adults. Naturally, Korean children, too, assume they can depend on their parents even after they have grown up.

As a result, more than 3 million Korean young adults are now receiving financial help from their parents, according to recent statistics.

Furthermore, there is the so-called "kangaroo tribe" who are living in their parents' pouch, just like baby kangaroos. Recently, a popular YouTuber pointed out that in South Korea, about 650,000 people between 30 and 49 are still living with their par-

ents. Consequently, he said that about 20 per cent of retired Korean parents were bankrupt due to the financial burden caused by their adult children who did not want to leave the comfort of the pouch.

We may assume that when and if our children marry, they can become independent financially. Not quite so. These days, a wedding in South Korea can cost more than \$100,000. Moreover, the typical cost of renting an apartment is so exorbitant that many newlyweds cannot possibly afford it. Thus, parents' financial support is indispensable.

On the other hand, parents who are not financially well off, too, can be a burden to their children, as they

grow old and sick. In that case, children may become bankrupt due to astronomical expenses for hospitalization, operations and health care for their ill parents. Parents and grown-up children are not supposed to be a burden to each other, and yet it seems inevitable in South Korea.

In foreign countries, a similar phenomenon has happened as well, and yet it has not been as serious as in Korea. In the 1990s, for example, young people who were NEET appeared in the UK. NEET stands for "Not in education, employment, or training." NEET eventually spread to other countries, such as Japan, South Korea, and the US. However, it had nothing to do with the majority of young people.

In Japan, too, new words have appeared to describe an emerging class of young people. For example, the phrase "parasite singles" refers to young adults who still depend wholly on their parents, while "freeter," a shortened version of "free arbiter," where "arbeiter" refers to a part-time worker, describes a person between the age of 25-34 who does not have full-time employment, but only holds a part-time job at a place like a convenience store during his or her entire lifetime. Japan is a country well known for its people's tendency of "not depending on others" or "not being a burden to others." Even in

Japan, however, the new trend of financially depending on one's parents seems to be spreading.

This new trend stems from various causes, such as expensive living costs, skyrocketing real estate prices and a tight job market, in addition to insecure financial status. Moreover, radical changes in the way young people view independence have played a role in this widespread phenomenon.

However, we all have to leave our parents when we become adults. We should learn to be independent and part with our parents even though it is difficult and inconvenient. We cannot depend on others constantly, even if it is our parents. It is costly to raise a child. Therefore, it would not be fair if we depend on our parents continually after we become an adult.

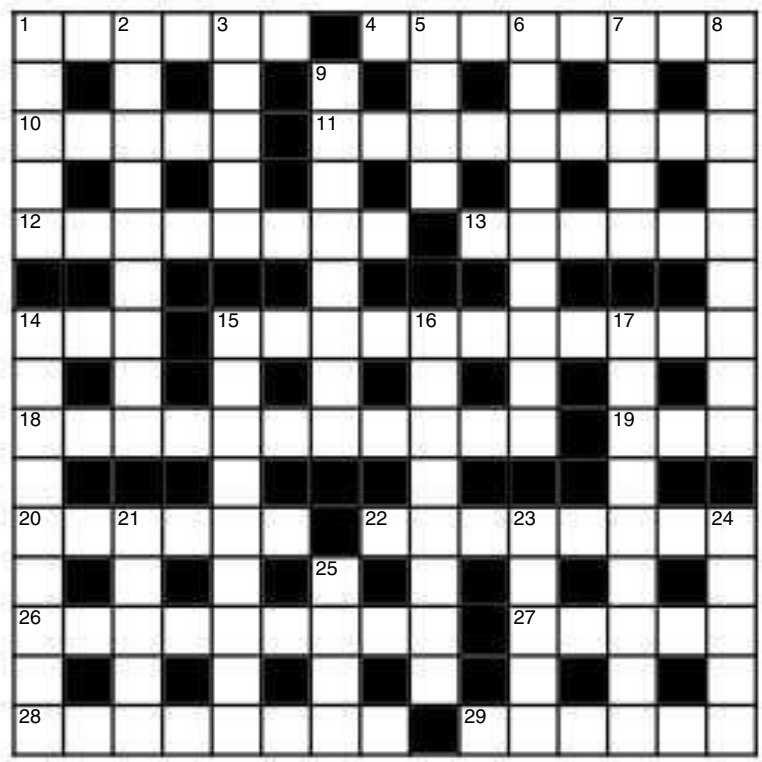
When they were young, your parents, too, must have worked hard in order to be financially independent. Your parents belong to the generation that has to support their parents and children at the same time. They are bearing double burdens on their shoulders.

Dear young adults, you should be independent and relieve your parents from the heavy burden of supporting you. Meanwhile, our political leaders should come up with ideas to solve this menacing social problem.

The Korea Herald/ANN.

CROSSWORD

NO-292780



YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

A P A E D F C B
P A R I P A S S U L L A M A
P O O T N I R T
A N T I C H I G H P O I N T
R E A E H L L E
E T A I L E R E C H E L O N
N Y A O O
T R U M P H I P R O N D O
N S A S U
J I G G E R Y P R E F E C T
E A F O L P H
R A I N C H E C K A M I G O
K N H V E U G U
I G L O O E G R E G I O U S
N Y P R Y H N E

ACROSS

- Obscure? Easily picked up within borders of country (6)
- Predict supporting online performers? (8)
- Street includes area that's sheltered - from this, perhaps (5)
- Work with what's given? I'm in favour of US tool (9)
- Certainly will accept first couple of tradescantia amongst little leafy plants (3,5)
- Area for blokes touring one French city (6)
- Hint: Minister should dismiss scoundrel (3)

- Here's what, at sea, starts to identify precipitation? (7,4)
- Paint, true, when splashed around, gives measure of warmth (11)
- Working to offload second purchase (3)
- A Republican will cover range of points in response (6)
- What's in wet areas, affected by storms? (8)
- Wise to restrain mischievous child - I'm offering personal view (4-5)
- Marsh, perhaps, never accommodating a lot of steps? (5)
- Second article in French about climb in good weather (8)

- Limits to healthy GM-free India given by health icon (6)
- Like an easy job? Copper's retiring (5)
- Get better of several deliveries with an edge, bagging 50 (9)
- Stop cleaner hiding man (5)
- Top removed from prison cells? That's an error (4)
- Energy and force about Frenchmen in online business (1-8)
- Father disembarks from tender, moving nimbly (5)
- Old work in attempt to support the belief system (9)
- A lunar location, mostly pleasant, set up in approach to filming (8)

- Cool guy has to accept workplace injury, getting emotional relief (9)
- Means to dismiss a lecturer - using what? (9)
- Employ the writer to interrupt beloved residents (8)
- Get used to a beaut hit, knocked for six (9)
- Lad has invested almost everything in hairdressing shop (5)
- Succeed despite your initially being nervous (5)
- Bearing up, consuming American orange juice and wine (5)
- Practise heading off downpour (4)

NOTE: Figures in parentheses denote the number of letters in the words required. (By arrangement with The Independent, London)

Bitter ballot battle

Poll rivals are rarely known for praising one another, but the current discourse has hit rock bottom

If the choice were for selecting the more entertaining option between the ongoing IPL or Lok Sabha elections, the latter — with its innovative taunts, snide remarks, branding family members with dirty accusations, obnoxious campaigning and mudslinging — would win hands down. With this election turning out to be more brutal and bloody than normal, social media is agog with videos of politicians that would put streetside rowdies to shame. A case in point: BJP's Mandi candidate, Kangana Ranaut, took a barrage of abuses, some too explicit to be printed. Disturbingly, even star campaigners are merrily throwing decency to the winds. The recent exchange between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and leaders of the Opposition, particularly the Congress, encapsulates the bitter nature of debate. Modi accused the Opposition leaders of being "cowards, scared of Pakistan", and the Congress shamed him by calling a corporate stooge, besides warning ominously that if he won this time too, India will see no more elections. This



exchange not only underscores the intense political polarisation, but also highlights the alarming decline in campaign standards. Modi's accusation resonates with the BJP's narrative to project itself as the sole guardian of national security. Such remarks, while appealing to a certain segment of the electorate, contribute to toxic polarisation of the polity. By insinuating that the Opposition is soft on Pakistan, Modi attempts to discredit his rivals and consolidate support by tapping into jingoistic sentiments. On the other hand, the Congress response reflects the prevalent perception of the BJP Government's policies favouring big business owners. The Opposition's strategy of portraying Modi as a representative of corporate interests seeks to appeal to the concerns of the common man. However, such charges, without substantial evidence, contribute to the erosion of trust in democratic institutions and further polarise the electorate. Besides, the Opposition has time and again accused him of being autocratic without any basis. What is particularly disconcerting is the way these accusations are delivered: Personal attack, character assassination and inflammatory rhetoric have become commonplace. Instead of engaging in substantive debates on policy issues and governance, the parties resort to sensationalism and vitriol. The falling standards of campaigning are symptomatic of deeper structural issues plaguing the democratic process. The influence of money power, the proliferation of fake news and misinformation, and the erosion of institutional checks and balances have created an environment conducive to negative campaigning and polarisation. Moreover, the advent of social media has amplified the reach and impact of divisive rhetoric. Unfortunately, the Election Commission has been rather ineffective in controlling these foul-mouthed leaders. That said, it is the responsibility of all of us to ensure that the leaders do not cross the 'Laxman Rekha'. We all can ensure that by pressing the blue button on voting day.

According to recent opinion polls, Prime Minister Narendra Modi is predicted to secure an unprecedented third-term win in these elections. There is a debate about whether the BJP tally will increase or decrease its tally. BJP leaders, including Narendra Modi, claim the NDA, led by the BJP, will win over 400 seats in the 543-member Lok Sabha. Home Minister Amit Shah says NDA will secure 200 of the 283 seats in the first three phases. The Congress party won over 400 seats only once in 1984. Political players need a game-changing strategy as there is no apparent wave of support. To gain an advantage, the BJP has implemented five key strategies: Celebrity Candidates Fighting Polls, strengthening the Hindu base, appealing to minority groups, exploiting redrawn boundaries to maintain the Hindu vote in areas controlled by the opposition and projecting Modi magic. The Congress and its allies are making a strategic move, attempting to consolidate the Hindu subaltern. The ongoing election witnessed a decline in voter turnout and it is still being determined whether it will recover or continue to decline. The Election Commission of India (ECI) expressed disappointment with the turnout in some metropolitan



Smoke rises from a forest fire, in Shimla

PTI

Fostering innovation from schools to startups

Early education is essential for shaping future innovators and entrepreneurs so that they can drive the nation towards a bright future

The boundary between science and engineering is so narrow that it is hard to differentiate them. They are two sides of the same coin and they go hand-in-hand. Whereas science explores the fundamental principles governing the universe, engineering focuses on applying scientific knowledge to design and develop solutions that meet specific requirements. So, engineers gather more respect in front of the public, as their output is tangible. Every year, the Govt. of India celebrates National Technology Day on 11th May to commemorate the contributions of Indian scientists, engineers and innovators who act as catalysts for the country's development. This year's National Technology Day was celebrated on the theme "From School to Startups: Igniting Young Minds to Innovate", giving thrust to nurture innovation from the school period onwards. One would doubt the need to promote a startup culture in schools. As the common adage goes, the seeds of character and attitude are sown during one's school life.



When we look at the life histories of great entrepreneurs and scientists, we can see that the spark for doing something special was initiated during their school years. Elon Musk, the founder of companies like SpaceX, Tesla and Neuralink, reportedly sold a video game he created at the age of 12 and later started a web software company while attending the University of Pennsylvania. Mark Zuckerberg, the co-founder of Facebook, started coding in middle school, where he developed a messaging programme called "Zucknet" for his father's dental office. Schoolchildren possess the ability to think freely and come up with crazy ideas. The limitations of reality do not shackle their minds. They are unfettered by the comments made by others

and don't have any preconceived notions about an idea. School students also have an inherent curiosity. The insatiable curiosity drives them to seek new knowledge and experience, fueling their creativity and innovation. The quality of innovation observed in the exhibits at various school science fairs, children's science congresses and IISF's students' science village provides ample proof of this. Some of the innovations displayed by the students in these exhibitions are at par or better than what our adult scientists have achieved in their lifetime. The Department of Science and Technology has instituted INSPIRE - MANAK (Million Minds Augmenting National Aspiration and Knowledge) Awards to support student innovators. MANAK, implemented through the National Innovation Foundation - India (NIF), seeks to inspire students in grades 6 to 10 to pursue their studies. The initiative aims to focus on one million unique ideas/innovations based on scientific principles and have practical applications in soci-

ety. Its goal is to promote a culture of creativity and encourage inventive thinking among schoolchildren. Another premier scientific organisation, the CSIR, has instituted the CIASC (CSIR Innovation Award for Schoolchildren) to harness schoolchildren's creative and innovative spirit. Though initiatives like Atal Tinkering Laboratories (ATLs) by the Government of India foster curiosity, creativity and imagination in young minds, most of our schools still put more stress on the traditional mode of rote learning. Rote memorisation and standardised testing prioritise conformity over creativity, relegating innovation to the sidelines. Furthermore, the fear of failure and the pressure to excel academically discourage risk-taking and experimentation. As a result, many children are discouraged from pursuing their innovative impulses, losing their untapped potential.

(The writer is an adjunct faculty at the National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bengaluru; views are personal)



BIJU DHARMAPALAN

et al. The boundary between science and engineering is so narrow that it is hard to differentiate them. They are two sides of the same coin and they go hand-in-hand. Whereas science explores the fundamental principles governing the universe, engineering focuses on applying scientific knowledge to design and develop solutions that meet specific requirements. So, engineers gather more respect in front of the public, as their output is tangible. Every year, the Govt. of India celebrates National Technology Day on 11th May to commemorate the contributions of Indian scientists, engineers and innovators who act as catalysts for the country's development. This year's National Technology Day was celebrated on the theme "From School to Startups: Igniting Young Minds to Innovate", giving thrust to nurture innovation from the school period onwards. One would doubt the need to promote a startup culture in schools. As the common adage goes, the seeds of character and attitude are sown during one's school life.

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This election is wide open

Amidst predictions of a third-term triumph for Prime Minister Modi, internal rifts, defections and dwindling voter turnout inject an element of unpredictability

Like many other countries, political parties in India often claim victory during elections even before official results are announced. It is part of their politics. The ongoing polls are not just another political event; they are of paramount importance, as well as the fate of several political party leaders. They have profound and far-reaching implications. In the current scenario, the ruling BJP has declared victory that the results will meet its expectations. However, the actual outcome remains uncertain, adding a layer of suspense to the political landscape. Four of the seven-phase polling have already occurred and the remaining three will occur on May 20, 25 and June 1. The outcome of these could significantly impact the election results, which will be revealed on June 4.

According to recent opinion polls, Prime Minister Narendra Modi is predicted to secure an unprecedented third-term win in these elections. There is a debate about whether the BJP tally will increase or decrease its tally. BJP leaders, including Narendra Modi, claim the NDA, led by the BJP, will win over 400 seats in the 543-member Lok Sabha. Home Minister Amit Shah says NDA will secure 200 of the 283 seats in the first three phases. The Congress party won over 400 seats only once in 1984. Political players need a game-changing strategy as there is no apparent wave of support. To gain an advantage, the BJP has implemented five key strategies: Celebrity Candidates Fighting Polls, strengthening the Hindu base, appealing to minority groups, exploiting redrawn boundaries to maintain the Hindu vote in areas controlled by the opposition and projecting Modi magic. The Congress and its allies are making a strategic move, attempting to consolidate the Hindu subaltern. The ongoing election witnessed a decline in voter turnout and it is still being determined whether it will recover or continue to decline. The Election Commission of India (ECI) expressed disappointment with the turnout in some metropolitan



cities, highlighting the rigid voter apathy in high-tech cities. This underscores the significance of each voter in shaping the election results. CP Joshi, former Chief Minister of Rajasthan, lost an election by one vote. His wife and daughter missed voting while praying for his victory. This shows how even one vote can significantly impact election results. This anecdote emphasises the potential impact of even one vote on the election results. High temperatures in some parts of India may reduce election turnout. However, low turnout can sometimes harm the ruling party, as local issues can sway the outcome.

BJP aims to improve in six Indian States: West Bengal, Odisha, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Kerala. However, it could face challenges from regional parties, which have the potential to sway State elections and impact overall results. During a recent rally, Congress leader Rahul Gandhi spoke about the uncertainties in predicting election results. Congress President Mallikharjun Kharge posted a message in Hindi on

THE BJP AIMS TO IMPROVE IN SIX INDIAN STATES: WEST BENGAL, ODISHA, TELANGANA, ANDHRA PRADESH, TAMIL NADU AND KERALA. HOWEVER, IT COULD FACE CHALLENGES FROM REGIONAL PARTIES, WHICH HAVE THE POTENTIAL TO SWAY STATE ELECTIONS AND IMPACT OVERALL RESULTS



X, saying the Prime Minister attacked his friends, indicating that Modi's chair is shaking. SP leader Akhilesh Yadav tweeted that the BJP's condition will worsen after the first two voting phases. The Congress party's strategy primarily concerns social welfare and economic empowerment. This all-encompassing approach aims to address the primary concerns of the voters and has the potential to connect with a vast section of the electorate. It could significantly impact the election results if it garners the voters' support. The Congress Party's challenge is to keep its members united. Since Modi's rise, many politicians, including State leaders, have defected to the BJP. The BJP has given tickets to some of them. How voters treat these turncoats remains to be seen. Internal disputes within Congress are currently a significant concern. Allegations of connections with rival parties raise questions about loyalty. They could affect the party's unity, which could, in turn, impact their performance in the upcoming elections. Therefore, it is crucial to close-

ly monitor any developments within the party to gain a more accurate understanding of their prospects in the polls. Political leaders' connections with rival parties have raised concerns about their loyalty. Between 2016 and 2020, 170 Congress MLAs and 7 Rajya Sabha members switched parties, causing an impact on Indian politics. It has created confusion and doubts about their loyalty. The allegations could influence voters' perception of these leaders and their parties. India's Satta Bazaar predicts the BJP will win between 330 and 335 seats at Re. 1, 350 seats at Rs. 3 and 400 seats at Rs. 12-15. The odds for the NDA to win 400 seats are Rs. 4-5. The predictions reflect the market perception of election outcomes that could impact politics. India's stock benchmarks fell by 1.5% on Tuesday as investors cut their bets, expressing concern that the BJP may not get as many seats as projected. The voters will decide the winner of the election on June 4.

(The writer is a popular columnist; views are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

MALIWAL'S ALLEGATIONS

Madam — Apropos the news article "Kissa Kursi Ka: Why Maliwal was thrashed," published on 14 May, this is my response. The unfolding drama surrounding Swati Maliwal's allegations against Arvind Kejriwal's personal assistant paints a troubling picture for the AAP. As a daily reader, it's concerning to witness such internal strife within a political party. The lack of formal complaints and the delayed response from all parties involved only adds to the murkiness of the situation. The fact that senior AAP leaders are already entangled in legal troubles exacerbates the issue, hinting at deeper rifts within the party. The swift condemnation from opposition leaders underscores the gravity of the accusations. Additionally, the involvement of the National Commission for Women (NCW) signifies the broader societal implications of such incidents. It's crucial for authorities to conduct a thorough investigation to ensure justice is served and perpetrators are held accountable. Overall, this episode serves as a stark reminder of the complexities and challenges inherent in the realm of politics and the importance of transparency and accountability in governance.

Avani Chawla | Pune

EMPOWERING MOTHERS

Madam — Apropos the news article "Empowering working mothers financially," published on 13 May, this is my response. Mother's Day is a poignant reminder of the extraordinary women who shape our lives. Yet, amid their selfless dedication, the need for securing their financial future often goes unaddressed. Despite the strides in insurance awareness, women remain underrepresented in safeguarding their loved ones. Whether as working professionals or homemakers, mothers are the backbone of many households, balancing myriad responsibilities with grace. However,

Legal pillars of democracy



Apropos the news article "SC judgments have strengthened democracy," published on 14 May, this is my response. India's journey through elections is a testament to the strength of its democratic framework, fortified by landmark legal rulings. These decisions not only uphold the sanctity of the electoral process but also embody the nation's commitment to fairness, transparency and inclusivity. The fundamental right to vote, upheld in cases like Mohinder Singh Gill v. The Chief Election Commissioner, forms the bedrock

of India's electoral democracy. Judicial interventions, such as those seen in Association for Democratic Reforms v. Union of India, ensure transparency while balancing individual privacy rights. Inclusive representation, as highlighted in the Indra Sawhney v. Union of India case, underscores the importance of equitable participation, especially for marginalised communities. Concurrently, efficient resolution of electoral disputes, as emphasised in various judgements, safeguards the credibility of the electoral process. Moreover, cases like Mohd. Sattar v. State of Rajasthan reaffirm the principle of universal suffrage, ensuring every citizen's voice resonates in the democratic chorus. These legal pillars not only shape India's electoral landscape but also serve as guiding lights, illuminating the path towards a more robust and inclusive democracy.

Arjun Banerjee | Chandigarh

amidst the daily chaos, ensuring financial protection can be overlooked. Term insurance emerges as a vital tool in providing comprehensive coverage against life's uncertainties. For working mothers, it acts as a safety net, guaranteeing their family's well-being in their absence. Its flexibility allows customisation to meet specific needs, offering peace of mind amidst life's unpredictability. With retirement planning gaining importance, term insurance with maturity benefits becomes crucial. As women embrace diverse roles, securing their financial future becomes imperative. It's time for mothers to prioritise their financial security, ensuring a stable tomorrow for their loved ones.

Sanvi Reddy | Hyderabad

THE SONGSAREK HERITAGE

Madam — Apropos the news article "Vibing to the dance of a 100 drums," published on 12 May, this is my response. Exploring the lesser-known West Garo Hills of Meghalaya unveils a cultural tapestry woven with the

ancient traditions of the Songsarek people. In the face of modernity and religious conversions, their practices stand as guardians of a fading era. The partnership between Royal Enfield and UNESCO emerges as a beacon, spotlighting these intangible treasures. Wangala dances, Chubitchi rituals and matrilineal societal norms narrate stories of resilience and identity. The meticulous documentation not only honours these customs but also amplifies their significance, ensuring their legacy transcends generations. As custodians of heritage, it's our collective duty to cherish and safeguard these cultural jewels nestled amidst the Himalayan foothills. Through respectful engagement and awareness initiatives, we pave the path towards a future where diversity thrives and ancient wisdom finds its rightful place in the modern world.

Vihaan Singh | Ahmedabad

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

FIRST COLUMN

THE ROLE OF MEDITATION IN SLEEP

Meditate every night for a relaxed mind and better sleep



RAJYOGI BRAHMAKUMAR **NIKUNJ JI**

A recent newspaper article caught everyone's attention, featuring an elderly woman who initiated a 'Sleep Service Center' for those struggling to find restful sleep. This compassionate woman would just engage in conversation with the person and sing a lullaby offering comfort akin to a mother lulling her child to sleep. The result? Clients emerged refreshed and rejuvenated after just half an hour of her soothing sessions. Isn't it astonishing that we now seek sleep therapists for what should come naturally? What does this say about our society? If animals and birds can sleep peacefully, why can't humans enjoy this innate gift of carefree slumber?

Sleep is the best form of relaxation, akin to meditation, that's why those who sleep well always keep well & feel well. It's a fact that if we get sound sleep during the night, we get up fresh being more active & feeling more energetic. However, in today's world getting sound sleep has become a rare occasion because today millions of people suffer from sleep disorders like sleep apnea, insomnia, restless leg syndrome, narcolepsy etc. In addition, the number of those who get a very broken, fitful sleep would be many times more. Sadly, many of these individuals resort to sleeping pills and drugs which ultimately make the problem worse. Knowing that tranquilisers are usually prescribed for insomnia and such other disorders as are due to anxiety and mental depression etc., one would say: 'Where are we heading?'




Medical science has acknowledged several causes that lead to sleep disorders. The biggest hindrance of all that contributes to sleeplessness is bad mental health. We must understand that not being able to have restful sleep is not only in itself an unhealthy condition but also causes or aggravates many other diseases. For example, it is now recognised that sleep disturbance is one of the factors that lead to coronary heart disease. But most of us would agree subconsciously that tranquilisers are not the answer to the question of sleep disturbance. They now know well that these drugs represent a purely symptomatic approach, ignoring the underlying problems that cause these conditions. A British medical journal recently published a report about experiments that have shown that sympathy can work well in cases of sleep disorders. It further said that in one trial, the doctors, instead of giving tranquilisers as they would have normally given, spent some time with the patients and talked with them in an open atmosphere. They just had a brief chat with them, with sympathy and also gave them a few words of advice and explained to them why they had those conditions. The results of these informal chats were astounding and the follow-up assessment showed that with this replacement of allopathy by sympathy, depression in those patients dropped from a level of 80 per cent to 40 per cent. The other fact being realised is that mental depression, anxiety, etc. are mainly due to certain lifestyles, behavioural patterns and personality traits. It was also felt that the pattern of behaviour, designated as type 'A' which is characterised by competitiveness, impatience, etc., predisposes a person to coronary diseases, hypertension, etc. As a result of these new findings, doctors all over the world are now increasingly advising such patients to practise meditation and to have proper dietary patterns. It's a medically proven fact that mental ill health adversely affects one's eating habits, which in turn, drastically influences our sleep and health. Under such a medical condition, proper meditation techniques can be of great help if practised regularly. In the hustle and bustle of living a modern life, we tend to forget that it is the quality of life that matters the most & not the quantity. Hence if we jeopardise our sleep for silly reasons, we are knowingly undermining our health.

(Writer is a spiritual educator & popular columnist; views are personal)

Stopping thieving through DBT

A lot of pilfering from fertiliser subsidies is happening due to policy flaws. This can be curbed if only the subsidy is given under Direct Benefit Transfer



UTTAM GUPTA



On January 22, 2019, addressing NRIs and Indian-origin people at the inauguration of the 15th Pravasi Bharatiya Divas convention in Varanasi (Uttar Pradesh), Prime Minister Narendra Modi recalled what Rajiv Gandhi had Stated "Of the funds the Central Government sends, only 15 per cent of that reaches the people. If one rupee is sent from Delhi, only 15 paise reaches the villages, 85 paise disappear. Even as the country's middle class kept giving tax honestly, this "loot" of 85 per cent also continued." Modi added "I also want to tell you today's truth as well. We used technology to end this loot of 85 per cent completely." Elaborating on this theme, he explained:- In the last four-and-a-half years, about Rs 580,000 crore, our Government, through various schemes viz. for a home, for education, for scholarship, for gas cylinder and to other such ends etc directly gives to the people, transferring it in their bank accounts. Now, just consider that if the country was being run through the old system, then even today from this Rs 580,000 crore, about Rs 450,000 crore would have disappeared or leaked. If we would not have brought a change in the system then this amount would have been looted like the former Prime Minister had accepted..." Modi said.

That was before the 2019 General Elections. Today, when the 2024 General Elections are underway, the same discourse reverberates in the air even as the PM cites a figure that is nearly seven times. The amount spent on welfare schemes during the last ten years under the Modi - regime has gone up to a gargantuan of around Rs 4000,000 crore. Had the old system (read: before 2014) continued, the amount disappearing from the distribution pipe would have been Rs 3400,000 crore (4000,000x0.85).

What do the facts say?
The Union Government executes a plethora of welfare programs aimed at providing basic and necessary amenities and upliftment of the most disadvantaged members of society. It does so mainly through "Central Schemes" (CS) which are fully funded and implemented by it. A total of 740 CS schemes are currently under implementation. During FY2022-23, the CS

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UNDER ITS FLAGSHIP DIGITAL INDIA PROGRAMME, THE MODI - GOVERNMENT HAS BEEN IMPLEMENTING WHAT IS POPULARLY KNOWN AS DIRECT BENEFIT TRANSFER FOR TRANSFERRING CASH BENEFITS AND SUBSIDIES 'DIRECTLY' TO THE AADHAAR-LINKED BANK ACCOUNTS OF INDIVIDUAL ELIGIBLE BENEFICIARIES

spending was Rs 1208,000 crore. In addition, there are "Centrally Sponsored Schemes" (CSS) designed to supplement the efforts of the States in achieving various socioeconomic goals and implementing national priorities. These are funded by the central Government and the States in varying proportions viz. 90:10, 60:40, 50:50 and so on depending on the scheme. These schemes are implemented by the States. During FY2022-23, the spending on a total of 50 CSSs was Rs 412,000 crore. Put together, the total expenditure of the Central Government on CS and CSS schemes during the year was Rs 1620,000 crore.

Now, if we were to apply the 85 per cent magic formula dished out by the then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, the amount pilfered while on the way to the beneficiaries would have been Rs 1377,000 crore. Only Rs 243,000 crore would have reached. Under the Modi - model, the entire Rs 1620,000 crore has been reached; courtesy of, the use of technology to transfer the money to their bank accounts.

How does it work?
Under its flagship Digital India program, the Modi - Government has been implementing what is popularly known as DBT (Direct Benefit Transfer) for transferring the cash benefits and subsidies 'directly' to the Aadhaar-linked bank accounts of individual eligible beneficiaries. Launched by the erstwhile UPA - Government on January 1, 2013, its use has picked up pace under Modi since January 2015. As of date, DBT is used in 314 CS schemes. The JAM trinity (Jan Dhan, Aadhar, Mobile) is a DBT enabler the 'mover and shaker' behind its successful implementation. Today, there are around 520 million Jan Dhan Accounts, more than 1.39 billion Aadhaar cards and 1.15 billion mobile connections. With this, the money can be 'instantaneously' transferred at the click of a mouse to tens of millions of beneficiaries spread all over the country. The DBT is free from the delays corruption and associated pilferage that was germane to the earlier arrangements under which there was human intervention, a host of intermediaries/mediators and the money was flowing through multiple layers in administrative offices. To improve transparency, the Government has put in place the Central Plan Scheme Monitoring System (CPSMS) which ensures that all transfers to bank accounts are made strictly as per the list of eligible beneficiaries. The persons included in the list are authenticated with the use of an Aadhaar card that contains their biometric details thus removing any scope for fictitious claimants. The provision for such checks and balances has helped hugely in preventing bogus claims. As per the latest update on the DBT portal, the total savings by way of plugging leakages in the schemes due to the implementation of DBT during FY2022-23 was Rs 63,000 crore.

However, if we look at the food subsidy (the excess of the cost of procurement, handling and distribution of food over the price paid by the beneficiary/consumer), during FY2022-23, the Government was able to save over Rs 50,000 crore which works out to around 18 per cent in the total food subsidy bill of Rs 272,000 crore. This was made possible because of the "deletion of over 50 million duplicate and fake/non-existent Ration Cards". Likewise, under the Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi or PM-KISAN (, the Union Government provides income support of Rs 6,000 a year to farmers with a valid enrolment, paid in three equal cash transfers of Rs 2,000 every four months; the money is credited to their account via the DBT mode), it was able to save over Rs 10,000 crore during FY2022-23. This is about 17 per cent of the total payment of Rs. 58,000 crores during the year. The savings were due to the deletion of over 21 million ineligible beneficiaries.

According to the DBT portal, the Government has been able to generate a cumulative saving of Rs 348,000 crore by plugging leakages since the inception of the DBT. Of this, more than half or Rs 185,000 crore are savings in the distribution of food subsidies alone. Notwithstanding the above, there remains a huge untapped potential for garnering more savings. This is because in the initial years, neither States used Aadhaar for validation nor the Centre made it compulsory even as the latter's efforts in this regard were hamstrung due to protracted litigation in the top court. In such circumstances, a large number of 'ineligible' persons making their way to the beneficiary list was inevitable. While the Government has got rid of them in some schemes like PM-KISAN, it has a long way to go.

Meanwhile, Modi also needs to focus on areas where technology intervention alone won't help. For instance, in fertilisers, the Government asks manufacturers to sell fertiliser at a low price to farmers. The excess of the cost of supply over it is claimed by the latter from the former as a subsidy. Since the subsidy is embodied in the MRP (albeit low), the subsidised fertiliser product must reach the farmer and be used only for growing the crop. If it doesn't reach, then the benefit of subsidy is enjoyed by the person who grabs it. A lot of pilferage from fertiliser subsidies is happening due to this flaw in policy. This can be curbed if only the subsidy is given 'directly' to the farmers under DBT.

(The writer is a policy analyst; views are personal)

Filmmakers must calibrate branding of film festivals

In the ever-evolving world of branding, where impressions and connections are paramount, film festivals emerge as vibrant stages

The success of any branding exercise is the impact & impression it creates on the target audience, visibility of products, recall value and deep connection with the audiences cutting across campaigns, launches, events and the wide array of trends and styles. In a similar vein, it is important to understand the impact of the branding idea or strategy on a visible platform, where eyeballs determine the yardstick of success. Film festivals today are the perfect ecosystem to understand the value, intensity and impact of branding on such a glamorous circuit and ecosystem. In the domain of cinema, where creativity meets commerce, film festivals serve as vibrant hubs where storytelling converges with culture,



CHAITANYA K PRASAD

artistry intertwines with industry and communities bond around a shared love for the silver screen. Beyond the showcases of cinematic aptitude, these festivals have evolved into powerful brands, each with its own distinct identity and allure. From the glitz of Cannes to the heritage of the Venice Film Festival and from the cosmopolitan charm of Berlinale to the intellectual

intricacies of the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF) and the grandeur of the International Film Festival of India (IFFI), the branding strategies of these festivals offer a fascinating glimpse into the intersection of culture, economics and politics. Film festivals portray glamour, charisma, fashion and celebrity quotient that creates a unique buzz with audiences Cannes, Berlin, IFFI and Toronto, over the years have developed a unique brand identity that has crafted and shaped the storytelling and visibility narrative in the branding space. Festivals are known for their innovative burst disruptive proclivities that lead to unique "out of the box Branding." The hustle and bustle of any film festival cre-

ate a unique integral link and the relationship between arc lights that define cinema and colours, shades and images that constitute branding. A study of the branding quotient across film festivals portrays a reflection of the shifting strands of ideas, concepts & evaluation of branding across the festival space. The 4Cs = Creativity, Culture, Content and Consistency outline the integral link between branding and the festival circuit. It is a perfect convergence of creative minds, storytellers, narrators and inspirational Talking heads. Every festival has defining branding moments, which leave an imprint on the minds of audiences and a lasting impression on prospective consumers and supporters of cinematic excel-

lence. Opportunities at festivals are limitless. Cannes, Berlin, IFFI & Toronto integrate branding platforms and ideas, with their filming culture leanings, narrator's values and storytelling nuggets. At these festivals branding as a medium has reinforced the soft power dynamics & equitations leading to better visibility, product value, loaded positive perception and enhanced outreach and networking opportunities. An idea by technology brands brings out another level of product display. Interactive experience and marketing outreach. Each of the prominent festivals in their editions has reinforced the image, identity, influence, interaction and interface of brands with tech tools cross-

cutting themes thereby positioning a unique product identity & space at the venues. Each major film festival, whether it's Cannes, TIFF, Venice, Berlinale, or IFFI, meticulously builds a blueprint for its branding elements to convey its individuality and values. Cannes, renowned for its glamour, incorporates the illustration of the Palme d'Or trophy and celebrities on the red carpet, alongside a sophisticated logo design often featuring the Cannes coastline. The festival's colour palette of black, gold and red represents poise, prestige and excitement. Meanwhile, TIFF embraces diversity with dynamic iconography displaying film reels, diverse viewers and Toronto landmarks, complemented by

vibrant shades like red, blue and yellow that reflect energy, creativity and inclusivity. Venice Film Festival, with its rich heritage, opts for classical depictions of Venetian landmarks such as the Rialto Bridge or St. Mark's Square, accompanied by a refined logo design that captures the essence of Venice's timeless beauty. IFFI celebrates Indian cinema with displays of aesthetic motifs and sceneries, traditional logo design and vivid hues of orange, red and gold, beside serene blues and greens that capture India's cultural richness. Through these branding elements, each festival communicates its beliefs, attracts audiences worldwide and reinforces its significance within the global film industry.

For filmmakers, the choice of which festival to submit their work to often depends not only on the esteem and reputation of the event but also on its alignment with their artistic vision and career goals. A filmmaker seeking international recognition may gravitate towards Cannes or Berlinale, while those championing a wide and diverse range of filmography might find a home at Venice or TIFF. In this way, the branding of film festivals becomes a crucial factor in shaping the trajectory of filmmakers' careers and the cultural nuances of movies as a whole.

(The writer was addl. DG, DFF & director IFFI. Views are personal. Inputs by Zoya Ahmed & Vaishnavie Srinivasan)

OUR VIEW



I-Sec case: It bodes well for stockholder activism

The ICICI merger case of alleged shareholder-vote irregularities could go either way. It’s under scrutiny. But to the extent it speaks of alert minority shareholders, it augurs well

On Monday, the National Company Law Tribunal deferred a class-action case filed by some shareholders of ICICI Securities (I-Sec) who are up in arms over the company’s move to delist itself and merge with parent ICICI Bank under a plan that won shareholder approval on 28 March. As investors, they were offered 67 shares of ICICI Bank for every 100 of I-Sec, a brokerage business owned nearly three-fourths by ICICI Bank and the rest by the public. As disgruntled minority owners saw it, that share-swap ratio implied their company had been valued at only about half its earnings multiple than at the time it was listed for trading six years ago. Although ICICI argued that valuations were calculated properly and the merger would benefit all involved, dissenters insisted that they had been cut a raw deal in the process. Since over two-thirds of I-Sec’s equity pie has already voted in favour of the proposal, one may conclude that their objections got out-voted and that’s that. However, that isn’t the end of it. What muddies the story is the way votes were allegedly won. These charges need a look-in.

As alleged, ICICI Bank canvassed votes for the merger’s approval from retail holders of I-Sec shares by having bank representatives call them. The lender claims these were mere awareness calls aimed at getting shareholders to participate. Yet, dissenters have raised questions that require clear answers. Why were these calls, assuming they were made, coming from ICICI Bank reps and not from I-Sec? And how did the parent company get hold of their contact details? What plaintiffs want probed here is whether the bank gained access to their personal data via a privacy breach. Regardless

of its majority holding, since I-Sec is a separately listed firm, these details ought to have been kept secure. For all such corporate polls, the Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi) insists on disclosure of relevant information and forbids misleading stuff and coercion; it also has guidelines on poll communication. If any of these was explicitly flouted, authorities should easily be able to pin it. What qualifies as a coercive tactic, though, could lead investigators into a grey zone. In its early remarks, the tribunal noted that shareholders are expected to be knowledgeable and aware of tricks of the trade. What clouds the matter further, though, are allegations of backroom manoeuvres by ICICI Bank, which is also accused of having its asset-management unit buy shares of I-Sec to get a say even in the ‘public’ portion of its equity. Employees of I-Sec who own its shares are also alleged to have been lured through stock options to vote favourably. Interestingly, Quantum Mutual Fund, which owns a slice of I-Sec, had written to Sebi in April with objections of its own. The fund has contended that I-Sec was valued at a discount to its listed peers, causing a loss for minority shareholders. ICICI’s defence is that valuations were done independently and vetted by independent experts for both the bank and brokerage business.

A Sebi probe is on and the tribunal is expected to rule on the case. Whichever way it goes, from afar, the alertness of minority shareholders in guarding their interests looks impressive. Such activism is new to India and stirrings of shareholder democracy are good for our economy. Ownership dispersal is low, with bulk owners in command, mostly. But still, for capitalism to thrive, it must capture the voice of all investors, retail included, and their vigil holds value.

GUEST VIEW

We should mobilize resources to bend India’s road fatality trend

Timely evacuation and treatment hold the key to solving a problem on which India is still an outlier



RAGHAV CHANDRA is a former secretary, Government of India.

The sensational Himalayan tunnel rescue operation in Silkyara, lasting 17 days, riveted the nation’s attention. The deployment of foreign experts, high-tech boring equipment and 41 ambulances (one for each of construction workers) was proof that India values human lives and will do what’s needed to prevent fatalities. It is surprising that the death of more than ten times that number every day on Indian roads is not being addressed with the same alacrity.

Ever since the National Highways Development Programme was launched in 1998, ministers for road transport have committed themselves to dramatically reducing road accidents and fatalities, some even announcing impressive timelines. However, the ground reality belies that aspiration. Timelines have often been extended. As per *Road Accidents in India: 2022*, published by the ministry of road transport and highways, the number of fatalities in 2022 rose to 168,000 from about 150,000 the previous year. A World Bank press release of June 2022 states that India loses more than 5% of its GDP to road accidents and related fatalities. More than 80% of those suffering road mishaps are in the productive age group. Globally, India has the highest fatalities. According to the World Health Organization, despite having only 1% of the world’s vehicles, India

accounts for almost 11% of all crash-related-deaths. Such a death occurs every three minutes. In contrast, China has roughly the same population but just one-third the road fatalities.

A common misconception is that accidents occur because of bad roads. But, both in terms of quality and the length of expressways and highways, we have seen a significant enhancement in India. In fact, the better the roads, the higher the speed at which vehicles can travel, which can result in recklessness. With as many as 500 individuals losing their lives daily on our highways, there is an urgent need for a more strategic approach to secure Indian lives.

The government has introduced measures like steep penalties and prison sentences for traffic violations under the Motor Vehicles Act and Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita. A committee for road safety was also set up, headed by a retired Supreme Court judge. However, as vehicles continue to proliferate, road accidents look likely to increase. The emphasis so far has been on accident reduction, and this has borne some positive results. It is now time to focus on fatality prevention.

Currently, once an accident occurs, the injured are taken by ambulance to the nearest hospital. Reports suggest that half of those killed could not get appropriate medical assistance in the ‘golden hour’; trauma care emergency services are not always available along national highways. Lapses in terms of time taken for evacuation and quality of treatment are responsible for most of India’s high fatalities.

In some states in the US, the police have integrated helicopter-based traffic surveillance with medical evacuation procedures. Pilots are trained as rescue specialists and paramedics are kept on standby in accordance with accident density patterns and their analysis. Equipped with requisite medical equipment and medicines for immediate stabilization, helicopters are located at an airport from where they can cover a

defined radius of highways. A Johns Hopkins study of 2012 concluded that, adjusting for such factors as injury severity, type of injury and patients’ age, mishap victims taken to hospital by air are much more likely to survive than those transported by ground.

For severely injured patients, delayed control of bleeding is the leading cause of death. To prevent this, a trained team of paramedics should reach the accident site on a signal from a control centre to conduct a ‘stay and play’ exercise to stabilize victims first. Thereupon, they should be transported to trauma care units or more advanced medical centres in well equipped ambulances or air-ambulances. Improved and timely medical intervention, thanks to life-saving medical equipment and trained medical professionals on board, can enhance survival chances. Recipient trauma hospitals with critical care super-specialties should be pre-identified and have suitable landing facilities. These provisions can make that slender but winning difference to human lives.

The Madhya Pradesh government has initiated such an emergency service as a pioneering effort. The central government should define the protocols and standard operating procedures for undertaking such measures in a systemic, meaningful and coordinated manner across the country. We also need to find a way of recovering the cost of such emergency services through innovative insurance products for those who can afford to pay for these, and by linking the plan with Ayushman Bharat and other welfare schemes for those who cannot. Efforts in this direction are reported to have begun.

In reality, the cost of road accidents is borne not only by victims and their families, but by the entire economy. With the Union budget for this fiscal year yet to be unveiled, we should consider allocating a tiny fraction of our enormous road-building outlay to reversing the trend on road fatalities. This is a national imperative.



JUST A THOUGHT

Accidents, and particularly street and highway accidents, do not happen—they are caused.

ERNEST GREENWOOD

THEIR VIEW

Curb deepfake velocity, vulnerability and viciousness

AMAR PATNAIK



is a member of the Rajya Sabha from Odisha, an advocate and a former CAG bureaucrat.

Trust is at the core of the diffusion of any innovation in any sector, particularly so in the case of technology. If this trust is compromised, diffusion will fail, no matter how useful it is. In today’s age of digitally generated deepfakes, the old adage “seeing is believing” is under siege.

Trust erosion: While any technology can be misused, what sets deepfakes apart is their rapid spread (velocity) enabled by social media platforms and the human tendency to believe what one sees (vulnerability), causing harms that can be severe (viciousness). Women and children face significant psychological distress as targets of deepfake depictions, some of which are pornographic. Deepfakes violate privacy and publicity rights, as seen in the *Anil Kapoor vs Simply Life India* case last year at the Delhi high court. The threat has vast scope. Institutions like the judiciary face potential manipulation with fabricated evidence, making it harder for courts to discern the truth and raising the chilling possibility of wrongful

convictions. Trials getting bogged down as parties contest the authenticity of evidence could erode public trust in the legal system.

Deepfakes also threaten user-verification methods such as facial recognition, which is a worry for a country like India that’s reliant on biometric identification for critical services, financial transactions and more.

Perhaps the most worrying aspect is their impact on democratic discourse and practices. Deepfakes can act as a megaphone for misinformation, feeding echo chambers and confirmation biases. The World Economic Forum’s 2024 risk report labelled mis- and dis-information the most critical global risk, especially for poll-bound countries. Political sabotage is frighteningly easy if deepfakes are used as weapons to discredit candidates. The proliferation of manipulated content breeds scepticism, with plausible deniability made easier for all video clips, even real ones, that may lead to a collapse of trust.

Current rules: India lacks laws specific to deepfake content. Sections 66D and 66E of the IT Act penalize impersonation and unauthorized publication of private images, while Sections 67, 67A, and 67B prohibit the transmission of obscene material. However, they fall short in addressing the broader challenge of identifying perpetrators and

preventing the dissemination of harmful deepfake content. The newly enacted Digital Personal Data Protection Act could have been more impactful had “loss” as defined in Section 2 (P) included reputational loss besides financial. Section 8(5) obliges data fiduciaries to safeguard data from breaches. This could necessitate stricter measures like disabling private-media downloads or curbing ways in which content is shared on platforms. Data fiduciaries also need to notify individuals of any data breach. Section 3, which eases the law’s provisions if an individual publicly shares personal data on social media through a blog, etc, needs to be interpreted strictly.

Traceability, vital to combat fake news and hate speech, remains a contentious issue, as evident in the ongoing case between WhatsApp and the government. Although Rule 4(2) of the 2021 IT (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) mandates ‘significant social media intermediaries’ to enable the identification of originators of information on the orders of a court or another competent authority, WhatsApp and its parent Meta have contested this rule, citing privacy concerns and arguing that the platform’s end-to-end encryption would be breached.

Way ahead: Regulation can help India ensure the responsible use of technology and retain the trust of users in tech-enabled systems.

First, we must emphasize that while free speech is a fundamental right, ‘freedom of reach’ is not. Social media platforms and intermediaries must bear responsibility for curbing deepfake dissemination. This could mean limiting the number of times such content can be re-shared or crackdowns on bots that amplify misinformation.

Second, tech developers could be mandated to incorporate consistent labelling features that allow artificial content to be readily identifiable, an approach aligned with the Union IT ministry’s 15 March advisory. The urgency of consistent labelling standards across all major platforms should nudge them to move quickly on self-

regulation in the interest of corporate digital responsibility—an idea now in need of legal backing. Mandatory user verification for content creation can also be explored. This would help establish a trail of accountability, aiding in tracing the origin of deepfakes.

Finally, we must address the human cost of deepfakes. Victims need a clear path to justice, including takedown requests to platforms, identification of perpetrators and legal recourse aimed at taking perpetrators to task. Besides, psychological support services are essential to help individuals cope with trauma in cases involving vulnerable citizens. As with a recently proposed UK law that criminalizes the very creation of non-consensual sexually explicit deepfakes, we need comprehensive legislation to deter criminal abuse. Beyond taking legislative measures, we must invest in media literacy efforts and fostering responsible digital citizenship, so as to equip individuals with what they need to critically evaluate online content and identify deepfakes.

To reaffirm trust in the digital sphere so that we can continue to benefit from its huge positive externalities, tech developers, platforms, civil society organizations and the government must work together.

These are the author’s personal views.

Parties indulging in violence is mockery of democracy

WHEN Andhra Pradesh witnessed heavy polling on Monday which is said to be over 81% people breathed easy and congratulated the Election Commission of India for successfully conducting peaceful elections as against large number of violent incidents in 2019. But then by evening, incidents of violence were reported from Palnadu region between the ruling party and opposition activists and spread to Chittoor and Anantapur on Tuesday.

While the ruling party alleged that it was the handiwork of opposition as it feels that it was losing the polls. The opposition said attacks were by ruling party activists who realised that their game was over. Whatever it is, such incidents are highly condemnable. There is nothing wrong in claims and counter

claims on winning chances of each party till the final results are announced on June 4. But, indulging in violence is nothing but making a mockery of democracy.

Political parties and leaders should either stop speaking about democracy or otherwise they should do everything that is necessary to protect democracy. They cannot swear by Constitution and duck from protecting democracy. There is no point giving big lectures during public meetings whenever there are elections saying X party is bad, it is anti democratic and claim that they are the only saviours of democracy. Till the polling day, candidates beg for votes, hold hands, hug voters kiss them and indulge in all kinds of theatrics. Immediately after the polling they attack voters whom they suspect were

favorable towards their rival party and might have voted for them. In fact on Monday, a voter was slapped and beaten while he was waiting in queue just for questioning the MLA who jumped the queue. How the polling staff and security staff allowed him to jump the queue is another question. This shows that the English men have gone but attitude of officials being subservient has not changed even 75 years of Independence.

If this is the situation, how can anyone claim that it is free and fair poll. Every voter as per Constitution has right to vote for a candidate of their choice but if this anger is displayed by political parties, then certainly democracy has no meaning. Instead of giving lectures waving books saying Constitution will be scrapped etc, the top

leaders of all political parties would be doing a great service to the nation provided they ensure that the voter can enjoy his freedom to vote at least once in five years. If that cannot be done, then it would be hypocrisy to say India is the biggest democracy, mother of democracy etc.

Unfortunately post poll violence has been on the increase in Andhra Pradesh, West Bengal and few other states. What is also intriguing and needs cleansing is the functioning of the administrative machinery which includes the police and other law enforcing agencies. Why they do not act as per rules and act tough to curb any violence, whoever the perpetrator be is something that bothers the common man. Such violence is never spontaneous. It is organised and politically

motivated.

They spread only if the police fails to act tough. We have seen this in case of anti Sikh riots in Delhi in 1984, we have seen this in communal violence in Hyderabad in united Andhra Pradesh and we have experienced it in 2019 polls and again this time we are seeing how political violence is rising its ugly head.

As voters, people wish that the Central government whether it is Modi 3.0 should ensure that this menace ends. Political parties should understand that they come to power and draw salaries from the taxes paid by the common man and they should work as "Karyakartas" of people and not as their 'Maibaap'. They need to learn the meaning of decency, decorum and the core values of democracy.



LETTERS

Madhavi Latha's act irrational

IN the presence of one woman police officer BJP candidate Kompella Madhavi Latha checks the voter ID cards of Burkha - clad women's and shamelessly ask them to lift their veils to cross check with photography on the card. She doesn't feel sorry for what she has done and shamelessly says that she is the candidate and she has rightly to check cards without face mask. The irrational behavior of Madhavi Latha proves that she has poor knowledge in law or doesn't obey the law. No candidate has the right to lift someone's veil to check her identity. If she has suspicion she can ask the polling officer to verify the voters identity. What will happen to fate of the people if such candidate wins the elections?

Zeeshan, Kazipet

TMC on a tightrope

TMC is in a shaky wicket since 2019, when the party has been reduced to 22 seats out of 42. Since then TMC has been on the downslide. In the 2021 assembly election the drama of Mamata getting hurt and fasting for 24 hours did the trick. But still BJP came out strong. In 2024, Mamata is on the receiving end with Sandeshkali virtually making her defensive. Never in her career as a politician has she been so subdued as she is now. Her support to Shahjahan Sheik increased her problem. The entire Hindu Samaj is now ranged against Mamata and she is staring at a total eclipse of her party. She is in for her greatest surprise of winning less than ten seats. Once it happens it is as good as Mamata being written off from West Bengal politics. Her influence will be marginal. The beginning of the end came when she lost Assembly Election and later on won through another seat to remain as CM.

C K Subramaniam, Navi Mumbai

Voters alone not to be blamed

IT is not right to blame only voters for low turnout in the city. Whether it is PM, Home Minister, the other colleagues from the ruling party, everyone who campaigned in the state and capital and elsewhere rarely spoke on the real issues. In Hyderabad, the BJP's new poster women Madhavi Latha and present MP AIMIM Chief Asaudin Owasis were seen focusing only on communal attacks. Under this circumstances, the voters ultimately prefer to stay back.

N Nagarajan, Hyderabad

Threat of nuclear war is more tangible

A PROPOS editorial 'Nuclear war risk reaches tipping point'. The UNGA resolution in 2017, to initiate global negotiation on a treaty that prohibits nuclear weapons remained more on paper than get translated to tangible course correction towards elimination of nuclear weapons in the world. More and more countries are joining the nuclear club with impunity. The so called super powers - The US and Russia are openly saber rattling to use nuclear weapons in the ongoing Ukraine war. The Russians are already readying their nuclear-tipped missiles on the pretext that the US is supplying Ukraine F16 fighter jets that are nuclear capable. The looming threat of nuclear war is more tangible over the mankind in spite of the disastrous effects the bombs have had on Japan's cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the after-effects of which are still being endured environmentally and genetically by the population.

S Lakshmi, Hyderabad

Voters losing interest to vote

EVEN after the lots of campaigns and promotional awareness done by the Election Commission of India (ECI) to substantially increase the voter's participation and increase the turnout rate, the general assembly elections produces no such optimistic outcome. The fourth phase of election have been conducted successfully in 96 constituencies across 10 State and Union Territory and has recorded average 62.9% voters turnout with lowest 36.58% logs in J&K's Srinagar and highest 76.02% recorded in West Bengal. This particularly represents the lack of interest among voters to decide to whom they want them to serve.

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BENGALURU ONLINE

Railways introduces affordable food counters in seven stations

BENGALURU: In a move aimed at enhancing passenger experience and ensuring access to affordable meals, few of Karnataka's railway stations are now equipped with low-cost food counters. The Indian Railway Board has initiated this program, establishing counters offering economical yet nutritious food options near general compartment coaches at over 100 railway stations across the nation. Among these, seven stations in Karnataka have been selected for the implementation of this scheme.

Passengers traveling through prominent railway stations such as Mangaluru Central and Junction, KSR Bengaluru, Yeshwantpur, Mysuru, Vijayapura, and Ballari will now have access to subsidised food counters. This initiative is a collaborative effort between the Indian Railways Catering and Tourism Corporation (IRCTC) and Indian Railways, with the primary goal of ensuring that passengers, especially those traveling in unreserved compartments, have access to quality meals at affordable prices. Unlike the previous system where passengers relied on railway station restaurants offering Janatha meals, these new counters are conveniently located directly on the platforms. This strategic placement significantly enhances accessibility and affordability, making it easier for passengers to purchase meals during their journey. As part of the initiative, approximately 150 platforms across 100 railway stations nationwide now offer this service.

The menu at these low-cost food counters includes breakfast options starting at Rs. 20, light meals priced at Rs. 50, and 200 ml of water available for Rs. 3. This initiative not only addresses the nutritional needs of passengers but also ensures that they can enjoy a satisfying meal without straining their budget.

The Public Relations Officer (PRO) of the railway department has confirmed these details, underscoring the railway's commitment to enhancing passenger satisfaction and comfort.

Read more at

<https://epaper.thehansindia.com>

Lawyers not liable under COPRA for deficiency in Services: SC

NEW DELHI

IN a significant verdict, the Supreme Court on Tuesday held the lawyers do not come within the purview of Consumer Protection Act (COPRA) and cannot be sued for "deficiency in service" before the consumer courts. The top court said a considerable amount of direct control is exercised by the client over the manner in which an advocate renders his services during the course of his employment. The services hired or availed of an advocate would be that of a contract "of personal service" and would, therefore, stand excluded from the definition of "service", it said.

A bench of justices Bela M Trivedi and Pankaj Mithal said the legal profession is sui generis (unique) and the nature of work is specialised and cannot be compared with other professions. The top court said the very purpose and object of the Consumer Protection Act 1986 as re-enacted in 2019 was to provide protection to the consumers from unfair trade practices and unethical business practices, and the legislature never intended to include either the professions or the services rendered by the professionals within the purview of the said Act.

"A service hired or availed of an advocate is a service

under 'a contract of personal service', and therefore would fall within the exclusionary part of the definition of 'Service' contained in Section 2 (42) of the Consumer Protection Act, 2019. A complaint alleging 'deficiency in service' against Advocates practising legal profession would not be maintainable under the Consumer Protection Act, 2019," the bench said.

The judgment came on a plea filed by the bar bodies and other individuals challenging a 2007 verdict of the National Consumer Disputes Redressal Commission (NCDRC), which has ruled that advocates and their services come under the purview of the Consumer Protection Act, 1986. The top court said the object of the Consumer Protection Act was to provide to the consumers timely and effective administration and settlement of their disputes.

"If the services provided by all the professionals are also brought within the purview of the Act, there would be flood-gate of litigations in the commissions/forums established under the Act, particularly because the remedy provided under the Act is inexpensive and summary in nature," the bench said.

Observing that the legal profession cannot be equated with any other traditional professions, the bench said it is not commercial in nature



A service hired or availed of an advocate is a service under 'a contract of personal service', and therefore would fall within the exclusionary part of the definition of 'Service' contained in Section 2 (42) of the Consumer Protection Act, 2019. The judgment came on a plea filed by the bar bodies and other individuals challenging a 2007 verdict of the National Consumer Disputes Redressal Commission (NCDRC), which has ruled that advocates and their services come under the purview of the Consumer Protection Act, 1986.

but is essentially a service-oriented and noble profession. "It cannot be gainsaid that the role of Advocates is indispensable in the Justice Delivery System. An evolution of jurisprudence to keep our Constitution vibrant is possible only with the posi-

tive contribution of the Advocates. The Advocates are expected to be fearless and independent for protecting the rights of citizens, for upholding the Rule of law and also for protecting the Independence of Judiciary. "People repose immense

faith in the Judiciary, and the Bar being an integral part of the Judicial System has been assigned a very crucial role for preserving the independence of the Judiciary, and in turn the very democratic set up of the Nation. The advocates are perceived to be the intellectuals amongst the elites and social activists amongst the down-trodden," it said.

That is the reason they are expected to act according to the principles of "uberrima fides" -- the utmost good faith, integrity, fairness and loyalty while handling the legal proceedings of his client, it added. The top court said being a responsible officer of the court and an important adjunct of the administration of justice, an advocate owes his duty not only to his client but also to the court as well as to the opposite side.

"The legal profession is different from the other professions also for the reason that what the Advocates do, affects not only an individual but the entire administration of justice, which is the foundation of the civilised society. It must be remembered that the legal profession is a solemn and serious profession," it said.

The apex court said the legal profession has always been held in very high esteem because of the stellar role played by the stalwarts in the profession to strength-

en the judicial system in the country. "Therefore, having regard to the role, status and duties of the Advocates as the professionals, we are of the opinion that the legal profession is sui generis i.e., unique in nature and cannot be compared with any other profession," it said.

In its 2007 judgment, the consumer commission held that advocates come under the purview of the Consumer Protection Act and can be sued in a consumer court by their clients for any deficiency in service. The national consumer forum's verdict had held that the legal services rendered by lawyers would come within the ambit of section 2(1)(o) of the 1986 Act.

Section 2(1)(o) of the Act defines the word "service" to mean a "service of any description, which is made available to potential users and includes, but not limited to, the provision of facilities in connection with banking, financing insurance, transport, processing, supply of electrical or other energy; board or lodging or both, housing construction, entertainment, amusement or the purveying of news or other information, but does not include the rendering of any service free of charge or under a contract of personal service". The top court, however, stayed the August 6, 2007 verdict of the NCDRC in April 2009. (PTI)

9,600 children jailed in adult prisons between 2016 and Dec 2021

NEW DELHI

MORE than 9,600 children were wrongly incarcerated in adult prisons across India between January 1, 2016, and December 31, 2021, a new study has found.

The data for the study -- "Incarceration of Children in Prisons in India" -- was obtained under the Right to Information (RTI) Act. The study by legal rights body iProbono sheds light on a deeply concerning issue affecting the juvenile justice system in India.

The data indicates that at least 9,681 children were wrongly incarcerated in adult prisons between January 1, 2016, and December 31, 2021.

"This means an average of over 1,600 children were transferred out of prisons across the country every year," the study said, referring to the children identified by Juvenile Justice Boards (JJB) and moved to juvenile homes from adult jails. This figure was ascertained on the basis of responses to RTI requests by 285 district and central prisons out of a total of 570.

"This also does not include the 749 other prisons from which we did not request data, including sub jails, women's prisons, open prisons, special prisons, borstal schools and other

prisons. It also, as previously mentioned, only includes those who were successfully identified and transferred, not all those who were juveniles at the time of their alleged offence, including those identified by prison visitors, families or through self-identification," it said.

Several states failed to adequately respond to enquiries, with notable non-compliance from Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal, Nagaland and the Union Territory of Ladakh. Among the states that responded, the study said the figures reveal alarming patterns.

With a response rate -- jails that provided data -- of 71 per cent, Uttar Pradesh reported that 2,914 children were transferred from prisons to juvenile homes. However, the data indicates discrepancies, with some prisons showing high numbers of detained children despite no visits from JJBs.

In Bihar, where 34 per cent of prisons responded, 1,518 children were transferred out of adult jails. Instances were noted of more children being identified by JJBs than those transferred.

Madhya Pradesh provided no data despite repeated appeals under the RTI Act. West Bengal also provided no data.

Responses from 35 per cent of prisons in Maha-



rashtira revealed that only 34 children were transferred, significantly lower than those identified by JJBs.

The study found that Delhi demonstrated a highly organised approach to juvenile justice, with clear directives from Delhi High Court aimed at preventing the incarceration of children in adult facilities.

Haryana -- where data was provided by 90 per cent of prisons -- transferred 1,621 children, correlating well with the number identified during JJB visits.

In Rajasthan, 108 children were transferred, ac-

cording to data from 51 per cent of its prisons, with a notable lack of information on children identified during JJB visits. Chhattisgarh transferred 159 children, data from 44 per cent of its jails showed, revealing disparities in JJB visitation patterns across prisons.

Jharkhand transferred 1,115 children, also highlighting discrepancies in JJB visitations and identification practices, with 60 per cent of its prisons responding to RTI queries for the study.

Prisons in Odisha and Tamil Nadu demonstrated ex-

tremely low response rates to the queries, with no children reported to have been transferred from prisons to juvenile homes.

The report relied on data obtained under Section 6 of the RTI Act, which pertains to the Request for Obtaining Information.

Between April 2022 and March 2023, 124 RTI applications were filed across 28 states and two Union Territories, primarily directed to Prison Headquarters, except for Uttar Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, where applications were filed in each district and central jail at

The study by legal rights body iProbono obtained data through the RTI Act, exposes flaws in the juvenile justice system. This figure was ascertained on the basis of responses to RTI requests by 285 district and central prisons out of a total of 570. This also does not include the 749 other prisons from which request for data was not made, including sub jails, women's prisons, open prisons, special prisons, borstal schools and other prisons. It also includes only those who were successfully identified and transferred. Several states failed to adequately respond to enquiries, with notable non-compliance from Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal, Nagaland and the Union Territory of Ladakh.

the directions of the Prison Headquarters.

The data excludes the Union Territory jurisdictions of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Dadra and Nagar Haveli and Daman and Diu, and Lakshadweep due to the absence of district and central jails there.

The human factor

With their vast experience in M&As, the Tatas should’ve known that mergers are also about people making the synergies real

THE TATA GROUP’S firefighting of yet another airline crisis—involving Air India Express, after Vistara last month—should serve as a cautionary example of the need to prioritise human resource management, especially during mergers and acquisitions (M&As). Last week, low-cost carrier AI Express cancelled numerous flights after a section of its cabin crew called in sick. As thousands of passengers were left stranded, the airline terminated the services of a few employees but later reinstated them after a conciliatory meeting called by the chief labour commissioner. The chief executive officers of Air India and Vistara have met employees of both carriers, and apprised them of various aspects of the M&A that is likely to be complete by the year-end or early 2025. Around 7,000 employees have also been assessed and are to be integrated with the merged entity by June.

While the steps taken to contain the crisis are appreciable, the disruptions at AI Express could have been avoided. In April, the airline’s employees’ union had written to the Tata Group and the head of Air India alleging mismanagement, lack of equal treatment, and reduced pay as a result of new HR policies. And last month itself, the Tata Group, which jointly owns Vistara with Singapore Airlines, contended with a similar strike by pilots over pay cuts resulting from new contracts that reduced the number of flying hours allotted to them. It is surprising that the top management did not anticipate similar trouble brewing in AI Express. The nature of problems faced by Vistara and AI Express shows that mergers can readily face resistance from employees with diverse ownership and culture backgrounds. Business studies widely acknowledge differences in corporate culture, lack of involvement of management, poor communication, etc. as factors that contribute to a high rate of failure of M&As; according to several studies, between 50 and 90% of mergers fail worldwide.

A recent McKinsey article has also pointed out companies that effectively manage culture during integration planning are more likely to capture cost and revenue synergies. According to a Mercer study, while many tend to view culture as a non-financial risk, it can derail 30% of the transactions from meeting financial targets. For example, look at the problem that grounded the US’ largest merger — the AOL-Time Warner deal in January 2000 that created the biggest company in the world. Ignoring the people problem resulted in a clash of cultures that set the stage for a spectacular corporate collapse. AOL executives lorded it over their Time Warner counterparts, who felt they were being acquired by brash, young interlopers with inflated dollars. The AOL way was fast, loose, and aggressive, and Time Warner executives — schooled in more genteel business practices — rebelled. In the midst of clashing cultures and conflicting management styles, AOL’s business slowed and then stalled.

For mergers to succeed across sectors, it is thus crucial that people risks are identified early and leaders communicate effectively and win their trust. The Tatas should have known better. After all, India’s biggest conglomerate has acquired companies domestically as well as overseas, and has enough experience in these issues. The Tata experience should serve valuable lessons to other companies — they should not ever forget that mergers are not just about balance sheets, cash flows or marketing synergies; they are also about people making the synergies real.

Shipping is a dirty business. Cleaning it up is lucrative

SOUTH KOREA’S TECH-heavy stock market has found inspiration in an under-appreciated sector of the nation’s sprawling economy. HD Hyundai Marine Solution Co. raised more than \$500 million in its initial public offering last week and immediately found momentum: The stock doubled in the first few days of trading, taking its market value past \$5.8 billion.

It’s not a chipmaker like Samsung Electronics Co. nor an electric-vehicle battery supplier like LG Energy Solution Ltd. HD Hyundai Marine is in the ship-services business, and investors have taken notice. The biggest winner from its meteoric first-week rise is its largest shareholder, South Korea’s Hyundai conglomerate. Private-equity firm KKR & Co. is also counting its profits as it retains a 24% stake after the listing. KKR, HD Hyundai Co., and its slate of new investors are all betting that a global green movement that’s taking hold in industries from server farms to automobiles will prove lucrative to the ocean transport sector.

Regulations implemented by the International Maritime Organization in 2020, called IMO2020, mandate hitting reduction targets for sulphur dioxide emissions to reduce shore-side air pollution. That means using less, and cleaner, fuel. A separate set of goals for greenhouse gas emissions, called the 2023 IMO GHG Strategy, aims to cut carbon-dioxide emission intensity 40% by 2030, including 10% of all fuels being zero-emission.

There’s a few ways these goals can be achieved. The first is to build entirely new ships with cleaner, more efficient engines. That’s happening, and is driving demand at ship builders. Another is to retrofit devices onto existing engines that filter exhaust air, make tweaks that ensure they run more efficiently, or convert them to dual-fuel so that they can use cleaner alternatives like methanol or ammonia.

Each of these choices requires a follow-up service, including checking and replacing components, as well as testing whether a ship is running at maximum efficiency. These ongoing costs will be an increasingly important part of marine-transport operations. It’s also an opportunity for maintenance companies.

HD Hyundai Marine’s business does both: retrofitting and after-market support for ships. It also provides fuel supply for maritime vessels, known as bunker service. Among the deals it has struck is a contract to help Greek operator Thenamaris LNG implement re-liquefaction on at least one of its carriers, a process that returns evaporated gas back to their tanks. This cuts wastage and carbon emissions. The business also installs treatment systems to clean up ballast water, a common cause of ocean pollution, to make ships meet stricter environmental regulations.

These eco-friendly vessels tend to require greater care — the engines are often more complex, and the parts more expensive. That’s why HD Hyundai Marine is so confident that revenue will keep rising. According to the company, HD Hyundai Maritime’s annual turnover includes 50,000 purchase orders and 80,000 deliveries with warehouses in Busan, Rotterdam, Houston, Singapore, and soon Dubai. As global manufacturing diversifies away from China, we’ll see more factories open in Vietnam, India, Mexico, and Eastern Europe. Rather than replacing China, supply chains will require ships making calls in more ports and with more frequency.

To keep up, the firm will have to grow. IPO proceeds will go toward expanding shipyards in Southeast Asia, increasing warehouse capacity, and developing technologies for making vessels more green, Chief executive officer Lee Ki-dong said in an interview with *Bloomberg News* last week. Each of these moves will add cost and complexity, but if executed efficiently will also offer competitive advantages.

There are myriad ways companies like HD Hyundai can mess up. Expanding too fast and overspending on new facilities is a big risk. Failing to keep up with industry trends, or the market itself suffering a downturn are others. Right now, investors don’t seem concerned. Their love for this exciting new category of company may wane when the EV market picks up again, or the smartphone sector finally returns to growth. But, for now, ship maintenance is exciting.

ON MAY 5, CHINESE president Xi Jinping arrived in France for a five-day Europe tour. Xi’s first trip to Europe in five years looks markedly different from his last one in 2019, when multi-billion-dollar deals were signed and Italy became the only G7 nation to join China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In 2024, the European Union’s (EU) perception of China stands dramatically altered against a backdrop of rising trade tensions and concerns over Beijing’s “no limits” partnership with Moscow.

Playing divide and rule

Xi’s first stop was France, which has time and again advocated for European strategic autonomy, often interpreted as scripting a third way between the US-China rivalry. Last year, President Emmanuel Macron ruffled feathers with his controversial comments on Taiwan, and more recently, during his speech at the Sorbonne, he urged Europe not to become a vassal of the US — music to Xi’s ears.

European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen’s presence in Paris was an attempt to present a united European front. Under her hardened approach, the EU has launched anti-subsidy probes into China’s electric vehicle (EV) sector and investigations into China’s procurement of medical devices. Just before Xi’s arrival in Europe, the Commission launched fresh crackdowns on TikTok and fashion retailer Shein. With allegations of overcapacity, unfair competition, and a ballooning trade deficit that stood at €400 billion in 2022, EU-China trade tensions are at their peak, underpinned by political tensions revolving around Chinese espionage activities, and exports of dual-use components aiding Russia’s war effort against Ukraine.

Even while Macron supports the EU’s “de-risking” approach and anti-subsidies probes, Paris, keen to attract Chi-

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nese investment in its own EV sector, has emphasised Europe’s need to rebalance trade ties with China. For Xi, Paris’ malleability, combined with its significant influence in the EU, is leverage to dilute the EU’s toughened China position.

In contrast to France, where China’s wider relationship with Europe was the focus, the next two stops on Xi’s tour were Serbia and Hungary, both pro-China forces in Europe, where Beijing’s ties with Moscow are no barrier to cooperation.

In Hungary, often referred to as China’s Trojan horse in the EU, Chinese investments, such as the €7.3 billion to construct an EV battery plant near Debrecen, have made Hungary the largest recipient of Chinese foreign direct investment (FDI) in the Central and Eastern European region. In 2023, Hungary received FDI worth €13 billion, out of which €7.6 billion came from China, and the country also hosts Huawei’s largest external supply centre. Ramping up ties with Hungary is important as Budapest gears up to take over the EU Council’s rotating presidency in July. As the Union’s serial disruptor, Budapest has often blocked critical EU statements on China relating to its actions in the South China Sea and Hong Kong. Capitalising on Hungary’s disenchantment with Brussels, an EU member state unequivocally in its favour is in China’s interest.

Xi’s stopover in EU candidate country

Serbia was smartly timed to coincide with the 25th anniversary of the 1999 NATO bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade — an opportunity to highlight US-led NATO’s disruptive global impact. With 29 new agreements signed, the visit had the intended effect of deepening China-Serbia bilateral cooperation. Italy’s BRI exit has increased the strategic importance of the Western Balkans as a route to access EU markets. Chinese investment data posits €10.3 billion flowed into Serbia from 2009-2021, with bilateral trade increasing from \$450 million in 2012 to \$4 billion in 2023.

Implications for India

Xi’s Europe tour has highlighted Beijing’s standard gimmick of playing divide and rule in Europe. With op-eds featured in prominent Serbian and Hungarian media, Xi’s charm offensive may have worked to double down on China’s relationships with these two nations. Yet his efforts at damage control and stabilising relations with the wider continent may not have been as successful.

Instead, his obvious attempts to drive a wedge between EU member states and exploit their divisions is likely to cast darker shadows. For Beijing, a possible Trump return in the White House presents a rationale to woo Europe in anticipation of weakening transatlantic ties. Yet, China’s unwill-



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Views are personal

AS IS OFTEN pointed out, nature has fairly provided every country — big or small, rich or poor — the same amount of all types of spectrum. However, a similar principle of equity does not appear to have been applied by nature in the allocation of spectrum disputes and controversies. India has been rather fertile in spawning scams and controversies in the field of spectrum. Another interesting episode appears to be ripening, and the cognoscenti are rubbing their hands in gleeful anticipation of the magnum opus in the making — this time, as 6 GHz spectrum is deployed in major countries of the world in licence-exempt (unlicensed) conditions for modern Wi-Fi and short-range devices (essential in telemetry, healthcare, research, etc.), the decision in India is being successfully stalled by the high-pressure lobbying of vested interests wanting to block new complementary technologies.

Licence-exempt 6 GHz Wi-Fi is universally accepted to be a great public interest facility, since it gives more affordable and improved quality access to broadband. As we transition to advanced mobile generations like 5G and 6G, the spectrum frequencies are necessarily higher, which unfortunately means poorer penetration into buildings, and hence heighten the need for strong Wi-Fi coverage. To overcome this difficulty, about 84

countries have adopted, evaluated, or introduced unlicensed 6 GHz Wi-Fi. This is the only band available with 1100 MHz contiguous spectrum to accommodate three overlapping carriers of 320 MHz, which are essential to use the next-gen apps that are available today but are too data-intensive and cannot be handled by the existing Wi-Fi networks based on 2.4 GHz and 5.0 GHz. These next-gen apps of 5G and 6G (of 2030) require modern Wi-Fi 6E and Wi-Fi 7, which work best on licence-exempt 6 GHz.

While India already has nationwide networks of the latest mobile technology, 5G, it is unfortunately lagging in adoption of Wi-Fi technology as well as coverage, and this could greatly harm its digital ambitions. We have hardly 1% of public Wi-Fi hotspots available as per global norms, and we are also still using the earlier technologies of 802.11ac (Wi-Fi 5) and 802.11n (Wi-Fi 4). These work on 2.4 and 5 GHz spectrum and are out of tune with today’s mobile technologies and customer requirements. Moreover, Indian Wi-Fi, which has to carry over 70% of the data, has

only 689 MHz spectrum, whereas 5G, which has garnered only 11% mobile subscribers as yet, has about 3700 MHz, or a five-fold higher spectrum. The legacy bands of Wi-Fi cannot accommodate 160 MHz and 320 MHz carriers and so cannot handle the data-intensive apps desired by today’s consumers. The modern Wi-Fi technologies need the wide swathe of the 1100 MHz band in 6 GHz available in India to efficiently accommodate and thereby facilitate usage of the more data-intensive and immersive apps for the customers as well as for the commercial success of 5G and 6G. The 2023 6G vision document raises the clarion call for 50 million public Wi-Fi hotspots (PWH) by 2030, or 8 million

PWHs per year from now — a herculean task. It is amazing, therefore, that licence-exempt 6 GHz is delayed like this.

More puzzling is the issue of equipment availability. While the devices and network ecosystems for Wi-Fi 6E and Wi-Fi 7 are plentifully available from several trusted sources, it is well-known that 6 GHz IMT equipment is available only or predominantly from

one source, which the government of India has placed in the non-trusted category from a national security point of view. Moreover, the adoption of 6 GHz IMT would place India out of line with the western nations and almost all the developed economies, and possibly bracket us in the same category as China. When 6 GHz IMT could clearly become a game-stopper for us, why then is the right decision being avoided?

Large and recurring economic gain could flow from licence-exempt 6 GHz spectrum band, which would be as much as \$60 billion (~₹5 trillion every year) — much more than the one-time proceeds of spectrum auction. These annual economic benefits would be happening from the improved commercial success of 5G as well as digitalisation of industry, modernisation of agriculture and healthcare, and massive energy savings from the delineating of the full 1100 MHz of the 6 GHz band. With such attractive socioeconomic benefits flowing from licence-exempt 6 GHz usage with modern Wi-Fi, one is truly perplexed at the continued stonewalling of its allocation. India could indeed lose heavily on the digital front due to this costly delay. Ironically, mobile operators need 6 GHz Wi-Fi for 5G’s commercial sustainability, but are blocking it and harming themselves.

prompting policy measures such as performance-linked incentive schemes and anti-dumping duties. The intricate balance between economic interests, strategic considerations, and policy responses delineates the complexity of the India-China trade relationship, with implications reaching across multiple domains. —Amareet Kumar, Hazaribagh

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EUROPEAN EFFORTS TO FIND A FOOTING IN CHINA PRESENT OPPORTUNITIES FOR INDIA

Xi and a tale of two Europes



HARSH V PANT
SHAIREE MALHOTRA

Respectively, vice president for studies, and associate fellow-Europe, ORF

As India navigates its international chessboard, it would be useful to pay active attention and play its cards accordingly

Wrong signal to 6 GHz spectrum

India stands to lose out on socioeconomic benefits flowing from licence-exempt 6 GHz usage due to the continued stonewalling of its allocation

The adoption of 6 GHz IMT would place India out of line with the western nations and almost all the developed economies, and possibly bracket us in the same category as China

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Inflation eases marginally

Being within the Reserve Bank of India’s (RBI) tolerance range, India’s consumer price-based retail inflation rate eased marginally to 4.83% in April on an annual basis from 4.85% in March this year. The April data, however, showed that despite a slight increase in the prices of food baskets, some kitchen items showed a decline to an extent in the same month.

According to the RBI, food price uncertainties continue to weigh on the inflation trajectory. According to the data released by the National Statistical Office, inflation in the food basket was at 8.7% in April, marginally up from 8.52% in March. While food was likely underpinned by higher perishables, fuel inflation benefitted from reduction in retail prices. For the central bank, strong growth prospects and contained inflationary expectations will continue to keep

policy in a comfortable slot in the first half of the fiscal year. —Sanjay Chopra, Mohali

Trade deficit

The recent resurgence of China as India’s primary trading partner, with bilateral trade reaching \$118.4 billion, signifies economic interdependence. However, this dynamic also underscores concerns regarding India’s economic dependency and the significant trade deficit,

prompting policy measures such as performance-linked incentive schemes and anti-dumping duties. The intricate balance between economic interests, strategic considerations, and policy responses delineates the complexity of the India-China trade relationship, with implications reaching across multiple domains. —Amareet Kumar, Hazaribagh

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DECCAN Chronicle

15 MAY 2024

Market turbulent, but are reforms working?

Over the last few days, the Indian stock markets have been wobbling in spite of fairly stable economic indicators of the country. Ever since the Lok Sabha elections began, the Sensex has been on a losing streak, giving sleepless nights to investors — and the reasons are all political.

On Monday, the volatility index had touched a 52-week high at 21.41, triggering a fear-induced sell-out in the equity markets.

The Sensex lost nearly 700 points, forcing Union home minister Amit Shah to step in to restore a sense of calm among investors by asserting that the BJP will come back to power with a clear majority, addressing the underlying anxiety of either a minority government or a hung house.

The Sensex finally ended the day in green and continued to remain in the positive territory on Tuesday as well. However, the volatility index, which has been on the rise since the last week of April, continues to stay elevated — the longest ever fear streak — despite unanimous opinion among economists that the Indian economy will continue to grow at over seven per cent, which is not a small feat.

A cocktail of negative developments such as the sell-out by foreign institutional investors, dismal quarterly results and strong dollar might have influenced the stock market behaviour. Nevertheless, the fear of uncertainty in the wake of a possible dip in the BJP's expected MP seats had the most decisive impact, which is most characteristic of a bygone third-world economy.

When the economy is heavily dependent on government policies, stock markets turn jittery when the patron — the government — is under threat. For the investors are not keen on taking bets on unexpected turns of events or unfavourable policy decisions.

After the 13-month-long Atal Behari Vajpayee government and its predecessors from other political leanings such as the United Front and the Congress, investors believed that economic liberalisation has got bipartisan approval. Economic reforms were not rolled back even though the first Congress-led UPA government was formed with the support of the Marxists.

The current fear among investors over the magnitude of the BJP's victory, therefore, is unfounded. Whether the BJP wins 400 seats in the Lok Sabha or 273, its government will pursue the same economic policy as it has been doing for the last 10 years as the economic policy does not require absolute majority. So why should investors worry about this detail?

Investors, however, may have a reason to worry if the BJP does not win enough seats to form a majority because the new dispensation may have its policy preferences.

However, if economic reforms have bipartisan support as it had earlier, what is the trigger for the worry? Evidently, it could be a highly populist route that the Congress-led alliance had opted for. If the Congress-led alliance wins a significantly large number of seats even without forming the government, it could reintroduce socialist strain in the economy — something that the capitalist class worries about.

However, it is high time that political and business classes reassess whether the benefits of economic reform are reaching every section of the society. Is the theory of trickle-down effect actually working?

India's bold gambit in Chabahar

In the wake of signing on to be a part of Quad, India may have been betting on the robust foundation of its strategic alignment with the United States that steering an independent course in other foreign policy matters would not hurt the relationship.

A US state department spokesperson's warning about sanctions applying to India and any Indians doing business with Iran came soon after India signed a 10-year contract to operate a terminal at the Chabahar port in Iran. This has been described by India as a flagship project that it has been involved in for a long time.

The Chabahar port on the Iranian coast on the Gulf of Oman, very close to the Gwadar port in Balochistan province which Pakistan is developing in partnership with China, is vital in terms of logistics as a route for Indian goods to reach Iran and landlocked Central Asian nations, including Afghanistan. It also figures in India-Iran-Russia cooperation plans to develop a significant trade route.

India may be hoping, as in the case of its massive deals in buying and refining Russian oil for export to Europe as well as domestic use in the wake of the Ukraine war, that the US would not interfere in a project that is only for trade.

There were EU restrictions in place for trading in Russian oil which, however, did not prevent the movement of crude to India and refined fuel out. It was revealed that the US saw its own interests being served in terms of helping keep a check on the global price of oil.

The Chabahar port is a matter in which India is pursuing its interest, which must, of course, come first as much as the buying of a bit of Iranian oil was also thought of as a right not to be interfered with by other powers, however fraught the West's relationship with Iran may be.

India is also investing in the development of the port infrastructure to facilitate a transport and transit corridor. Given the projected benefits of sharing in the port's future, India has taken bold steps in pursuit of its interest and that of the region over US objections to dealing with Iran.

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Subhani



After 1-yr unrest, Manipur in need of a healing touch



M.P. Nathanael

The eerie silence that pervaded the area around Nayanseina village near the Churachandpur-Bishnupur border in Manipur stood shattered a little past midnight on April 27, 2024, when a bomb exploded in the India Reserve Battalion camp harbouring a company of CRPF's 128 Battalion. Four CRPF personnel were seriously injured, two of whom succumbed to the injuries later. Though Kuki militants were suspected to be the culprits, the security adviser, Kuldeip Singh, a former director-general of the CRPF, wisely chose to refrain from naming any group.

The northeastern state has been roiled by clashes between the Imphal Valley-based Meitei community and the Kuki-Zo tribes, who inhabit the hills largely towards Churachandpur and Kongpokpi for the past one year. After a brief lull for a month, the violence returned when extremists from the two communities exchanged fire in the Tengnoupal-Kakching area on April 12. Two men were injured. While the Kuki-Zo tribes are Christians, the Meiteis are largely Vaishnavite Hindus, with a fair sprinkling of Christians and Muslims among them.

Two Kukis guarding their village were killed and their bodies brutally mutilated in Kamu Saichang village on Imphal East-Kangpokpi border on April 13 by the "Arambai Tenggol", a radical outfit that claims to protect the interests of Meiteis with a call to return to their erstwhile religion Sana-mahi. The video of brutal killing and dragging of the two slain Kukis went viral, leading to tensions between the two communities.

The withdrawal of 50 companies of the BSF and CRPF from Manipur for deployment in West Bengal added to the consternation of both

communities. They blocked the roads to prevent the departure of the Central forces, which speaks volumes for the confidence they repose in these forces. Despite the Assam Rifles playing a significant role in containing the violence, there was a clamour among the Meiteis for the withdrawal of this oldest paramilitary force in the country. According to the Reporter's Collective, a report prepared by the Assam Rifles blames Manipur chief minister N. Biren Singh's "political authoritarianism for the conflict", though the authorities deny having prepared the report.

With over 5,600 weapons looted from police armouries along with about 6,50,000 rounds of ammunition, of which just about 1,500 weapons and 20,000 rounds have been recovered, the fear looms large that these weapons are being used to attack the Kukis. The arms looted include sophisticated weapons like AK assault rifles, light machine-guns and explosives.

If the weapons are in the possession of militant outfits like the People's Liberation Army, People's Republic of Kangleipak, United National Liberation Front (now surrendered without weapons) and Arambai Tenggol — though not declared a militant outfit — the return of normalcy cannot be expected. Despite appeals to deposit the looted weapons, the response has been poor. Of late, weapon drop boxes have been placed at vantage points with the message that the looted weapons be dropped in these boxes. The response needs to be monitored.

As the Arambai Tenggol enjoys the patronage of the erstwhile maharaja and parliamentarian Leishemba Sanajaoba, and even the incumbent CM, this outfit, with a strength of over

The death toll since the ethnic conflict began on May 3, 2023 has risen to 230, with over 65,000 displaced people languishing in 320 relief camps. Over 1,100 from both communities were maimed.

50,000, calls the shots. No one dares to disobey its dictates. On January 24 this year, 37 MLAs and two MPs were directed to take an oath to convey their demands to the Centre. Among its demands are the abrogation of the "Suspension of Operation", better known as SoO Agreement, with the Kuki-Zo, border fencing along the Indo-Myanmar border, the Assam Rifles' withdrawal from Manipur, the relocation of Myanmar refugees from Manipur to Mizoram and the removal of illegal migrants from the Scheduled Tribes List.

The SoO, that was signed in 2008 by the Kuki National Organisation and United People's Front combine, a conglomeration of 24 surrendered Kuki outfits, the Centre and the Manipur government, which was extended on a yearly basis till February 29, 2024 has not been extended further. The state withdrew from the agreement in March last year and failed to send its representative to the meeting convened to extend the agreement this year. The agreement is now in a limbo.

The death toll since the ethnic conflict began on May 3, 2023 has risen to 230, with over 65,000 displaced people languishing in 320 relief camps. Over 1,100 people from both communities have sustained serious injuries in the unabated violence that continues to rock the state.

While Prime Minister Narendra Modi said that "because of the timely intervention of the Government of India and efforts made by the Government of Manipur, there has been a marked improvement in the situation in the state", much more still needs to be done.

Any claim of normalcy having been restored would fall flat until the Meiteis can freely move to the hills, and the Kuki-Zo tribals confidently venture into the Imphal Valley without fearing any attack by Meiteis.

The denizens of Churachandpur have had to face inconceivable misery since the mayhem of May 3 last year. The district hospital is handicapped for want of an adequate number of specialists and para-medical staff as all Meiteis have chosen to stay safe in Imphal.

Those requiring specialised treatment have to visit Aizawl in Mizoram by the meandering road through the hills, covering a stretch of over 400 km via Thanlon and Parbung. Air travellers must go to Aizawl or Silchar to board a flight, though the nearest airport at Imphal is just 60 km away. The state needs to step in to mitigate the people's misery by deputing specialists and other staff from Central institutions like the AIIMS.

While the Kuki-Zo have been demanding a separate administration for the Kuki-Zo dominated areas, the Meiteis oppose this. The Union home ministry needs to step in to restore peace in the state by inviting the Kuki MLAs and the representatives of the Indigenous Tribal Leaders Forum, the All-Tribal Students Union Manipur, Kuki Inpi and the Meitei leaders for peace talks, and extracting a promise to abjure violence. The Naga tribal leaders and their MLAs, who surprisingly have remained aloof so far, need to be roped in as intercessors.

The restoration of peace will remain a far cry until the rank and file of the Arambai Tenggol and Manipur Leepun, the two radical outfits, are reined in. That most of the weapons looted last year from state police armouries are still in the hands of the miscreants poses a serious threat. A massive drive to retrieve these weapons through specific and accurate intelligence needs to be carried out.

The writer is a retired CRPF IGP who has served in Manipur for over a decade

LETTERS

VIP CULTURE EXPOSED

In a brazen show of VIP culture, an Andhra Pradesh MLA slapped a voter, after he had objected to the legislator jumping the queue at a polling booth in Guntur district. The voter returned the blow and the MLA's aides joined him in launching an all-out assault on the voter. No security personnel were seen intervening to rescue the voter. The retaliation by the voter shows that people are not going to tolerate this nonsense anymore. The viral video comes against the backdrop of a high-octane poll campaign in Andhra Pradesh. Tempers are also running high because both parties have a lot at stake in this election.

CK Ramani Jayanthi
Tiruchy

DARK DAYS OF EMERGENCY

There is not a person in INDI alliance who doesn't fail to accuse Narendra Modi of being a fascist though how many know the meaning is unknown. Indians, however, do know what is 'Police Raj' as experienced by citizens of all categories during the dark days of the Emergency imposed by Indira Gandhi and even now in a few States. India may prosper more under a benevolent dictator than under the conglomeration of parties who with different selfish agendas work in different directions.

B.S.Jayaraman
Coimbatore

FILL VACANCIES FIRST

We are not at all supportive of BJP or for that matter the Congress Party, as both have failed to solve the sufferings of the common man, especially the unemployed youth. Even when the Congress Party was in power for more than five decades there were crores of unemployed youth who had registered with Employment Exchanges. With the addition of crores of youth completing their education, the waiting list is increasing by crores every year. The ultimate sufferer is the common man, especially educated youth, who are frustrated with the shortage of employment opportunities. Due to the introduction of advanced technology, no Institution bothers to fill vacancies created by retirement. Due to this the services in those Institutions continue to worsen year after year. Even if the gap created by retirements is filled, at least a crore can be employed in our country. If there is a will, there is a way.

D.B. Madan
New Delhi

Mail your letters to
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Bhopinder Singh



Is the 'marketplace of ideas' beginning to get diminished in India's democracy?

Democracy, in an ideal situation, ought to be a contest of ideas, and not a public relations competition. The electoral season should trigger a marketplace of informed debates and fiercely contested ideas with supporting plans, declared priorities, and postulated solutions, to what troubles India. This would obviously entail the freedom of speech for all, an equitable space for ideas from all competing sides, fact-check culture, and detailed evaluation of "shadow" plans as promised in the manifestoes of various parties. The nuts and bolts of the path proposed should be made amply clear and curbs enforced on one-sided hijacking of the media, sophistry, spin-doctoring, deflections, or fear-mongering, to ensure that the constituents are able to assess the marketplace of ideas freely and fairly. But is it really so in the "world's largest democracy"? The short answer is "no".

Globally, democracies are regressing into public relations exercises with individuals and dynastic cults, unsubstantiated promises, and in the unique Indian experiment with democracy, with unsustainable promises of freebies and "reservations". Ironically, the more backsliding the agenda, the higher the traction! "Garibi Hatao" (eradicate poverty) was the winning slogan of Indira Gandhi's campaign in the 1971 election campaign (and also part of the 5th Five-Year Plan). Almost 55 years after that, with many decades afforded to the Congress Party and about 15 years out of the last 25-odd years to the BJP, there are over 800 million Indians surviving on

free staples. Only the semantics have changed to Pradhan Mantri Kalyan Anna Yojana (PMGKAY). The last Global Hunger Index ranked India at 111 out of 125 countries, but as it happens whenever something unsavoury is brought to light, the government swiftly attacked the report as "mischievous" with "mala fide intentions". A woman minister attributed the report methodology to getting "a phone call from Gallup and they are asked 'Are you hungry?'", and later mocked that had she been asked that question on a busy day, she too would have said: "Oh yes, I am." Sarcasm aside, that is not how the Hunger Index is calculated and the brutal reality beyond partisanship is that collectively all governments, be it from the Congress-led or BJP-led varieties, have failed India, even if the constituents themselves still defy their political leaders, as only Indians do.

The high-decibel electoral duels are replete with baseless insinuations, emotive alarmism, and "manufactured outrage", while being frighteningly low on meaningful content. The air of majoritarianism has injected a regrettable "us-versus-them" discourse that manifests itself recklessly and in a polarising manner with allusions to certain communities (what they eat, how they dress, what they ostensibly seek for India, etc). With the extent of the socio-economic crisis, agrarian distress, and wounded communities (such as in Manipur) — it is rather rich and wholly unpardonable to be discussing "mangalsutras", inheritance tax, non-vegetarian food, et al. The race for leadership is not decided amongst who is more

qualified, understanding, statesmanlike and accepting of the challenges, but by who is more religiously pious, more nativist (not progressive), or more aggressive towards the proverbial "other". The Opposition has no refreshing alternative in terms of "ideas" and only tries to "out-regress" or match the script of twentieth or nineteenth century with a combination of dynastic insinuations, and regional/ethnic supremacism in their boroghs. Amidst the meaningless drama of pretending to be more patriotic, holier-than-thou and essentially appealing to the basest of human instincts, the country is only becoming increasingly hungrier, angrier and more divided.

For starters, there is just no insistence that politicians show any concrete "plans", other than rather imperious personal "guarantees". Why can't facts, details, and the thought-through "plans" be put forth by all parties? Why can't the politicians table a semblance of "shadow budgets" and "shadow cabinets"?

The means of "shadow" (proposed) will inform the citizenry about what form, action and direction the various alternatives entail? It will be tantamount to putting your money where your mouth is in terms of showing budgetary allocations towards various sectors and regions (instead of making easy promises everywhere, which are never intended to be honoured, otherwise called "jumbals"). Instead of crying hoarse, the Opposition can posit their alternative vision and allocations in their "shadow budget" to demonstrate that their alternative plan can improve the existing situation or address wrongs. Sectoral

allocations would force clarity and trigger serious discussions on the competing "plans", instead of discussing personalities ad nauseum.

Doesn't the citizenry deserve to know the form of "reforms" and what will be retained, clearly? The orchestra of leaders on all sides harping on "don't you trust me" is condescending and patronising. All parties are resorting to this tiring admixture of hyperbole, rhetoric, whataboutery and sheer falsehoods without a care or concern at the fakeness and poison it injects into our society. The "world's largest democracy" seeking to be the rightful global hub of thriving innovation, large-heartedness and science-based progress cannot be lacking for plurality of ideas and diversity of opinions by being constantly suffocated and driven towards a templatised uniformity.

A stark omission in this ongoing election has been the absence of data and figures that could have opened a healthy dialogue, a safeguard for democracy itself. All uncomfortable data has been relegated to "vested interests" or even "anti-national" derision. Opportunities and platforms for diverse participation without the threat of some sort of curbs are missing. The commonsensical betterment of society with a plethora and rigour of competing ideas has been denied, quite knowingly. There is clearly no "party with a difference".

The writer is a retired lieutenant-general and a former lieutenant-governor of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and Puducherry



FREE PRESS FOR FREE FLOW OF TRUTH

Needless Pakistan bashing in elections

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has a knack for making Pakistan an election issue. When he fought the first election in Gujarat after becoming chief minister, he campaigned extensively against “President Pervez Musharraf”, as if the Pakistani general was the chief ministerial candidate in the state. Of course, those who knew Modi knew that it was part of his strategy to polarise voters. All of a sudden, Pakistan has become a subject of debate in India. It all began when Defence Minister Rajnath Singh said that Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (PoK) would become part of India. To this, former Kashmir Chief Minister Farooq Abdullah, who had a close association with the BJP at one time, responded that Pakistan was not wearing bangles. He also mentioned that it was a nuclear power.

What he meant was that any attempt to capture PoK would result in a nuclear war. The Prime Minister did not leave the matter at that. His party resuscitated an old statement made by Congress leader Mani Shankar Aiyar that India should have good neighbourly relations with Pakistan. He also added in the same vein that Pakistan had nuclear bombs. Reading the two statements together, Modi alleged that the INDIA bloc was led by leaders who were scared of the nuclear might of Pakistan. It is not just the Opposition alliance but the whole world which is afraid of a nuclear war. Sensible people know the consequences of two nations throwing nuclear bombs and missiles at each other. Only a reckless, nonsensical person would say that he is not afraid of a nuclear bomb. It is also well-known that no country can win a nuclear war.

Modi has taken the debate to another crass level when he claimed that Pakistan was suffering from so many shortages, including a shortage of bangles. He even went to the extent of claiming that he had the capability to force Pakistan to wear bangles. The fact of the matter is that by Modi’s own admission, tens of millions of people in India cannot afford to survive without the government supplying them virtually free food grains. His statement is like the pot calling the kettle black. It was just nine years ago that Modi himself gatecrashed the then Pakistan prime minister’s marriage party to wish his daughter and bride. After all, a nation can choose its friends, not its neighbours.

Norms fly away in city

The devastating events that unfolded in Mumbai on Monday, marked by a powerful dust storm followed by heavy rains, have left the city reeling from tragedy and loss. The most harrowing incident occurred in Ghatkopar, where a towering billboard was torn from its moorings, crashing down onto a gas station below. The catastrophic impact claimed the lives of 14 individuals and left dozens more injured, some critically. Adding to the gravity of the situation was the presence of numerous pedestrians seeking refuge within the station premises.

It is appalling to note that this calamity was not merely an act of nature but a result of gross negligence and blatant disregard for safety regulations. The oversized hoarding, in flagrant violation of established norms, stands as a testament to the unchecked proliferation of hazardous structures throughout the city. While legal action has been initiated against the company responsible for installing the perilous billboard, accountability must extend beyond the corporate entity to encompass the officials and authorities complicit in permitting its erection. The failure of regulatory bodies and law enforcement agencies to uphold standards and enforce regulations reflects a systemic issue of non-accountability and corruption. The ease with which officials flout guidelines and turn a blind eye to illegal activities underscores the urgent need for reform and stringent enforcement measures. The delayed response of emergency services further underscores the inadequacy of disaster preparedness protocols, highlighting systemic deficiencies that must be addressed.

As Mumbai grapples with the aftermath of this tragedy, it is imperative that lessons are learnt and proactive measures implemented to prevent such incidents. Only through stringent enforcement of regulations and disaster preparedness can the city hope to mitigate the impact of future calamities and safeguard its residents’ well-being.



CORRUPTION IS THERE ON LARGE SCALE RAJEN BABU SPEAKS OUT

New Delhi, May 14. "I can say that there is corruption on a large-scale among Ministers and Government officials. There has also been a certain amount of deterioration in efficiency," declared Dr. Rajendra Prasad, President of the Constituent Assembly in an exclusive interview to the "Central Features."

Maha will be affected by last phases of voting

Fuzzy Logic

✖ Rohit Chandavarkar



As the nation approaches the last three phases of polling for the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, the focus has to be now on cities like Mumbai, Thane, Navi Mumbai and Pune which are part of this last phase. The delimitation exercise taken up by the Election Commission of India undertaken after the census of 2011 put a lot of focus on urban areas as it is understood that Maharashtra is one of the states that are fast moving towards urbanisation. In about seven years almost 50% of the state's population will be living in urban areas.

The Election Commission changed the geographical shapes of many constituencies in the delimitation exercise, pushing many rural areas that fell near large cities into city limits such as including large parts of Bara-mati into Pune city. This changes the situation in favour of urban voters now. But are the urban voters eager enough to come out and vote? Is there apathy among

urban voters when it comes to voting in elections?

In the first four phases of polling for the 2024 Lok Sabha elections there is a clear trend of the turnout being low in urban areas in most parts of the country.

On Monday evening, the fourth phase ended and in many urban areas the turnout was seen to be low. In some cases, the turnout has improved in comparison with the 2019 polls but generally speaking it has been low compared to the national average.

There is some concern among political parties now about how this will affect the results. Conventionally it is believed that low turnout of voters means people are less eager to change the government, but recently some reverse trends have also been experienced.

In the fourth phase in Maharashtra, in places like Beed district in Marathwada region, the voting percentage crossed 69% while in the third phase districts like Latur and some parts of Vidarbha witnessed over 65% voting. While in Pune city constituency in the fourth phase the average voting just about crossed the 50% mark. Here, too, affluent areas like Kothrud saw just about 49% while central areas of the city like Kasba peth, which is

the old part of the city, witnessed over 67% voting.

Does low turnout mean the party in power has a larger chance of winning or does the apathy divide equally on both sides of the political divide making the percentage of turnout irrelevant?

In the past elections we have seen cities like Mumbai and Pune having lower voter turnouts. This is partly blamed on adverse weather and partly on voters being carefree in these areas because their basic civic amenities are in any case assured.

Conventionally it is believed that low turnout of voters means people are less eager to change the government, but recently some reverse trends have also been experienced

It is interesting to see that not just the members of the Opposition but even the parties in power also want maximum voters to come out to vote in large numbers. Prime Minister Narendra Modi will be in Mumbai on Wednesday doing a road show in Mumbai Northeast constituency. He will focus mainly in areas dominated by Gujarati-speaking voters. What is the purpose of this road show? Obviously, it is

to attract as many voters to come out and vote.

The BJP thinks more voters coming out will benefit them, especially in a constituency which is witnessing a major fight. This means high turnout can benefit incumbents too!

The voting trends in cities are very important for political parties because they matter in the optics nationally. Metro cities are not just state capitals of their respective states but also seen as mini-India in various parts of the state.

Metro cities hold populations of

nancial power.

In the fifth phase of polling all six constituencies of Mumbai city as well as Thane and Navi Mumbai will go to the polls. These areas are going to be very crucial for all the parties. Issues of inflation and unemployment have been raised by the opposition nationwide, but in Mumbai and surrounding MMR (Mumbai Metropolitan Region) issues are going to be perhaps very different. They may be focused on urbanisation factors — transport, civic amenities, pollution and health services would be the issues that voters have on their mind.

Realising that urban votes will matter in the overall results, national leaders are now camping in Mumbai and all eyes are now on polling happening on May 20. Prime Minister Modi will spend three days in MMR this week. He is scheduled to hold a huge rally at Shivaji Park ground on the 17th where MNS chief Raj Thackeray will also participate.

As the fifth polling phase approaches, the entire focus now seems to be on winning these urban pockets for all players.

Rohit Chandavarkar is a senior journalist who has worked for 31 years with various leading newspaper brands and television channels in Mumbai and Pune

Kolkata's crossroads: BJP's battle for acceptance

Here, There, Everywhere

✖ Sayantan Ghosh



In the grand tapestry of India's democracy, the 2024 Lok Sabha elections are unfolding like a classic drama, with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) chanting the mantra of “Charsau Par” (400 plus seats) while the Opposition crafts a mosaic of counter-narratives across the diverse states.

At the heart of this electoral saga is the BJP's ideological crusade, with Hindutva as its central theme — a narrative that finds its crucible in the cultural cauldron of West Bengal.

West Bengal, with its rich political heritage, stands as a bastion where the BJP's ideological roots are deeply intertwined with the legacy of Syama Prasad Mookerjee, the founder of the Jana Sangh from which the BJP emerged. The state's historical resistance to the saffron wave only heightens the party's resolve to make inroads into this politically vibrant landscape.

The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the ideological parent of the BJP, has been a silent architect in this quest, weaving a network of grassroots organisations and welfare initiatives across Bengal since 2014. The Hindu Jagaran Manch and other right-wing groups have rallied under the RSS banner, creating a socio-political undercurrent that

has gradually permeated the state's fabric.

Yet, despite a decade of growing influence, the BJP faces a conundrum in Kolkata, the intellectual and cultural heart of Bengal. Under the leadership of Sukanta Majumdar and Subhendu Adhikari, the party grapples with gaining acceptance in a city that commands a disproportionate influence over the state's political psyche.

The “bhodrolok” (gentlefolk) of Kolkata, with their intellectual clout and cultural capital, continue to be the kingmakers, shaping the political narrative and electoral outcomes.

In analysing West Bengal's political history, a critical observation arises regarding the regional dynamics between rural and urban leadership.

Throughout the 35-year tenure of the Left regime, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) boasted a robust grassroots presence in Bengal's villages, showcasing significant organisational prowess.

However, a noteworthy trend emerges when examining the upper echelons of leadership within the Left and CPI(M) — a distinct Kolkata-centric focus.

Notable leaders such as the late Jyoti Basu, a former Chief Minister and prominent leftist figure, along with former CM Buddhadeb Bhattacharya, hailed from Kolkata's elite circles, emblematic of this urban-centric leadership trend.

This shift towards Kolkata-based leadership, despite the Left's stronghold in rural areas, underscores a nuanced dynamic

within the party's hierarchy.

Similarly, during the Congress regime in West Bengal, key leaders like the first CM, late Bidhan Chandra Roy, former CM late Siddhartha Shankar Roy, and even former President of India, late Pranab Mukherjee, enjoyed substantial popularity and acceptance within Kolkata.

Notably, Roy and Roy primarily contested and secured victories in assembly constituencies situated within Kolkata, highlighting

ethos. The “bhodrolok,” Kolkata's genteel class, steeped in a legacy of Left-leaning ideology and secularism, remain elusive to the BJP's overtures.

The BJP's narrative, steeped in Hindutva, has stirred the waters of Kolkata's traditionally secular pond, causing ripples of concern among its residents. In 2015, the party's West Bengal chapter, under the stewardship of Dilip Ghosh, saw organisational growth but failed to resonate with

borne little fruit.

Even Swapan Dasgupta, a right-wing intellectual with deep roots in Bengal, couldn't bridge the gap, his long tenure in Delhi distancing him from Kolkata's inner circles.

Anirban Ganguly's candidacy in Jadavpur, an attempt to present a “bhodrolok” face for the BJP, has yet to sway the city's elite. The BJP's narrative, it seems, is still searching for its place in the cultural lexicon of Kolkata.

As the Lok Sabha elections unfold, the BJP may find success in the broader landscape of West Bengal, but the true test lies in winning the hearts of Kolkata. For the BJP, electoral victory is only half the battle; the other half is securing intellectual and cultural acceptance within the city's influential circles.

To govern West Bengal, the BJP must weave itself into the fabric of Kolkata's society, earning the endorsement of its “bhodrolok,” whose influence extends far beyond the city's borders.

In this electoral odyssey, the BJP's challenge is not merely to secure seats but to resonate with the soul of Kolkata, where the echoes of political discourse are as old as the city itself.

The outcome will not only determine the BJP's fate in Bengal but will also reflect the evolving narrative of India's vibrant democracy.

The author, a columnist and research scholar, teaches journalism at St. Xavier's College (autonomous), Kolkata. He tweets at @sayantan_gh. Views are personal

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Return EB collections

This refers to the article, ‘Shouldn't tainted electoral bonds proceeds be returned?’ (May 13). The argument is valid and acceptable to everyone. Most of the proceeds are received due to ED or CBI's actions or under quid pro quo arrangement. Either way when it is evident that the bulk amounts received are by illegal means and the very idea of bonds is to make such illegal payments a legal ones there should not be any second thought in demanding that all such recipients return the ill-gotten funds to the government exchequer for redistribution among the poor. This idea cannot be declined by the ruling dispensation also because in 2014 itself it was assured that black money stashed away in foreign banks would be brought back and the proceeds would be credited in the accounts of the poor. Why the apex court did not order this may not a point of discourse but the same court may be approached by some enthusiast to order return of the proceeds received through electoral bonds.

AG Rajmohan



Love of gold

Despite rising prices, Indians' love for gold hasn't diminished. In fact, Indian women hold a staggering 11% of the world's total gold reserves, amounting to 18,000 tonnes in the form of jewellery. While gold purchases are less common in Western countries, several nations like the US, Germany, Italy, France, and Russia rank among the top holders of gold reserves globally. However, unlike India where gold is worn as jewellery, citizens in these countries primarily own 9 to 12 carat gold rings, often worn for weddings. The Harappan excavations at Rakhigarhi revealed an ancient culture of adorning oneself with gold, further demonstrating the deep-rooted connection Indians have with this precious metal. Therefore, it's safe to say that India's gold imports will continue to rise, and the love for gold amongst its people will remain strong.

Dattaprasad Shirodkar

Cause and effect

Guiding Light's 'How to get your desire fulfilled' (May 13) is very well elucidated, philosophically, in the light of cause and effect. When the water goes into the lemon tree, it takes on the quality of lemon and becomes sour, and when it goes

into the chili, it becomes hot. But even though it manifests in all these different forms, the soil is the same, the water is the same, the farmer is the same.

Ramswarth Acharya

Bad politicians, good citizens

It is heartening to learn that inmates of Shantivan which houses the leprosy treatment and rehabilitation centre at Panvel are upbeat about voting, which should act as a lesson for others who treat voting day as a holiday. Bad politicians or bureaucrats are elected by good citizens who do not vote. Every vote is precious; it is the most powerful non-violent tool in a democracy which every citizen must use to make himself heard. Voting must be made mandatory. Those who do not cast their votes have no right to complain against government policies if they are not part of the electoral system which elects the governing body to rule the country.

SN Kabra

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Little respite

Food inflation continues to undermine wider price stability

April’s retail inflation data flattered to deceive. The Consumer Price Index (CPI)-based provisional headline print shows year-on-year retail price gains, across the broad spectrum of goods and services that combine to constitute the CPI, slowed fractionally to a 11-month low of 4.83%, from March’s 4.85%. This slowing, however, did little to mask the more disconcerting acceleration in food price gains. Inflation based on the Consumer Food Price Index (CFPI) quickened by 18 basis points from the preceding month’s year-on-year pace to a four-month high of 8.7%, with the month-on-month rate accelerating to 0.74%, from 0.16% in March. Rural consumers fared worse than their urban counterparts with both food and broader headline inflation reflecting faster price gains. The CPI-based reading for the hinterland was still well above the 5% mark at 5.43%, while inflation in urban areas was a sharply lower 4.11%, reflecting the widening divergence in the impact that price gains are having on those already struggling from the hit to the rural economy from a weak monsoon last year and sizzling temperatures this summer. Food price gains at 8.75% for rural consumers, a good 19 basis points faster than the 8.56% faced by urban consumers, is all the more disconcerting as food is an essential expenditure that every household must try and find the means to meet.

The pressure on food prices remains wide-ranging, with cereals – the heaviest weight in the food category – witnessing a 26 basis points quickening in inflation to 8.63%. Data from the Department of Consumer Affairs’ Price Monitoring Division shows the average price of rice was 14.3% steeper as on May 14 than on May 14, 2023. And the price of wheat was 6.4% higher from a year earlier, signalling that respite on the cereals front is unlikely in the near term. April’s soaring temperatures also kept inflation in vegetables, particularly vulnerable as perishable produce, in double digits for a sixth straight month at 27.8%. Price gains in pulses too offered little succour as they extended their stay in double digits to an eleventh month. And the Consumer Affairs department’s data show prices of all the five key dals – gram, tur, urad, moong and masoor – continued to rise appreciably as on May 14. With live water storage at the country’s 150 reservoirs dwindling to 27% of capacity as on May 9 and trailing both the year-earlier and 10-year average levels significantly, the outlook for price stability rides almost entirely on the forecast ‘normal monsoon’ delivering spatially and temporally well-distributed rains in the coming months.

Lame excuses

Biren Singh continues to blame ethnic violence on ‘illegal migration’

It has been over three years since the coup d’etat in Myanmar in which the junta usurped absolute power and unleashed severe repression in order to clamp down on any demands for a return to democracy or granting more power to the marginalised ethnic identities in the civil war-prone country. Facing repression such as brutal bombing and the displacement of entire villages, many citizens, particularly those from ethnic minorities, have sought refuge in neighbouring countries including India. Many refugees from Myanmar’s Sagaing region and Chin State have fled the junta’s violent campaigns and headed to Mizoram and Manipur. While in Mizoram, refugees, of Chin ethnicity in particular, have been treated favourably, with the Mizo people regarding them as ethnic brethren, those in Manipur have not received such treatment from the government led by Chief Minister N. Biren Singh. Manipur has continued to conflate the issues related to the refugees fleeing Myanmar with that of cross-border drug trade. Ever since the ethnic violence between the Kuki-Zo community and the majority Meitei community last year, this refrain by the Manipur government, which has not hidden its preponderance to act as an ethnic majoritarian regime, has led to the stigmatisation of the refugees and policies that are in stark contrast to Mizoram’s humanitarian approach.

Moves such as seeking to end the Free Movement Regime, that is seen as favourable by the citizens of both countries, the announcement that India will fence the 1,643 km India-Myanmar border and Mr. Singh’s statement that 5,457 “illegal” migrants were found in Manipur’s Kamjong district should be seen in this light. The Chief Minister has repeatedly maintained that the conflict, which has killed more than 220 people, displaced over 50,000 people and resulted in injuries to thousands, besides creating a siege mentality among the Meitei and the Kuki-Zo communities, is a consequence of his government’s actions against “poppy cultivation” and “illegal immigration”. This is both an over-simplification and a biased view of the ethnic conflict that has raged in the State because of the inability of the Biren Singh government to rise above the ethnic fray and build confidence measures that could win the trust of the Kuki-Zo community. That the violence has been followed by the brazen militarisation of Manipuri society, in the hills and in the valley, with vigilante groups armed with sophisticated weapons, causing law and order problems, and impeding security personnel seeking to impose law and order, reflects even more poorly on the government. Unless there is a change, both in approach and in leadership in Manipur and the way it has treated the conflict, the situation will continue to fester.

Last month, a young person decided to end his life. And days before this, another young man committed suicide. Both incidents were in Kota, Rajasthan, the “coaching capital” of India, and these young people took this desperate step as they were unable to cope with the stress of entrance examinations. Across India, every year, there are several suicides that are related to competitive examinations, the pressures of entrance examinations and the compulsions of social pressures, including those from family – often openly stated in suicide notes. Why are our young people perishing? We must pay attention to this alarming development, because if we do not, our young people will continue to perish. It is not as if this is a recent trend. I fear we will become immune and insensitive to this great tragedy among our young people if we do not act immediately. But why are our young people taking such a drastic step to end their lives?

Where there is no vision, the people perish. While some negative forces such as family pressure can only be mitigated by a better sense of priorities and awareness, there are definitely some other elements which can be controlled by the examination boards and regulating authorities. If our vision so far has been clouded by other priorities, let us correct this by putting our young people first, rather than examinations or marks. Let us tell our young people that they are important and that our policies and practices will keep them first.

The rise of coaching institutes

The fact that the National Testing Agency has the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT)/Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) syllabus as the basis for entrance examinations for entry to medicine, professional courses, the Indian Institutes of Technology and undergraduate and post-graduate courses is a very good thing. However, the rise of coaching institutes, and the often “inhuman” methods adopted at these centres, prove to be too much for young people to cope with. Often, those students who make it through these extremely competitive examinations have “lost out” on a normal adolescent or teenage life.

Such “winners” become walking machines who lack social skills and/or the abilities to communicate in a healthy manner beyond the



John Varghese

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Entrance examinations need to be revamped, helping every student understand that she/he has a worth beyond just marks

requirements of objective-type questions related largely to subjects that they have been preparing for at these coaching institutions. Often, these sweat shops are housed in unhealthy and unsafe buildings. In extreme cases, I have also come across residential coaching institutions which register students from Class 10 or even lower under a State board or CBSE school but takeover the lives of these students, depriving them of a normal childhood. It has a regimen which begins at 5 a.m. with a cold water bath, a functional breakfast and an intense study routine of up to 10 hours, and ends at 10 p.m. or later, all with the sole aim of “preparing” them for the entrance examinations. And these are children! Why have schools then if coaching centres are going to make them zombies?

After school

A case worth looking at is the recently-introduced Common University Entrance Test (CUET) for entry into undergraduate and post-graduate courses. Delhi University recently adopted the CUET as the basis for undergraduate and post-graduate entrance after having decided to ignore the school-leaving board marks or the undergraduate marks. Over the past two years, I have had teachers complain to me about the poor quality of students who join the undergraduate and post-graduate courses, their inability to think properly, their inattention to basic concepts and, sadly, their disregard for social proprieties. Numerous coaching centres have sprung up in the vicinity of the University and in the rural areas, trying to outdo each other in assuring a student the promise of entry into undergraduate or post-graduate courses.

I know of several parents, including those of first-generation learners, who have been taken in by these advertisements, often taking loans they can ill-afford in the hope of securing a seat for the undergraduate or post-graduate programme. Such a move has not been effective and the two years of depending solely on CUET scores tell a sad story. This is only a sample case. The National Eligibility-cum-Entrance Test (NEET), Joint Entrance Examinations (JEE) are more severe cases. In the end the casualties are our children. The future of India. The future of the world.

Students spend a good 12 years in school. Rather than throw the baby out with the bathwater, government schools should be strengthened by recruiting good teachers and

having better infrastructure. Private schools can take care of these requirements. The National Education Policy’s focus on schools is a good thing, but school education should be made to matter. State, CBSE and other boards should be brought on a par instead of negating the 12 years of effort put in by students through an examination like the CUET. If necessary, a common entrance exam can also be considered, but only if required.

Focus on the personal interview

Entrance examinations should encourage the personal interview component where students are encouraged to talk about things that they are good at. The academic scores that they work on for 12 years should not be negated or nullified with a CUET or a JEE taking sole precedence. The Class 12 board examination should be granted sufficient weightage as also every student’s personal talents and abilities through a personal interview. The JEE or CUET or NEET can be an addition, but only an addition. The personal interview is the crucial element where such a meeting offers the student an opportunity to express herself/himself to an interview panel which respects each candidate. St. Stephen’s College has had a personal interview for over 70 years now and has proven results to show that such a method of examination and entry to college has averted desperate/tragic measures. We have even had students who smile at the end of a personal interview declaring that they are happy to have attended the interview, and are more aware of their abilities, knowing fully well that they will not make it to college. If it can happen here, why cannot it happen all over India?

The personal interview is not easy. It is time-consuming. It calls for attention and sensitivity from the members on the interview panel. The personal interview offers every student the ability to understand that s/he has a worth beyond just marks. The personal interview as a part of entrance examinations can help our young people from perishing.

Let us all, teachers, parents, policymakers and parliamentarians, beginning with those from Kota, help our young people with a vision which tells the future of our country and young people across the world that they matter the most... otherwise, our young people will continue to perish.

Candid notes on the NHRC’s status deferral

The National Human Rights Commission of India (NHRC) was formally informed late last week that the deferral of its status would continue for a year more. The deferral was put in place by the sub-committee on accreditation (SCA) of the Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions (GANHRI) for a year, in 2023. While the SCA did not agree with the plea of some leading international non-governmental organisations, to put the NHRC in category ‘B’, it also rejected India’s request to lift the deferral.

The NHRC chairperson, a former Justice of the Supreme Court of India, Justice Arun Mishra, and the government may have been unhappy with the continuing deferral but are sure to be relieved that they have avoided the ignominy of a downgrade. The NHRC, directly and, the government, from behind the scenes, had lobbied hard for the deferral to be removed and the cloud over India’s ‘A’ status goes away. Justice Mishra retires in early June and, if the new government to be formed in June after the general election 2024 does not reappoint him, he will be the first NHRC chairman to leave the organisation with the sword of Damocles hanging over its head. This would only strengthen the initial doubts raised about his appointment.

The NHRC brochure

A peep into Justice Mishra’s approach to human rights is available from a brochure published by the NHRC, titled ‘Human Rights 75’. The document was put out as part of the celebrations of ‘Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav’. In its introduction the document sought to establish that “India’s earliest civilisations... laid the fundamental edifice for some basic human rights principles”. To substantiate this point it referred to ancient texts such as the *Vedas* and the *Upanishads*. It rightly asserted that they promoted the exploration of spiritual truths. Thereafter, the



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Much of the criticism of the West for weaponising human rights is valid, but the continuing deferral of the NHRC’s status must lead to hard questions in India

publication went on to state, “The concept of justice and fairness is also central to ancient Indian literature. The *Manusmriti*, while reflecting the social norms of its time, also outlines principles of justice, including punishment proportionate to the crime”.

For crores of historically disadvantaged Indians, the *Manusmriti* is the fountainhead of the evil of discrimination and violence they have suffered. Its mention in a NHRC document, despite the routine caveat attached to the reference, will be outrageous to them and to those who are pledged to uphold the Indian Constitution. Was the *Manusmriti*’s mention an oversight or does it reflect the considered views of Justice Mishra? Even at this stage a clarification would be useful. He would certainly know that the foundational values of the Indian Constitution are in direct conflict with the basic postulates of the *Manusmriti*.

Drifting away from the Paris Principles?

Certainly, the GANHRI’s decision has not been influenced by the reference to the *Manusmriti* but because of the belief that India has not been adhering to the Paris Principles. In early 2017, the SCA had put the NHRC in the deferral category but it was lifted after a review later that year. Hence, India retained its ‘A’ status.

In a public note on that occasion, the NHRC had stressed the importance of the ‘A’ status. It stated, “‘A’ status accreditation also grants participation in the work and participation of the GANHRI, as well as the work of the Human Rights Council and other UN mechanisms”. On the Paris Principles the NHRC noted, “The United Nations’ Paris Principles provide the international benchmarks against which the National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs) can be accredited”. The Paris Principles were adopted by the UN in 1993. The NHRC stated that the Paris Principles set out “six main criterions that NHRIs are

expected to meet. These are: Mandate and competence, Autonomy from Government, Independence guaranteed by a Statute or Constitution, Pluralism, Adequate Resources; and adequate powers of investigations. The GANHRI found the NHRC, India compatible with these criterion” and so gave it ‘A’ status. That was then. But now, the GANHRI’s doubts continue, obviously.

This is a peer-reviewed evaluation

The GANHRI evaluation process is a peer-reviewed one and hence cannot be dismissed as the government has done, since 2019, any criticism of the human rights situation in India. Indeed, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar has been especially sensitive to charges of the Narendra Modi government falling short in observing civil liberties and fundamental freedoms. He has, in response to criticism of India on these issues, pointed to the deficiencies in the West on these fronts. He has been acclaimed in India for doing so. Much of the criticism of the West for weaponising human rights is valid but the diplomacy of criticising the West and those who lecture India need not have been abrasive. Firmness does not need the use of the bludgeon of harsh language but the rapier of logic and reason. It also requires the acceptance that India, like all other countries, is not perfect. But such approaches are considered timid in these muscular times.

It is not clear if the Jaishankar muscular approach was adopted by the NHRC in dealing with the SCA. If it was, it has obviously not succeeded. The continuing deferral proves this. But there is a more substantial issue involved. This is the attitude of the government towards the NHRC. Doubts arise because of the nature of the appointments to it and also because of the continuing vacancies in the body. Finally, the NHRC itself has a lot to introspect about.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

‘Checking’ by candidate

The act by the BJP candidate for Hyderabad, Madhavi Latha Kompella, of checking the voter identity cards of some burqa-clad Muslim women voters, by asking them to lift their face veils, is provocative (Inside pages, May 14). If nominees notice any discrepancy in polling stations, they should always check with the presiding officer or even approach the State Election Commission. I wonder if Ms. Kompella’s actions result from the Prime Minister’s words; he seems to have set a precedent of conducting an informal roadshow after casting his vote. Members of his party seem to have

gone to the next level. What kind of signal is Ms. Kompella sending out? And from a party that claims that winning a third term in office is a given!

N. Nagarajan, Chennai

The other war that rages

Not a word is being said about Russia’s mounting aggression towards Ukraine. As a senior citizen, I am unable to understand why nations that matter in the world order are silent. Instead, the focus seems to be more on the Gaza-Israel war. Peace-loving citizens across the world are distressed. What are the present plans of the United

Nations to quell the war? Mani Natarajan, Chennai

IPL, restrictive practices

I write this letter as Past Chairman, CII Southern Region. This year, the sale of tickets for the IPL matches at Chepauk, Chennai, is through two assigned online portals. There is no box office sale of tickets. Also, all air-conditioned boxes are assigned to organisations such as the TNCA, MCC, BCCI, CSK. In countries such as the U.K., Australia and South Africa, the cricket boards (such as the ECB) authorise companies to sell hospitality packages.

Regrettably, this is not being done by the IPL and TNCA in Chennai. This denies the ordinary citizen a chance to buy tickets for seats in the air-conditioned boxes. As an alternative, people have no choice but to buy tickets from agents who sell them at exorbitant prices. On May 12, I was able to get an MCC member to buy two tickets for me from the MCC Club. I had to watch the IPL match from the MCC

Terrace. As a senior citizen — I am 84 — I had to undergo much stress (the sharp sun, the deafening noise and access to the restroom) right through the match. I learnt that for tickets for the stands, the published price was ₹1,500. The black market rate is ₹10,000. The IPL and TNCA must realise that the ticket sale policy and sale of air-conditioned box access to corporates is affecting

Corrections & Clarifications

CBSE expands not as the Central Bureau of Secondary Education as published in the report titled “CBSE results: 93.6% clear Class 10, 87.98% pass Class 12; girls fare better” (May 14, 2024). The correct expansion is the Central Board of Secondary Education.

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the common man. It is aiding and abetting the sale of tickets in the black market. The designated portals on which the IPL tickets are sold show more than a lakh of people in queue at the appointed hour of sale. This indicates that syndicates are operating on these portals. Another pertinent question relates to the policy for ticket sales to senior citizens and people with disabilities. There needs to be transparency.

Ramesh Daga, Chennai

Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the full postal address and the full name.

The challenge of extra-pulmonary TB

While the most common form of tuberculosis (TB), which is pulmonary TB, infects the lungs, some 20% of TB infections develop in the lymph nodes, brain, gut, eyes, or other organs. Some of these organs have immune privileges in the body. This means that extra-pulmonary infections can persist even after the TB infection in the lungs is resolved. Just as we have an undercount of the people infected with TB, the public health challenge of extra-pulmonary TB (EPTB) may be larger than our current estimates.

The World Health Organization (WHO) reports over 10 million new cases of TB every year and India alone accounts for 27% of the global TB burden. However, the burden of EPTB is hard to estimate. EPTB is often stain negative, which means it is not detectable on regular TB stain tests. The infection may surface in any part of the body and present itself like other non-TB conditions. Many cases of EPTB may not have a corresponding lung infection. So, EPTB's true prevalence in society remains hidden.

As the burden of pulmonary TB is greatest, it makes epidemiological sense to focus our efforts on its elimination. The lungs are the primary source of infection spread and reducing this burden will impact all forms of the disease. However, given the scale of TB, variants like EPTB end up affecting a large number of people. EPTB's under diagnosis results in irreparable damage to the infected organs, leading to vision loss or even blindness, for example. It is therefore important to address TB in all its complexity.

Knowledge gap

The twin challenges in tackling EPTB are lack of awareness, even among physicians, and lack of accurate diagnostic and treatment criteria. The mycobacterium that causes TB was first isolated in the eye just a year after Robert Koch



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The twin challenges in tackling EPTB are lack of awareness, even among physicians, and lack of accurate diagnostic and treatment criteria

identified the organism. Yet, many who treat the disease (and some who treat the eyes) are ignorant of this association. This situation is true with most of the other organs that host a TB infection as well. Even for those who are aware, it is challenging to reach an accurate diagnosis and put patients on the right therapy for treatment.

As TB can be present in multiple organs, the lack of formal and functioning protocols to exchange information between doctors in multiple specialties leads to silos of knowledge. In 2014, a group of experts from different health institutions across the country, the WHO, and the Cochrane Infectious Disease Group came together to formulate INDEX-TB, a set of guidelines for EPTB management in India. The group also released a set of clinical practice points for 10 organs, but good quality evidence was available only for five of them. This work has remained dormant. More needs to be done to foster and build a common approach to EPTB management, especially in a high TB burden country like India.

Armed with guidelines and practice points, our hospital systems need to generate better data on EPTB. Our current source of EPTB numbers are the TB departments of large public hospitals. However, specialist departments for each organ are the primary centres for EPTB management. Their data practices are diverse and do not become part of our aggregate numbers for EPTB prevalence. These departments must capture patient data and be ready to share it with the National TB Control Programme. Their action may help reinvigorate Ni-kshay, the national patient management portal for TB control, which has incomplete and missing data on TB patients insofar as EPTB patient data are concerned.

Research priority

Key aspects of EPTB, including the mechanisms of infection spread and the TB bacterium's

interactions with our organs, remain under-explored. A troubling aspect of EPTB infection is the prolonged presence of disease markers even after the infection is resolved with treatment. Some EPTB patients who complete anti-TB therapy may still find themselves affected by the disease. In the eye, for example, an autoimmune response to antigens triggered by the original infection can lead to a persistent intraocular inflammation even after appropriate anti-TB therapy. Similarly, there might be other immunological mechanisms lurking in other organs affected by EPTB that may prolong the disease, even after the bacteria have been cleared from that organ. This phenomenon causes a lot of misery to persons with EPTB and is an active area of research.

A concerted effort by different EPTB specialties, and advanced immunological tools such as single-cell RNA sequencing, might be able to uncover the immune mechanisms for the disease. Unless we understand these mechanisms, physicians will continue to treat EPTB with long duration anti-TB therapy (sometimes for even two years or more), assuming that the infection is persisting in the organ. This not only fails to resolve the disease, but also exposes the patient to the toxicity of anti-TB therapy.

Diagnosis and treatment protocols for all organs affected by EPTB do not exist. We will need high-quality data through clinical trials to formulate them. Similarly, INDEX-TB guidelines were formulated over a decade ago and need to be updated with the latest data and experience. They also need to be multidisciplinary and benefit from inputs from a variety of specialised areas of health care.

Nearly one in five TB patients have EPTB. Most of them go undiagnosed, and the few who are diagnosed cannot benefit from care unless they visit a few specialist health facilities. It is time we bring EPTB out of the shadows.

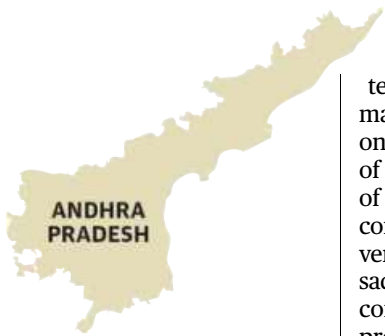
At loggerheads over a land law

The Land Titling Act, which is still on the drawing table, became a poll issue

STATE OF PLAY

V. Raghavendra

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The Andhra Pradesh Land Titling Act (APLTA), 2023, became a political flashpoint towards the end of the campaign to the Lok Sabha elections in the State, and provided much-needed ammunition to the Opposition parties to attack the ruling YSR Congress Party (YSRCP) government.

The APLTA has its origins in the land reforms initiated by the Central government. In 2020, the NITI Aayog recommended the implementation of a Land Tilting Act in all the States and followed this up with a model Bill on Conclusive Land Titling. A conclusive land titling system is one in which the State governments provide a guarantee on land titles and where the claimant settles disputes, if any, with the government and not the titleholder. In 2022, Andhra Pradesh passed the APLTA. The Act aims to maintain land records, provide a database according to the latest government surveys, and ensure more efficient dispute resolution mechanisms. Andhra Pradesh has been conducting a land survey in 17,000 revenue villages to implement the Act.

There have been apprehensions about the law and opposition to it. In a batch of writ petitions filed by the All India Lawyers' Union State branch and the Kurnool District Bar Association, among others, in the Andhra Pradesh High Court, the petitioners said that the Act excludes the application of the Code of Civil Procedure. This means that civil courts will not be able to hear appeals against provisions of the legislation. While dispos-

ing of the petitions, the High Court declined to stay the Act. However, it also said that the civil courts should continue to hear pending cases and entertain fresh suits pertaining to immovable properties till the matter is adjudicated.

Notwithstanding the court order, Opposition parties began to repeatedly criticise the government over the Act. While tearing copies of the Act during public meetings, Telugu Desam Party (TDP) national president N. Chandrababu Naidu called the law a "Land Grabbing Act" and accused the Jagan Mohan Reddy government of tweaking it to suit the interests of the land mafia. He promised to repeal the Act if the TDP-Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) alliance is voted to power. Mr. Naidu's constant attacks led the State government to have a case booked by the Criminal Investigation Department against Mr. Naidu, his son Lokesh, and others for allegedly spreading falsehoods about the Act.

This sustained campaign against the APLTA created distrust among the people and left them worried, especially given the inconsistent statements by leaders of the ruling party and elected representatives. The government tried to fend off the TDP's allegations by saying that while the Act has been notified, it has not yet come into force since the rules are yet to be framed. It insisted that the TDP was rak-

ing up the law simply to garner votes. Chief Minister Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy maintained that the Act not only facilitates the conferring of clear and permanent titles of land ownership, but also comes with title insurance. Revenue Minister Dharmana Prasada Rao asserted that the Act complies with both the Supreme Court guidelines and the rules laid down by the Centre. He added that the government had no intention of implementing it arbitrarily.

Even as the government was at pains to convince the people that the APLTA will ensure transparency in land registrations and protect their rights, posts on X by retired IAS officers I.Y.R. Krishna Rao and P.V. Ramesh added fuel to the fire. Mr. Ramesh claimed to be a victim of the APLTA even before it became operative, prompting his critics to label him a corrupt officer. And Mr. Krishna Rao, citing a newspaper advertisement captioned 'Your Land Will Not Be Yours' given by the TDP on the APLTA, sought to know how the BJP, which heads the Central government that proposed the Act and is an ally of the TDP, could possibly take a conflicting stand in the State. These observations sparked protests in some places.

It is clear that the Opposition indulged in fear mongering to rake up sentiments associated with land ownership in order to garner votes, given that the Act is yet to become functional and the rules have not been framed yet. As these accusations came at the tail end of the campaign, the impact of the controversy on some voters, especially fence-sitters, cannot be ruled out. The Act is still on the drawing table and may well cease to be such an emotive issue after the elections.

Rise in public health spending due to States, not Centre

The Centre's spending on health has decreased post-pandemic while States have continued to spend more

DATA POINT

Indranil

Public spending on health in India has historically remained low. Recently, many think tanks claimed that India, which has always spent a little more than 1% of its GDP on health-care, is inching close to 2% under the current regime. An increase in public spending is welcome. But is it correct to attribute it to the Union government?

First, public spending on health in India continues to be abysmal compared to many countries. Second, while public spending on health has indeed increased, much of the rise is due to the States and not the Centre. In fact, the Union Health Ministry has been transferring a lower share of its resources to States in recent years. Moreover, the Centre has also cut the budget for the National Health Mission (NHM) in recent years, while increasing disproportionately the spending on government-funded health insurance schemes (GFHIs).

Chart 1 shows the per capita public spending on health in India compared to other countries in 2021. Bhutan's spending on health was 2.5 times more than India's while Sri Lanka's was three times more. Many BRICS nations (old list) spent 14-15 times more than India.

The increase in public spending on health in recent years, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, can be attributed to the States and Union Territories (**Chart 2**). The States have sustained the increase post-COVID-19 as well. Given the resource constraints they face, this is commendable. In contrast, the Union government's spending on health as a percentage of GDP, which increased moderately during the pandemic, has decreased post-pandemic.

Furthermore, a significant part of the increase in health invest-

ment as a percentage of GDP during the pandemic needs to be attributed to the negative and low growth of GDP, while absolute increase in expenditure remained modest, in real terms (**Chart 3**).

More concerning is the decline in the share of resources transferred to the States by the Union Healthy Ministry. In FY14, three-fourth (75.9%) of the Union spending on health was transferred to the States (**Figure 4**). Within the first three years of the National Democratic Alliance government, the share came down to little more than half (53.4%) and declined consistently to reach a new low of 43% in FY24 (Budget Estimates). The trend reflects increased centralisation of financial resources on health, a subject which largely falls within the domain of States.

Launched in 2005, the NHM was a crucial intervention by the Union government. But expenditure on the scheme has mostly remained stagnant or has come down in the last seven years (**Chart 5**). Between FY14 and FY19, the spending on NHM grew at 7.4% on average, largely due to a sudden jump in FY18. During the second tenure of the NDA government, spending on NHM declined in real terms at 5.5% on average.

The Modi government's emphasis on Ayushman Bharat Pradhan Mantri Sri Arogya Yojana (PMJAY) is visible in its spending patterns. A look at the expenditure on various GFHIs such as PMJAY shows a steady increase in expenditure. Between FY15 and FY20, expenditure in real terms nearly doubled, growing at an average of 18% per annum. Even though the Centre draws a lot of mileage from these schemes, a bigger share of the spending is incurred by the States.

The COVID-19 pandemic had shown the cracks in India's health system and highlighted the need for increased public investment in healthcare. While the States have risen up to the challenge, despite financial constraints, the Union government has done little.

Public spending on health: States versus Union

The data for public spending on health are sourced from the World Health Organisation, indiabudget.gov.in (Expenditure Budget Vol 1&2) and the National Health Accounts of India



Chart 1: The chart compares India's per capita public spending on health with other countries (2021) (in \$ PPP)

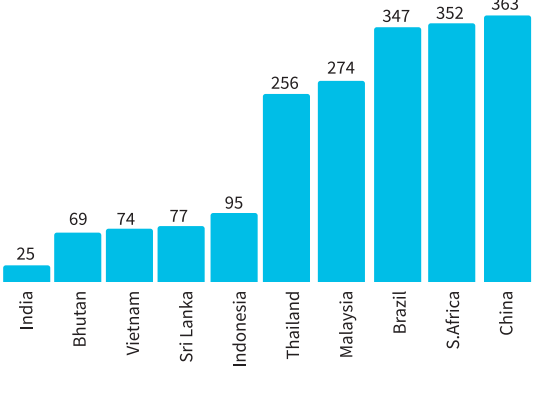
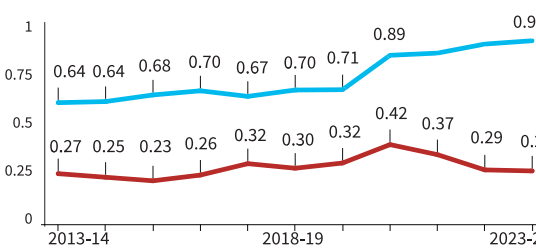
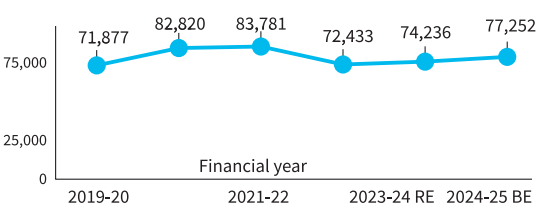


Chart 2: The Union Government's and States' spending on health as a % of GDP



Note: Union government spending includes spending by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare and the Ministry of AYUSH

Chart 3: The chart shows Union Government spending on health from 2019-20 (in ₹ crore)



Indranil is a Professor at the Jindal School of Government and Public Policy, O.P. Jindal Global University, Sonapat, Haryana

FROM THE ARCHIVES

The **Hindu.**

FIFTY YEARS AGO MAY 15, 1974

Thriving business in skeletons

Tokyo, May 14: A number of Calcutta-based trading firms are doing thriving business in export of human skeletons and internal organs to foreign countries, including Japan, for use by medical students. Japan alone imports about 200 skeletons every year.

News of export by India of this commodity came to light with a report appearing recently in Mainichi Shimbun which said import of skeletons from abroad had been necessitated in the last 15 or 20 years due to their shortage at home.

A spokesman for the Hanehara Skeletons Specimen Research Institute in Tokyo which has been importing skeletons solely from a firm of Calcutta since 1955 said it imported skeletons only from India. He would not reveal the import cost per skeleton, but the Mainichi report quoting educational ministry sources said one human skeleton was sold by the importers to medical institutions for the equivalent of about Rs 5,000. No licence is required for import of human skeletons in Japan, nor are any customs duties levied. All skeletons come by air.

Processing and export of human skeletons and preserved internal parts is stated to be a regular business in Calcutta, with well-organised factories which supply skeletons of all ages of humans.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO MAY 15, 1924

Visit to Wembley

London, May 14: King George, Queen Mary and the Romanian King and Queen today paid a private visit to Wembley in glorious weather. They were very heartily welcomed by thousands of visitors. They visited the Indian pavilion where they were met by the High Commissioner Sir Dadiba Dalal. Lady Dalal invested the Kings and Queens with garlands of flowers which they wore round their necks during the whole of the time they were in the Indian section. Punjabi and Baluchi bands played in the courtyard. Their Majesties were very much interested and praised the exhibits and congratulated Sir Dadiba Dalal. Subsequently they visited the Burma, Ceylon, Hongkong, and other sections before lunching in the Royal apartments.

The two Queens made various purchases at the stalls in the Indian section. The King chatted with Major Watts, commanding Punjab and Baluchi bands.

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Internal displacement in India due to natural disasters

5.28 in lakh. India experienced over half a million internal displacements due to floods, storms, earthquakes, and other disasters in 2023, a sharp dip from around 2.5 million displacements in 2022. PTI

The Palestinians displaced from Rafah in Gaza

4.5 in lakh. Roughly 1.3 million people were sheltering in Rafah before Israel began pushing into the city, which Israel says is the last Hamas stronghold. The UN also said that another 1,00,000 people have been displaced in northern Gaza. AP

Unemployment in South Africa ahead of elections

32.9 In percentage. The number of unemployed persons increased by 3,30,000 to 8.2 million. High unemployment is a key political issue before the national and provincial elections on May 29. AFP

The fall in the net profit of Bharti Airtel in the fourth quarter

31 In percentage. Bharti Airtel reported a consolidated profit of ₹2,072 crore for the March quarter. The company had registered a profit of ₹3,005.6 crore in the year-ago period. For the year ended March 31, 2024, Bharti Airtel's profit dropped 10.5%. PTI

The economic gain estimated from the Paris Olympics

6-11 in billion euros. According to a study by the Center for Law and Economics of Sport (CDES), the economic gain for the Paris region ranges from 6.7 billion euros to 11.1 billion. AFP

COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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The Dabholkar murder case verdict

Why was Narendra Dabholkar targeted by an extreme right-wing Hindu organisation? Why did the Court remark that investigating agencies had failed to nab the ‘mastermind’ of the crime? Why were three of the five accused acquitted by the special CBI Court?

EXPLAINER

Aaratrika Bhaumik

The story so far:

In May 10, a special CBI Court in Pune sentenced Sachin Prakashrao Andure and Sharad Bhausaheb Kalaskar to life imprisonment for the murder of rationalist Narendra Achyut Dabholkar. It, however, acquitted three other accused in the case – alleged mastermind Virendrasinh Sharadchandra Tawde, lawyer Sanjeev Punalekar and his assistant Vinay Bhave – due to the failure of both the Maharashtra police and the CBI to procure sufficient evidence. The two convicts hail from Chhatrapati Sambhaji Nagar (then called Aurangabad district) in Maharashtra. Andure worked as an accountant in a private shop and Kalaskar was a farmer.

Who was Narendra Dabholkar?

Dabholkar was a physician, activist, rationalist and author based in Maharashtra. He founded the Committee for the Eradication of Blind Faith (Maharashtra Andhashraddha Nirmoolan Samiti, or MANS) after leaving his decade-long medical practice. As a prominent crusader against religious superstitions, he was highly critical of godmen who promised “miracle cures” to ailments. He also spent many years advocating for a law to ban fraudulent superstitious practices and played a crucial role in drafting the Andhashraddha Nirmulan Bill, 2005 (Anti-Superstition Bill) which was pending before the Maharashtra legislature at the time of his death. However, the law was opposed by various organisations and political parties for being “anti-Hindu”. It was finally passed as an ordinance on August 24, 2013 – days after Dabholkar’s death. In December 2013, the State passed the Maharashtra Prevention and Eradication of Human Sacrifice and other Inhuman, Evil and Aghori Practices and Black Magic Act, 2013.

Dabholkar was shot dead on August 20, 2013, by two motorcycle-borne assailants on the Omkareshwar bridge near Pune’s Shanivar Peth area when he was out on a morning walk.

How did the investigation progress?

Over the last 10 years, various investigating agencies have handled the case starting from the Pune police to the Maharashtra Anti Terrorism Squad (ATS). In 2014, the CBI took over the case following a Bombay High Court direction.

In Friday’s ruling, Andure and Kalaskar were convicted under Sections 302 (murder) and 34 (common intention) of the Indian Penal Code, 1860 (IPC), along with charges under the Indian Arms Act, 1959. However, the rest of the three accused were acquitted of charges under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967 (UAPA) and Section 120B of the IPC (criminal conspiracy). During the proceedings, the prosecution examined 20 witnesses which included various close associates of the Sanatan Sanstha, an extreme far-right Hindu organisation, which had expressed strong opposition to the 2005 Anti-Superstition Bill spearheaded by Dabholkar. The Court identified this enmity as the primary motive for the murder. Other witnesses included Dabholkar’s son Hamid and activists from the Maharashtra Andhashraddha Nirmoolan Samiti.



Justice served: Agitations by the Andhashraddha Nirmoolan Samiti to bring the culprits of Dabholkar’s murder to book in Thane in 2018. VIBHAV BIRWATKAR

The first accused in the case, ENT surgeon Virendrasinh Tawde, was arrested in June 2016 after the CBI claimed that he was a coordinator for Sanatan Sanstha in Kolhapur and had personal differences with Dabholkar. Before his arrest in this case, Tawde was arrested by the Maharashtra police for the murder of communist leader Govind Pansare. In its chargesheets, the central agency alleged that he was the “mastermind” of the conspiracy to commit the murder.

The two convicted assailants, Andure and Kalaskar, were arrested only in 2018 when their role in the murder of Gauri Lankesh came up. The duo was apprehended by the ATS with the help of Karnataka Police’s Special Investigation Team (SIT). They were subsequently named in a supplementary chargesheet filed in February 2019. Eventually, in May 2019, Mumbai-based lawyer Sanjeev Punalekar was arrested along with his close aide Vikram Bhawe who was earlier convicted for his role in the 2008 Gadkari Rangayatan Theatre bomb blast in Thane. All the accused were allegedly linked to the Sanatan Sanstha.

According to the CBI, Bhawe allegedly participated in a recce along with Andure and Kalaskar about 15 days before the murder. In its chargesheet, the agency claimed that Punalekar had advised Kalaskar to destroy the firearms used in multiple murders – including that of Dabholkar and Gauri Lankesh. On Punalekar’s instructions, Kalaskar had allegedly thrown four country-made pistols into a creek near Thane. However, the agency later told the trial Court that efforts to recover the murder weapon had been unsuccessful. On September 15, 2021, charges were framed against the five accused by the special CBI Court marking the beginning of the trial.

What did the verdict say?

In a detailed 171-page judgment, the Court minced no words in asserting that the investigating agencies had failed to nab

the “mastermind” of the crime. “The murder is committed with very well-prepared plan, which is executed by accused Nos. 2 (Andure) and 3 (Kalaskar). Considering the economic and social status of the accused Nos. 2 and 3, they are not the masterminds of the crime. The main mastermind behind the crime is someone else. Pune police as well as CBI has failed to unearth those master minds. They have to introspect whether it is their failure or deliberate inaction on their part due to influence by any person in powers”, it underscored.

The Court also criticised the State authorities for procedural lapses in obtaining appropriate sanction orders for the prosecution of the acquitted accused under the UAPA. The Rules prescribed for the law mandate that the competent authority must submit its recommendation for sanction to the Central or State Government within seven working days of receiving evidence gathered by the investigating officer. However, during the proceedings, it was revealed that Shirish Nagorao Mohod, then Deputy Secretary and Sanjay Kumar Shyamkishor Prasad, then Additional Chief Secretary of the Mumbai Home Department had failed to process the sanction orders on time.

“Present case is very serious and is of national importance. Not only, Dr. Narendra Dabholkar is assassinated but an attempt is made to finish his ideology”, judge Jadhav grimly noted. He also implicated Sanatan Sanstha and its affiliates—Hindu Janjaguti Samiti, Warkari Sampraday, and others for “nurturing bitter enmity against” the rationalist.

Notably, the Court expressed serious reservations over the conduct of defence counsels during the proceedings. It pointed out how attempts were made to imply that Dabholkar was “hated” because he had “insulted Hindu gods”. Calling this approach “very strange and is condemnable”, the Court further highlighted, “The chargesheeted accused and defence counsels have not merely

attempted to raise the defence. From unnecessary and irrelevant lengthy cross-examination of the prosecution witnesses and even in final argument, an attempt is made to tarnish image of the deceased. At the same time, the approach of the defence was to justify the killing of the deceased Dr. Narendra Dabholkar, by labelling him as anti-Hindu.”

After perusing the testimonies of eyewitnesses, the Court concluded that Andure and Kalaskar had indeed shot Dabholkar dead.

What happens next?

Reacting to the verdict, Dabholkar’s kin said that the conviction of Andure and Kalaskar had reaffirmed their faith in the judiciary but they intended to appeal against the acquittals of the other five accused.

Speaking to *The Hindu*, Dabholkar’s son and daughter, Hamid Dabholkar and Mukta Dabholkar said, “We are satisfied that the two accused have been convicted and sentenced to life, but the masterminds also need to be punished. We are determined to pursue justice and take the case to the Supreme Court. The chargesheets, including those related to the murders of Govind Pansare, M.M. Kalburgi, and Gauri Lankesh reveal alarming connections, indicating a broader conspiracy spanning multiple cases. All the cases have a common thread, which is what investigation agencies have been saying. Until the conspirator in all these cases is apprehended, the safety of all rationalists remains in jeopardy.”

Highlighting that “Tawde and his aides have been acquitted”, Maharashtra Pradesh Congress Committee president Nana Patole too demanded that the masterminds be brought to justice. Meanwhile, Maharashtra Deputy Chief Minister Devendra Fadnis on Saturday said that the State government would take cognisance of the Court’s observations and decide if an appeal should be filed against the acquittals.

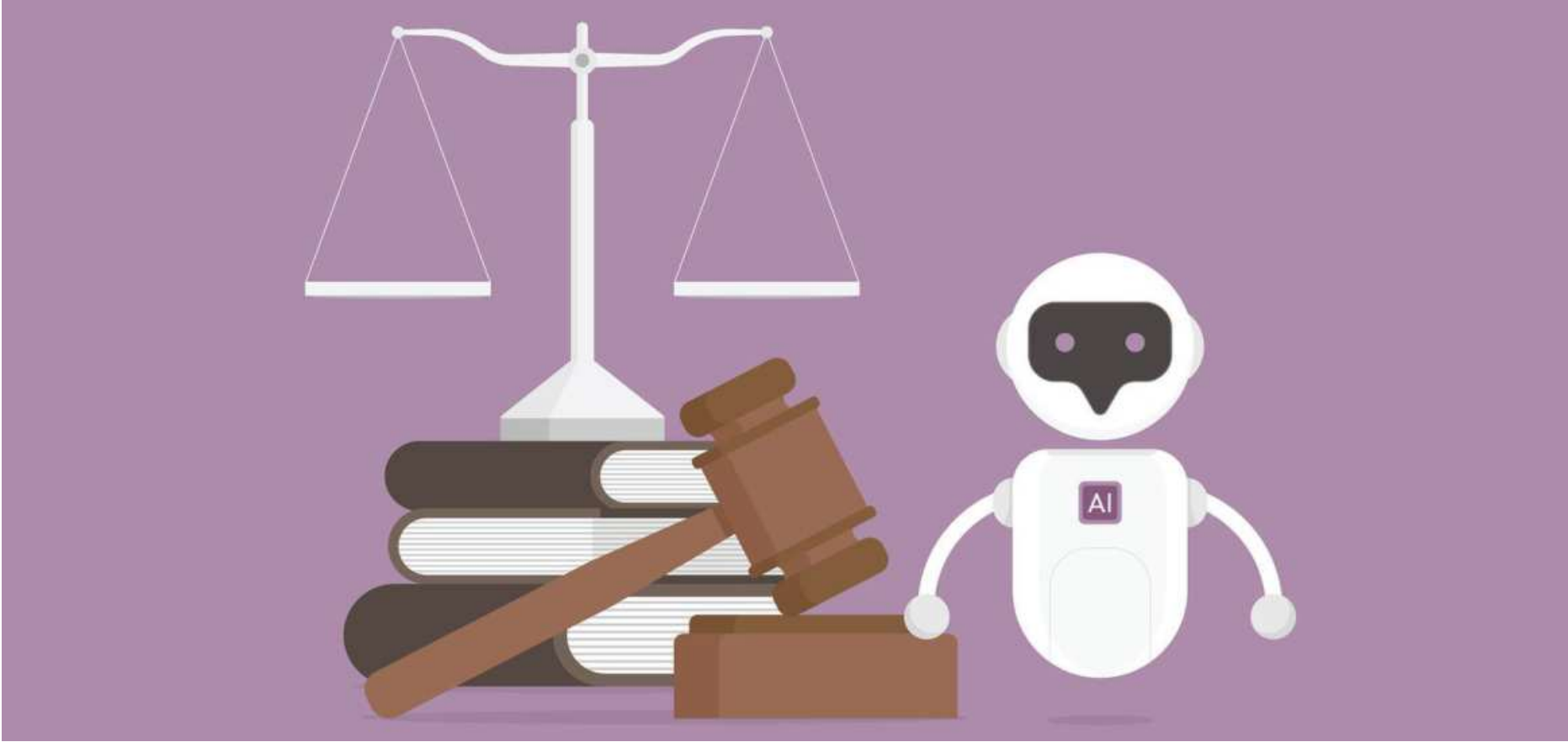
THE GIST

On May 10, a special CBI Court in Pune sentenced Sachin Prakashrao Andure and Sharad Bhausaheb Kalaskar to life imprisonment for the murder of rationalist Narendra Achyut Dabholkar.

Dabholkar was a physician, activist, rationalist and author based in Maharashtra. He founded the Committee for the Eradication of Blind Faith (Maharashtra Andhashraddha Nirmoolan Samiti, or MANS) after leaving his decade-long medical practice. As a prominent crusader against religious superstitions, he was highly critical of godmen who promised “miracle cures” to ailments.

Reacting to the verdict, Dabholkar’s kin said that the conviction of Andure and Kalaskar had reaffirmed their faith in the judiciary but they intended to appeal against the acquittals of the other five accused.

CACHE



GETTY IMAGES

On the importance of regulatory sandboxes in artificial intelligence

Regulatory sandboxes have become a significant instrument in various countries, used to evaluate innovations within a defined and monitored time frame while being subject to regulatory oversight and controlled constraints

Sanhita Chauriha

The advancement of Artificial Intelligence (AI) technologies has posed both unprecedented opportunities and complex challenges for societies worldwide. As AI applications continue to proliferate across industries such as healthcare, transportation, finance, and more, concerns have emerged regarding ethical implications, data privacy, and potential risks associated with their deployment. In response, many governments and regulatory bodies have turned to innovative approaches such as “AI regulatory sandboxes” to strike a balance between fostering AI innovation and ensuring responsible development.

To regulate but not restrict
Regulatory sandboxes have become a significant instrument in various countries, used to evaluate innovations within a defined and monitored time frame while being subject to regulatory oversight and controlled constraints. This approach serves as a valuable tool for policymakers, furnishing them with empirical evidence regarding the advantages and potential risks associated with emerging technologies. Moreover, an evidence-based approach empowers policymakers to adopt a well-informed stance in crafting legal and policy responses that foster beneficial innovation. For businesses engaged in these sandboxes, insights gleaned from a study on ‘fintech regulatory sandboxes’ indicate that this controlled environment enhances access to funding by mitigating information imbalances and reducing regulatory costs. Such multifaceted utility positions regulatory sandboxes as a catalyst for fostering innovation, supporting economic growth, and ensuring responsible governance in a rapidly evolving landscape of emerging technologies.

While the inception of the first formal regulatory sandbox is often attributed to the Financial Conduct Authority in the U.K., numerous other nations have subsequently introduced or announced similar initiatives to assess innovations spanning various industries. According to data from the World Bank, as of November 2020, there were approximately 73 regulatory sandboxes, both announced and operational, within the financial sector across 57 jurisdictions. In India, all financial sector regulators, including the Reserve Bank of India, Securities and Exchange Board of India, Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority of India, Pension Fund Regulatory and Development Authority, and International Financial Services Centre Authority, have launched their respective regulatory sandboxes. Expanding beyond finance, Karnataka has enacted the Karnataka Innovation Authority Act, 2020, establishing an Innovation Authority dedicated to promoting and regulating innovative technologies through a regulatory sandbox model. Notably, the recently passed Telecommunications Act 2023 proposed a regulatory sandbox where the central Government has the authority to establish one or more regulatory sandboxes, as prescribed, to promote and facilitate innovation and technological development in the field of telecommunications, specifying the manner and duration for their implementation.

The benefits of regulatory sandboxes
In the discourse surrounding AI regulation, the concept of regulatory sandboxes emerges as a compelling avenue for exploration. When one considers the necessity of stringent, detailed regulation or favouring adaptable strategies like soft or self-regulation, the introduction of a regulatory sandbox remains a viable option. Firstly, such a

sandbox provides a controlled environment for experimentation, offering invaluable insights into AI technologies capabilities and limitations while fostering collaboration between innovators and regulators. Additionally, it promotes transparency and accountability by requiring participants to disclose information about their AI models, addressing concerns about opacity and enabling tailored regulations. Furthermore, by mandating risk assessments and safeguards, the sandbox encourages responsible innovation, mitigating potential societal impacts of AI applications and nurturing a culture of ethical development within the industry.

Article 53 of the European Union’s AI Act, has the provision of a regulatory sandbox to test technology before making it mainstream. Additionally, Spain became the first European country to have established the statute of the Spanish Agency for the Supervision of Artificial Intelligence (AESIA), ahead of the European regulation on artificial intelligence. This regulation will mandate member states to designate a ‘national supervisory authority’ responsible for overseeing the implementation of regulations related to AI.

Globally, there is a competitive race to regulate and harness AI’s vast potential. The EU has come up with an AI Act, the U.S. has released a white paper on the AI Bill of Rights, and the U.K. has a national AI Strategy. China is trying to regulate various aspects of AI like generative AI while Singapore is following an innovation-friendly approach.

India’s approach to AI
In India, NITI Ayog released a discussion paper outlining a national strategy for AI, which led to the establishment of the national AI Portal. The Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY), released a report on AI Innovation 2023 highlighting India’s AI

vision through seven working groups. The latest proposal of the Digital India Act, 2023 also talks about regulating AI by creating a separate set of laws and regulations.

India’s interest in regulating AI is grounded in a multifaceted approach encompassing economic ambitions, ethical considerations, job creation, industrial transformation, and overall societal welfare. As a global technology hub, the chair of the Global Partnership on Artificial Intelligence and the Delhi Declaration, India aspires to foster innovation in alignment with its cultural and ethical values. A comprehensive regulatory sandbox can be envisioned to guide businesses, researchers, and policymakers, steering AI development towards sustainable growth.

A regulatory sandbox should not be viewed as an approach to directly govern AI, but rather as a progressive step preceding formal legislation. It serves as a preparatory measure tailored to India’s specific circumstances, paving the way for future regulatory actions aligned with the country’s needs and developments in the AI landscape. By providing a controlled environment for testing innovative AI applications, a regulatory sandbox enables stakeholders to assess risks, refine regulatory frameworks, and foster collaboration between regulators, industry players, and other stakeholders. This collaborative approach not only promotes responsible AI deployment but also positions India at the forefront of shaping effective and adaptive regulatory frameworks for emerging technologies. Given the distinct Indian context, it becomes pivotal to determine which approach is most viable and efficient in striking a balance between fostering AI innovation and ensuring ethical, transparent, and accountable AI implementations.

Sanhita Chauriha is a Data Privacy and Technology Lawyer.

THE DAILY QUIZ

Walt Disney’s Mickey Mouse made his debut on May 15, 1928. Here is a quiz on one of the most famous cartoon characters in the history of animation

Sindhu Nagaraj

QUESTION 1
What was the name initially decided for the character, which was later changed to Mickey Mouse?

QUESTION 2
Even though Mickey first appeared in ‘Plane Crazy’ and ‘The Gallopin’ Gaucho’, they were not picked for public distribution. He made his public debut in which film?

QUESTION 3
After a composer initially provided the voice for Mickey, who took over

later in the job in which he appeared to take great personal pride?

QUESTION 4
Which important figure has been identified by Disney as a source of inspiration for the Mickey character?

QUESTION 5
What is termed as Mickey’s signature closing line?

QUESTION 6
Which American President jokingly referred to Mickey as “a world leader who has bigger ears than me”?



Visual question:
We can see a ‘Vote for Mickey’ badge in the image. How is this relevant to the U.S. presidential elections?

Questions and Answers to the previous day’s daily quiz: 1. The unique aspect about Imtiaz Jaleel’s victory in Aurangabad in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections. **Ans: He is the only AIMIM candidate to win outside Hyderabad**
2. The claim to fame (or notoriety) of Akshay Kanti Bam of Indore. **Ans: He was the Congress candidate who withdrew before the elections were held in Indore**
3. The crime thriller written by Neeraj Pandey, based on the gang led by Ashok Mahto, on Netflix. **Ans: Khakee: the Bihar chapter**
4. Name the constituency from Andhra Pradesh where former prime minister Narasimha Rao won a bypoll with a record margin. **Ans: Nandyal**
5. This former Indian cricketer is contesting the elections from Baharampur in West Bengal. **Ans: Yusuf Pathan from the Trinamool Congress**
Visual: Identify this prominent leader. Ans: Kanshi Ram
Early Bird: Sadhan Kumar Panda



FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know your English

K. Subrahmanian

“Memento (Rm. Muthiah)”
“‘Memento’ means ‘an object kept as a reminder or a souvenir of a person or an event.’
He was given a painting as a memento of his visit to the school.
The first ‘e’ in the word is pronounced ‘i’ as in ‘fit,’ the second ‘e’ like the ‘e’ in ‘met’ and ‘o’ like the ‘oe’ in ‘toe,’ ‘woe’. The stress is on the second syllable.”
“Reminder”
“ ‘Reminder’ is from ‘remind’. A reminder is something that reminds you of a person or a thing. There is another word ‘remainder.’ ‘Remainder’ means ‘remaining people, things; the rest’. It also means (a) ‘the quantity left after subtraction or division’ (b) ‘the number of copies of a book left unsold after demand has almost ceased’. ‘Reminder’ is from ‘remind’ and ‘remainder’ is from ‘remain’. The ‘i’ in ‘remind’ is pronounced like the ‘i’ in ‘find’ and the ‘ai’ in ‘remainder’ like the ‘ai’ in ‘stain’.”
“Reticent, reserved (S. Charulata)”
“A person is reticent when he/she is disinclined to discuss all that he/she knows about a particular thing.
He is reticent about his private affairs.
One who is reticent is hesitant, reluctant to talk about a particular subject, especially personal affairs. A person who is reserved is also reticent but about everything. He/she is formal, may even be stand-offish, and is not sociable. One who is reticent is reticent in certain circumstances; one who is reserved is reserved in all circumstances.
“et al. (John Simon, Shillong)”
“This is an abbreviation of the Latin et al (masculine), et alias (feminine). They mean ‘and others’. ‘et al’ is generally used in a footnote or bibliography. When you refer to a book written by several authors, you give one or two names and add ‘et al’.

This book by Charles Morrison et al. is a fine one.
‘et al’ is used of people and not things. There should be a full stop after ‘al’. The ‘e’ in ‘et’ is pronounced like the ‘e’ in ‘set’ and the ‘a’ in ‘al’ like the ‘a’ in ‘sat’. You pronounce only the abbreviated form ‘et al’. ‘Etc.’ is an abbreviation of the Latin ‘etcetera’. You pronounce the full form ‘etcetera’. The ‘e’ in ‘et’ is pronounced like the ‘e’ in ‘set’, the first ‘e’ in ‘cetera’ also like the ‘e’ in ‘set’, the final ‘a’ like the ‘a’ in ‘India’. The ‘c’ is pronounced ‘s’ as in ‘set’ and the ‘e’ after ‘t’ is silent. So the word is pronounced ‘et setra’. ‘etc.’ is used of things and not people, it means ‘and other things, especially of the same kind.’ ‘etc.’ is not used in formal writing.
You should not use ‘and’ before ‘etc.’ or ‘et al’. ‘et’ itself means ‘and.’
Fiction, biography, poetry, etc.
There should be a comma before etc. and a full stop after it. If only one item has been listed, there is no need for a comma.
He has visited Varanasi etc.
You should not use ‘etc.’ at the end of a list that begins with ‘for example,’ ‘such as’: In this sentence, ‘etc.’ is incorrectly used: ‘It is not good to eat too often things such as chocolate, ice-cream, etc.’
Published in The Hindu on December 12, 1991.

Word of the day

Perforate:
make a hole into or between for ease of separation; pass into or through, often by overcoming resistance; having a hole cut through
Synonyms: punch, penetrate, pierced, punctured

Usage: I asked him to perforate the sheets of paper.
Pronunciation: bit.ly/perforatepro

International Phonetic Alphabet: /pəˈfɔːreɪt/

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

No small matter

Unintended effects of Sec 43B (h) of the I-Tax Act

About a week back, the Supreme Court dismissed a petition filed by traders' and manufacturers' bodies against Section 43B (h) of the Income Tax Act; it asked them to direct their pleas to their respective high courts. This Section, introduced in the FY24 Budget, says that if dues to SMEs are not settled within 45 days (a limit set under Section 15 of the Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises Development Act, 2006), the debtor concerned cannot claim a tax deduction in that particular financial year. It is deductible only in the year in which the dues are settled.

While this does not seem like a matter for the apex court, the petitioners had sought to raise a constitutional question — on whether the conditions under Section 43 negate commercial and contractual freedoms. Be that as it may, Section 43B (h) is no doubt meant to ease the perennial working capital concerns of MSMEs. But it runs the risk of harming MSMEs' business, as it does not take into account the ground realities with respect to supply chain flows and finance. The 45-day credit window seemed arbitrary and unrealistic anyway, even when the expense was deductible on an accrual basis. To get around this, market actors devised their own strategies. Cheques are issued, recorded in the books and not 'presented to the bank' by mutual consent, to get around the 45-day rule, clearly showing that the market demands a credit period that is perhaps closer to 180 days (the time allowed to close a transaction under GST to avail of input tax credit). MSMEs play along, fearing loss of business to others who offer better credit terms.

This is not to say that MSMEs should be reconciled to the harsh logic of the credit market. What they need is access to cheap working capital. There are a few ways to achieve this. First, those procuring and supplying to reputed companies should be able to avail finance at rates similar to their top rated clients. Second, banks should be asked to devise a system of financing raw material suppliers to MSMEs such that they don't demand upfront payments. Third, as the 2019 UK Sinha committee report on MSMEs observes, banks should move away from balance sheet-based lending to leveraging the cash flows of a unit, based on turnover and GST data. This could open up credit access for MSMEs whose cash flows are reliable, even if their collateral is not adequate. Fourth, the Trade Receivables electronic Discounting System, or TreDS, should be strengthened.

In the absence of the first three steps, the cost of discounting bills could rise sharply for MSMEs. It should be recognised that the supply chain financing squeeze happens most in the middle of the chain, as the large firms at the apex have considerable leeway in scheduling orders and paying for them. All this only tells us that market-based solutions work where legal diktats don't. This is only too easily forgotten.

POCKET RAVIKANTH



Services exports must go beyond IT

FOCUS AREAS. Tourism, hospitality, medicine, transport, accounting, environment and education services hold potential



AJAY SRIVASTAVA

Despite India's significant 20 per cent share in global IT exports, its share in other crucial services sectors is limited. This article explores the lesser-known aspects of India's services exports, underscoring the untapped potential outside the IT industry.

Unlike goods that are shipped or flown, services can be delivered in four distinct ways, referred to as modes. Mode I involves services being transmitted from one country to another through the internet or phone calls, without requiring either the consumer or provider to travel. Mode II occurs when consumers or firms from one country use a service located in another country. In Mode III, a service provider sets up a business in a foreign country to offer services locally. Lastly, Mode IV covers situations where professionals travel from their home country to another country to provide their services. An estimated 70 per cent of Indian services exports are digitally delivered over internet as Mode I services.

Rise of India's services trade: India's services exports have grown significantly since 1991, when they were just \$5 billion. This growth was initially sparked by the recognition of Indian IT expertise during the Y2K crisis, where thousands of Indian engineers used COBOL to address issues for global firms. Following the advent of the Internet and digitisation, India's IT sector surged, with exports reaching \$52 billion in 2005 and \$117 billion in 2010 — the first year India's services exports surpassed its imports. By 2023, India became the 7th largest global services exporter, capturing a 4.4 per cent market share with exports worth \$344 billion against imports of \$247 billion.

Over 80 per cent of India's IT services are delivered digitally, which aligns well with the global trend, where digitally delivered services are the fastest-growing category. These now represent \$4.25 trillion, or 60 per cent of all services delivered through cross-border supplies.

Sectorial performance: To assess the performance of India's services sector, we need to compare India's share in global services trade by sector. The Table provides these details. The software and IT services sector (Category name:

World and India's services exports (Avg of 2022-23)

S.No	Sectors	Value \$ trillion		Share (%)	
		World	India	Weightage of a service in global services export basket	India's share in global services
A1	Goods-related services (1+2)	245	1.72	3.43	0.7
1	Manufacturing services on physical inputs owned by others	158.1	1.51	2.21	0.96
2	Maintenance and repair services	86.9	0.21	1.22	0.24
A2	Transport	1,481	36.09	20.75	2.44
A3	Travel	1,116	27.05	15.63	2.42
A4	Other commercial services (3-9)	4,202	252.72	58.86	6.01
3	Construction	109.6	3.83	1.54	3.49
4	Insurance and pension services	238.2	3.28	3.34	1.38
5	Financial services	602.5	7.82	8.44	1.3
6	Charges for the use of intellectual property	548.9	1.27	7.69	0.23
7	Telecommunications, computer, and information services	761.5	152.29	10.67	20
8	Other business services	1,813	80.35	25.4	4.43
9	Personal, cultural, and recreational services	128.2	3.91	1.8	3.05
A	Total commercial services (A1+A2+A3+A4)	7,043	317.58	98.66	4.51
B	Government goods and services	95.5	0.68	1.34	0.71
C	Total services (A+B)	7,138.5	318.27	100	4.46

Source: GTRI estimates based on WTO and RBI data

"Telecommunications, computer, and information services") contributes \$150 billion, making up half of the country's total services exports. About 80 per cent of these exports are delivered digitally via the Internet. Fields like generative AI, machine learning, big data, and the Internet of Things expand opportunities for Indian software exports.

The next significant category is 'Other Business Services', which includes business and management consultancy, engineering services, and R&D, among other technical services. This sector contributes \$80 billion, or about a quarter of India's services exports, and holds a 4.2 per cent share in global exports in this category. The growth in

Despite its strengths, India's IT sector faces several challenges. It earns over 70 per cent of its revenue from the US, making it susceptible to protectionism and stringent data security regulations.

this sector is mainly driven by the rise of Global Capability Centres (GCCs) in India.

India is home to about 1,500 GCCs, primarily in major cities such as Bengaluru, Hyderabad, Pune, Chennai, Mumbai, Gurgaon, and Noida. Major companies like Microsoft, Google, IBM, GE, Walmart, JP Morgan, Goldman Sachs, HSBC, Siemens, and Intel have established GCCs in India, focusing on IT, finance, R&D, and business process management. GCCs are evidence of India's growing share in high-skill services exports.

Low participation in the significant revenue-earner sectors: This is the crucial reason for India's below potential export performance in the services sector. To explain this, we can divide the world services exports into two categories:

Category A includes Software ITes and other business services, where India has a high 9 per cent global share. This category accounts for 36 per cent of global services exports and 73 per cent of India's services exports.

Category B includes all other services not covered in Category A. India's global

Adopt a systems approach to food safety

India is harmonising standards with CODEX Alimentarius. It should ensure safe food output at the farming stage

S Sivakumar

Food safety is a shared responsibility. The regulatory framework in India has evolved with the enactment of the Food Safety and Standards Act (FSSA) in 2006. This legislation has brought nine regulations and various orders on food safety, administered by different ministries, under one roof. This has been a vital step towards establishing a holistic approach for setting up a single-window food safety mechanism. Since then, there has been a significant shift towards ensuring food safety and self-compliance rather than merely checking adulteration through a multi-level clearance system.

Setting and maintaining standards and ensuring appropriate Food Safety Management Systems are extremely critical for providing safe and nutritious food. With the establishment of the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) in 2008, the framework for setting robust science-based standards was defined and regulations were formulated through effective consultative processes with all stakeholders under the assistance of

Scientific Panels and the Scientific Committee.

The role of the authority has transitioned from being an enforcer to an enabler, acting as a catalyst for transforming the food systems. The focus has shifted towards strengthening the food safety, quality, and regulatory ecosystem across the country, with an emphasis on improving the State Food Safety Index with regard to laboratory infrastructure, surveillance data, compliance, consumer empowerment, training and capacity building.

TARGETED INITIATIVES

Additionally, beyond the regular and traditional application of regulatory practices, targeted initiatives to bring about social and behavioural shifts have been encouraged to inculcate a culture of food safety among the citizens of the country. Interventions such as the 'Eat Right India Movement' have been guiding and nudging consumers towards healthier and informed choices. The emphasis on healthy food systems aligns with the growing awareness of the importance of nutrition and wellness. To ensure consistency in global outreach between domestic and



CURB. Food-borne illnesses

international food policy measures and to facilitate an innovation-friendly food trade across the globe, an enormous amount of work has been done over the years on harmonising food regulations with active participation at CODEX. India's association with the CODEX Alimentarius Commission is a dynamic collaboration that demonstrates the nation's steadfast commitment to ensuring global food safety standards.

In the current scenario, with emerging food safety concerns, the export and food authorities have taken adequate and timely measures in the interest of public health. These steps

share in these services is only 1.9 per cent, even though they represent 64 per cent of world services exports. Their share is a low 27 per cent in India's services exports.

Major Category B sectors with high world trade but low India's share include Transport and Travel (2.4 per cent), Maintenance and Repair Services (0.24 per cent), Insurance and Pension Services (1.38 per cent), Financial Services (1.30 per cent), and Charges for the Use of Intellectual Property (0.23 per cent). The figures in brackets indicate India's global share in each respective category.

FIVE NEEDED ACTIONS

Address limitations of IT exports. Despite its strengths, India's IT sector faces several challenges. It earns over 70 per cent of its revenue from the US, making it susceptible to protectionism and stringent data security regulations. Automation and AI also pose a risk to 40 per cent of IT jobs. Moreover, competition from countries like the Philippines is impacting the ITes sector's revenue. There is an urgent need for upskilling within the sector to adapt to AI-led developments.

Focus on Category B services such as Tourism and Hospitality, Medical Value Travel, Transport and Logistics, Accounting and Finance, Audio Visual, Construction and Engineering, Environmental Services, Financial Services, and Education Services.

Establish regulations for digital businesses to manage the dominance of US firms like Google, Facebook, Amazon, and OpenAI and to create opportunities for local companies to expand.

Promote the growth of the manufacturing sector. This will increase demand for engineering, design, AI, IoT, and robotics services.

A significant challenge in the sector is the need for more detailed data. The RBI publishes total services earnings under various headings. However, the RBI does not release detailed bilateral or mode-specific transaction data. It's puzzling how the RBI can publish comprehensive services data without robust bilateral data. The Goods and Services Tax Network (GSTN) holds detailed information, yet this data still needs to be made available to the public. Without data, all we get are starry-eyed reports sans rigorous analysis.

India must work on above strategy to realise the true potential of its services exports, which extend well beyond its established IT sector.

The writer is founder of Global Trade Research Initiative

✉ LETTERS TO EDITOR Send your letters by email to bleditor@thehindu.co.in or by post to 'Letters to the Editor', The Hindu Business Line, Kasturi Buildings, 859-860, Anna Salai, Chennai 600002.

Health insurance

This refers to 'Health for all' (May 14). If more than half of health spending in India is met by patients and as many as two-thirds of our population do not have insurance cover, then it is indeed a sorry state of affairs. The example mentioned in the editorial about Chhattisgarh is not an isolated case. In other States too private hospitals empanelled under PMJAY take patients for a ride. So the need of the hour is to increase public spending in healthcare, accompanied by increasing the health insurance coverage to a wider population. It should be remembered that out-of-pocket expenditure of patients and their families should be bare minimum. Else, it defeats the purpose of providing health cover by the

government. It is the poor who need comprehensive insurance coverage.

Bal Govind
Noida

Payments to MSMEs

This refers to 'How to deal with delayed payments to MSMEs' (May 14). Rotation of funds and timely realisation of receivables are key for any business, and these have an impact on several operating ratios. Poor ratios would deprive the business of the opportunity of getting finance from lending institutions. It is shocking to note that per Brickworks Ratings, more than ₹8.6 trillion is annually stuck in delayed payments to be made to MSMEs by 760 large corporates. Addressing this chronic issue must be given top

priority by the government. Probably, a penalty clause needs to be introduced for large business entities having MSMEs as sundry creditors in their books.

RV Baskaran
Chennai

Audit fraud

Apropos 'Curbing audit frauds' (May 14), the author has rightly stressed on the need for quality audit. The significance of audit reports cannot be overstated in areas such as investment, lending and mergers/acquisitions. Hence the need for veracity in accounting and compliance with standard acceptable practices. The auditor, being the person relied on by various stakeholders, discharges a vital duty and the need for continuous vigil

should not be lost sight of.

Jose Abraham
Valkom, Kerala

Improve credibility

If it is BF Borgers today, it was the leading audit firm Arthur Anderson earlier — touching the nadir of infamy in its Enron accounts. That scandal obliterated the firm and the common investor lost his life's savings. Globally, policies and oversight were subsequently sought to be overhauled and yet we had our own Satyam and later the IL&FS scam, wherein the bankers and investors were done in by both auditors and the rating agencies who falsely affirmed the creditworthiness of a fraudulent client. Self-regulation and oversight thereof by apex professional institutions

have remained wanting. Time audit practitioners elevated themselves as guarantors of credibility.

R Narayanan
Navli Mumbai

Chabahar port

'India signs bilateral contract on Chabahar port with Iran' (May 14) was much-needed for India amid geopolitical tensions in West Asia and the Eastern European region. Although Chabahar port was built by India amid US sanctions on Iran and Chinese interference, this move is a message to the so-called super powers who are themselves facing an economic slowdown. This is also a clear indication to Pakistan to mend its relations with its neighbours.

Rajiv Magal
Halekere Village, Karnataka

Conundrum of choice

Diversifying credit card networks, a welcome move

Arjun Goswami
Aayushi Bindal

The RBI has mandated credit card issuers to provide consumers the option to choose the card network at the time of issuance/renewal of credit cards. Starting September 2024, card-issuers (banks or non-banks) providing credit cards on a particular card network (e.g., Visa) will have to diversify their offerings to include at least one more network (e.g., RuPay).

At the outset, the RBI must be lauded for being a progressive regulator by deeply rooting major policy decisions in extensive public consultation and being responsive to industry feedback. This is reflected in the flexibility built into the Circular by: (a) carving out an exception for credit card issuers whose active cards issuance is 10 lakhs or less; (b) exempting card issuers who issue cards on their own network; and (c) limiting the scope of choice of card network only as far as ‘credit cards’ are concerned, as opposed to the draft circular, which was applicable to debit/prepaid cards as well. This selective approach perhaps aims to pilot the implementation with credit cards and then, depending on its success, potentially extend it to debit/prepaid cards.

In addition to diversifying consumer choices, this Circular goes a step further in promoting interoperability between card issuers and card networks, with the aim of restraining exclusive arrangements. This will remove card issuers’ reliance on a particular network for serving all users whilst safeguarding them from any major network disruption, cyber-attacks and other contingencies.

Various factors, such as rewards and benefits (e.g., airport lounges), interoperability with UPI (e.g., RuPay), and customer services, will play a crucial role in continuing to boost the uptake of card networks. This will be important in terms of the ability of credit cards to continue supporting the tepid consumption expenditure.

COMPLIANCE CHALLENGES
The credit card sector is poised to face additional compliance challenges and increased costs, encompassing re-negotiation of existing arrangements, establishing technological infrastructure for routing payments through multiple card networks, engaging in consumer outreach, and addressing critical



CREDIT CARDS. Network choice
ISTOCK.COM

areas such as data protection and cybersecurity.

Globally, the diversity and interoperability of multiple card arrangements is very advanced. In countries like Denmark and France, co-badged cards offer customers and merchants the flexibility to choose between domestic card networks for local transactions and international networks (Mastercard/Visa) for overseas transactions, which are inscribed on the same card. A detailed analysis is required to juxtapose it with India’s unique demographics and market requirements, including customer awareness, literacy rate, and spending patterns, for a successful policy implementation of scaled-up interoperability in the future.

The RBI cites the lack of customer choice as its rationale for this policy decision. However, some banks already offer credit cards on different networks based on their commercial agreements. This raises questions about the necessity of regulatory compulsion. An Indian customer already has a myriad of digital payment options (UPI, debit cards, BNPL, prepaid wallets, upcoming digital rupee), together with the overflow of information on account of unregulated finfluencers.

It would be relevant to consider if the choice of card networks will really add value or lead to ‘choice fatigue’ among consumers. Customers who understand the nuances of choosing a card network already have options to consider, if they are interested in the benefits offered by a specific card network. Perhaps, the idea of interoperability in the Indian context needs to be seen from a different lens after analysing global practices. At its best, interoperability may feel “seamless”, but the process for achieving it can be quite complex, expensive and requires coordination across a range of stakeholders.

The writers are with Cyril Amarchand Mangaldas

thehindubusinessline. TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

May 15, 2004

Market goes into a tailspin

The Day After.....! It was carnage on the bourses. Stock prices fell like ninepins on Friday as fears of a possible slowdown in economic reforms and disinvestment, jolted the market. The brave face put up by the financial markets on Thursday wilted away as major stock indices plummeted to historic lows.

‘Practical’ privatisation, not ‘ideological’

The ‘P’ word is unlikely to figure explicitly in the new ‘Centre-Left’ administration’s scheme of things. An immediate casualty would be the scrapping of the Disinvestment Ministry, a creation of the previous Government. This is clear from the views expressed by Mr Jairam Ramesh, Secretary, Economic Affairs Department of the Congress, and Mr Prakash Karat, senior Polit Bureau member of the CPI (M).

It’s free power to all AP farmers

The leader of the Congress Legislature Party, Dr Y.S. Rajasekhara Reddy, was sworn in as the new Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh by the State Governor, Mr Surjit Singh Barnala, at the Lal Bahadur Stadium on Friday.



RK RAGHAVAN

US campuses are showing signs of recovering from the events of the past few stormy months of Leftist protest against Israeli action in Gaza. Assuming that total normalcy will be restored once universities shut down in the next few days for summer recess, the question is: what did the students achieve by causing severe disruption to academic life in the hallowed Columbia University and many other reputed centres of learning across the nation?

A positive outcome of the demonstrations — a few of which have been less than peaceful — seems to be an eloquent reiteration of the power of freedom of academic thought and expression. This is reminiscent of the Vietnam protests in the late 1960s.

In the context of a burgeoning educational sector there are implications as well for Indian universities, such as JNU, Jamia Millia Islamia, et al. which have a history of student unrest and campus violence. What is ironical is that in many instances the active involvement of students in concert with the teaching faculty on non-academic controversies has exacerbated an already troubled scenario.

Opinion is strongly divided over the right to demonstrate within campuses. The question is whether the lure of free expression can be allowed get the better of a majority desire in favour of learning in a peaceful environment. The problem is that a strong and vociferous section of students and teaching staff firmly believe that it is their divine right to protest even in matters that do not immediately affect them.

POLITICAL COLOUR

Unlike in the US campus happenings in India very often take on a political hue.

When campus protests get out of hand, university authorities have no choice but to call in the police. This could put the police in a tricky situation

It’s not easy to handle campus unrest

CONFLICT ZONE. Police excesses occur when students, faculty go overboard



HARD TASK. The police face a dilemma in breaking up student protests REUTERS

The principal actors in such a setting are political parties which want to exploit every situation to gain a few brownie points for the simple purpose of embarrassing the political party in power. A sequel is uninhibited violence at the behest of political parties fomenting trouble from outside.

Amidst the recent campus happenings in Columbia and other places in the US there is possibly an unintended gain in the form of a greater acceptance of the two nation theory that remains an anathema to the influential Jewish lobby in the US.

A strong Jewish presence both in private industry and in higher education has undoubtedly made a difficult situation more complex.

ROLE OF POLICE

Against this backdrop one important feature of the scene across nations is often ignored. My reference is to a disappointing lack of appreciation of the role of law enforcement agencies in protecting campus order.

A decision to call in the local police to quell disturbances swiftly and restore sanity to the process of academic

STATISTALK.

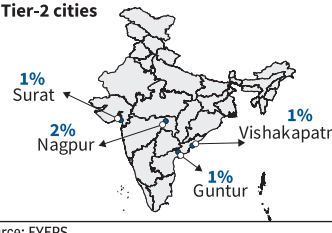
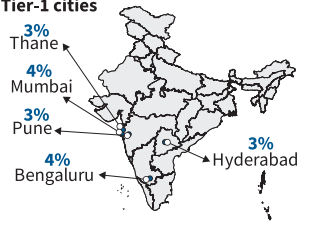
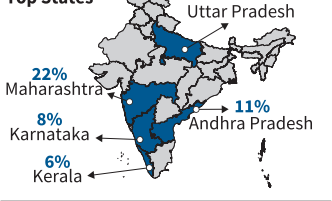
Compiled Arunachalam Vaidyanathan | Graphic Visveswaran V

Indian women - trading and investment preferences

Trading and investment done by women in India have steadily increased according to data from the FYERS platform. Close to 1 lakh women who constitute 20% of all turnover on its platform are indicating the following trends. Maharashtra and South India dominate by making up almost half the total market. Majority of the trading has been done by women between the ages of 26-55 thus dispelling the notion that most trading is done by college students with their pocket money. Most of the portfolios are less than ₹1 lakh while there has been consistent growth across equity, derivatives and MCX.

Top States and cities by volume

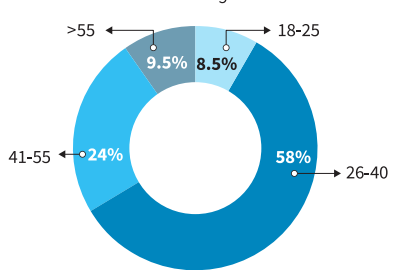
% of total women trading



Source: FYERS

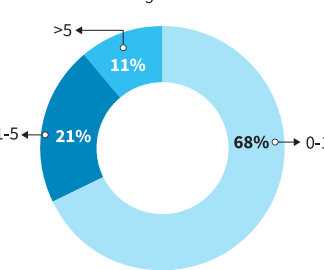
Age of women trading

% of women trading



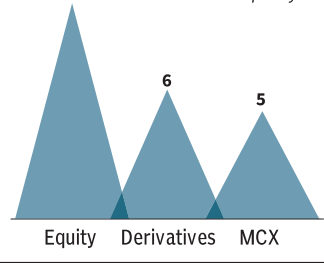
Investment portfolio size

% of women trading in ₹ lakh

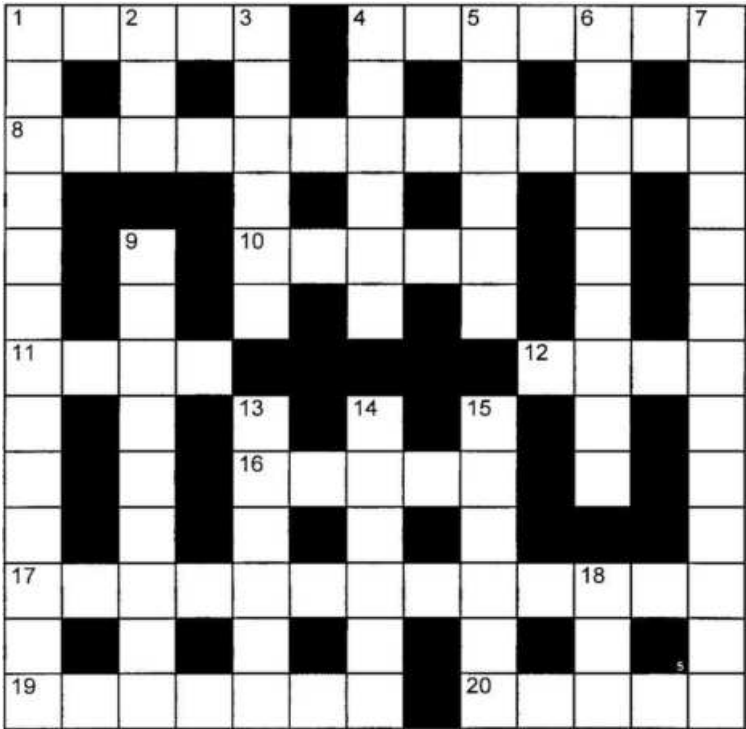


Consistent growth across segments

Growth % over the past year



BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2439



EASY

ACROSS

- Nip (5)
- Of the stomach (7)
- A questioning (13)
- Vote into office (5)
- Sheet of glass for window (4)
- Mineral powder (4)
- At no time (5)
- Midwifery specialists (13)
- Riding seats (7)
- Answer (5)

DOWN

- Panto actresses (9,4)
- Shelled fruit (3)
- Inure (6)
- Hand-wear (6)
- Is inclined (6)
- Put back in office (9)
- In an eye-catching way (13)
- Abridged (9)
- Ill (6)
- Turns aside (6)
- Retailer of foodstuffs (6)
- Snake (3)

NOT SO EASY

ACROSS

- Take, as one shouldn't, a little bit for cooking (5)
- Note, as endless ruse, what pertains to the tummy (7)
- Systematic questioning of a query in print (13)
- Choose top removal to choose in preference (5)
- What's in the window, Father? One that's lost the ring! (4)
- Powder used in hospital, certainly (4)
- When it's repeated it's the system of hire-purchase (5)
- Delivery experts (13)
- Lumbers one with seats for jodhpurs? (7)
- Depend upon being quietly enheartened by the comeback (5)

DOWN

- Male characters female, in the main (9,4)
- It's the head one may take a spanner to (3)
- Had the right to be included, end without end, to set solid (6)
- There's nothing in match non-u Gus holds with these on! (6)
- Different approaches to same story last achievable with Poles (6)
- Check condition to put back in office (9)
- In cups, coy soul is tormented in an outstanding way (13)
- Potted version of a hundred on five times that: needs changing (9)
- Isn't fit to provide an international water supply? (6)
- Rave about return of the Saint one manages not to encounter (6)
- He provides provisions (6)
- Something with bite, like pepper initially (3)

SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2438

ACROSS 1. Slung 4. Heretic 8. Unionists 9. Don 10. Scoured 12. Slat 14. Curtain 17. Chap 18. Hottest 20. Inn 21. Contralto 23. Garment 24. Sorts

DOWN 1. Soul-searching 2. Unison 3. Generous 4. Has 5. Rasp 6. Toddle 7. Constructions 11. Dutch 13. Pictures 15. Manner 16. Cellar 19. Ache 22. Nit

A geopolitical berth

Gains from Chabahar deal go beyond logistics

More than two decades after the project was conceived under the Atal Bihari Vajpayee government and almost eight years after the Narendra Modi government signed an agreement to establish an International Transport and Transit Corridor at Chabahar, India and Iran finally signed a 10-year operational contract on Monday. The agreement, between Indian government-owned India Ports Global Ltd (IPGL) and Ports and Maritime Organisation (PMO) of Iran, commits the former to invest roughly \$120 million to equip and operate the port. A rupee credit window of \$250 million to augment infrastructure is also on the table. The immediate significance of the agreement is that it breaks a six-year deadlock on equipment sourcing. Suppliers had been reluctant to open letters of credit on IPGL for fear of United States sanctions on Iran. Under the new deal, PMO will procure equipment on behalf of IPGL and the money will be refunded to an Iranian entity based in the United Arab Emirates. This development follows an agreement in April between India and Myanmar for IPGL to take full operational control of Sittwe Port to enhance connectivity between Myanmar and India's Northeast.

The Chabahar project is considered a response of sorts by India to China's massive Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Even if that is overstated, its importance to New Delhi can be seen from the fact that Sarbananda Sonowal, minister for shipping, ports and waterways, flew to Tehran in the middle of parliamentary elections to sign the agreement. The Shahid Beheshti port, to give Chabahar its full name, is seen as a key competing hub to Gwadar, the port that China is developing in Pakistan, offering India connectivity with Afghanistan and Central Asia by skirting its troubled western neighbour. Enhancing its potential is the prospect of linking with the International North South Transport Corridor (INSTC), a joint project by India, Russia, and Iran, to link the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf via an overland multi-modal corridor to St Petersburg and northern Europe. Chabahar was considered critical enough for the Modi government to secure a waiver from the US administration when Donald Trump was president, citing access to Afghanistan as a reason. But with the US disengaged from Afghanistan, the Biden administration has issued an oblique warning that anyone doing deals with Iran risked the threat of sanctions. This will be a diplomatic challenge for the Indian government.

As with Sittwe, where civil war in Myanmar is stalling progress, the political turbulence of the region means that operating the Chabahar port will be fraught. It is located in the Sistan-Balochistan region, sharing a border with Afghanistan and Pakistan, where a long-running insurgency festers. In January this year, Iran launched missile strikes into Pakistan's Balochistan province, ostensibly to flush out anti-Iranian militants, to which Islamabad responded with missiles and fighter jets in Sistan-Balochistan apparently to wipe out anti-Pakistani insurgents. Russia's war with Ukraine is also likely to weaken the ambitious INSTC adjunct. But the more substantive gain from the Chabahar agreement is geopolitical. At a time when India has been seen as tacitly backing Israel in its war against Hamas, including a deal sending Indian workers to Israel to replace Palestinians, the Chabahar agreement provides an opportunity to apply a rebalance to New Delhi's West Asian relations. Given the current uncertainty in the region and India's deep dependence on it, this, too, is an invaluable gain.

New tariff walls

US tariffs will further increase trade friction

In a move that could significantly increase global trade friction, the US has increased tariffs on several items imported from China, including lithium batteries, critical minerals, semiconductors, and solar cells. However, the most important is a fourfold increase in the tariff on electric vehicles to 100 per cent. Chinese manufacturers have developed significant capability in this sector. Mr Biden is facing a tough re-election campaign, and appears to be behind in the polls in battleground states. Winning back industrial workers to the Democratic Party has long been part of his electoral strategy, and these tariffs should be seen as part of that effort. His opponent, former President Donald Trump, has claimed he will take up tariffs to 200 per cent on EVs.

In actual fact, even 100 per cent is overkill — the existing 25 per cent level for EV tariffs on China seemed to be doing a good enough job of keeping them out of the US market. The larger question is what this means for the sector globally. The effect of the Chinese dominance of the EV market might well be further deterioration in the open trading system. While the European Union might be uncomfortable setting tariffs at comparable levels, it may well find other ways of penalising Chinese EV imports. It has already launched an investigation into whether “unfair subsidies” have been provided to such manufacturers by Beijing, which might allow the European Commission to legally impose tariffs or other restrictions later this year.

India already has fairly high tariffs on cars, especially high-end EVs. Recently the government announced it would reduce these tariffs on a case-by-case basis for companies that plan to set up manufacturing units in India. This was widely interpreted as an incentive to the American manufacturer Tesla in particular. The top Chinese EV company, BYD, has long sought to increase manufacturing in India, but has not got clearance for its proposed billion-dollar investment. Indian policy thus appears to be trying to meet several different aims. The US' approach of high tariffs, meanwhile, misses the point that Chinese EV companies — unlike some other sectors — may be doing well not just because of state-subsidised overcapacity but because it has become an innovation hub in the sector globally. In terms of quality and features, they may be more advanced than the offers from Western legacy carmakers. Imposition of tariffs will just confirm the big Detroit car companies in their belief of their political influence, and reduce their incentives to innovate in the EV sector. The long-term impact will be, as is inevitable, lower-quality, less efficient, and more expensive EVs in the US than in the rest of the world.

Indian policymakers must, therefore, consider their future path in the sector carefully. On the one hand, it is natural to want to promote domestic manufacturing. It is also a bad idea to cut off Indian consumers from the most efficient cars. But the US tariffs also highlight the need for trusted partners such as India to develop their own export capacity. What the government needs to objectively decide is whether keeping Chinese cars out requires them to also ban Chinese investment in the sector. India should aim to increase investment and innovation in the sector, considering the significant potential for both domestic and international demand.

Geopolitical challenges for next govt

When our gaze shifts from the domestic to the external after the polls, the challenges would have multiplied

ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA



An excruciatingly extended general election process, stretching from April 1 to June 1, 2024, inevitably turns the national gaze from the external world to the unfolding domestic political drama. The next government, which shall take office on June 4, will face an international landscape that would have changed since April 1. What would that world look like?

The US would have become a more diminished power. Its domestic politics has become more fragmented and more polarised than before. The US stand on the Israel-Hamas war has divided American society to a degree not seen since the Vietnam War. President Joe Biden is neither able to restrain Israel nor deny military and economic support to it. In Europe, Russia is making important gains in its war against Ukraine with the US caught in a serious dilemma — it does not want an escalation that demands direct intervention by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (Nato), but Ukraine losing the war, or settling for an unequal peace, would deliver a grievous blow to American credibility. This is compounded by the uncertainty over whether Mr Biden would be re-elected in the November presidential election or the nightmare of a Trump presidency will return.

The US has lowered the pitch of its confrontation with China in the Indo-Pacific region. It has launched a major diplomatic effort to expand engagement with China, including through the revival of several bilateral consultative mechanisms, which had lain dormant in the past couple of years. The US' Indo-Pacific strategy stays in place, but we can see diminished priority to the Quad, the grouping of Australia, India, Japan and the US. The Quad summit scheduled for January this year has been

postponed, but no new dates have been set. After repeatedly declaring that the US would defend Taiwan if it was invaded by China, President Biden categorically stated in January this year that the US did not support Taiwan independence. This was welcomed by China.

The US is in classic overstretch, having to deal with 2 “hot” wars — one in Europe and another in West Asia — and a potential conflict in the Indo-Pacific region. Since it is the Indo-Pacific which is, relatively speaking, more peaceful, the US wants to keep it that way, even while it shores up its alliances and military deployments in a region



SHYAM SARAN

which it considers the centre of gravity of global economic and military power. India was able to leverage US preoccupation with the Indo-Pacific and its rivalry with China to expand its own diplomatic space. This may now shrink both due to the US itself becoming a diminished power, and also due to its compulsion to play down its confrontation with China. If a Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government under Narendra Modi retains power, there may be a view that a Trump presidency will, on balance, be good for India. This would be wrong. A Trump presidency will only accelerate the US' decline and its unpredictability would “trump” any gain from ideological affinity.

What is China's perception of the changed geopolitical situation? It will be recalled at the Shangri-la Security Conference in 2019, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi had dismissed the Quad as “seafoam in the Pacific or the Indian Ocean; they may get some attention, but will soon dissipate”. As the Quad went from strength to strength, the Chinese perspective changed, regarding it as more threat-

Nuances of household savings

Household (HH) savings in India consist of two parts — net financial savings (NFS) and physical savings. HH NFS is arrived at after deducting financial liabilities (known as annual borrowing) from gross financial savings (GFS). GFS includes seven key areas: Currencies; deposits (bank and non-bank); insurance; provident and pension funds (P&PF), including the public provident fund (PPF); shares and debentures (S&D); claims on government (small savings); and others. HH physical savings primarily constitute residential real estate (accounting for about two-thirds) and machinery and equipment (owned by producers within the HH sector).

Three key trends have emerged within HH savings in recent years: 1) within GFS, HHs have increased their exposure to riskier assets (eg S&D), and the contractual category (P&PF and government schemes, ie small savings) and shifted from bank deposits; 2) HH liabilities have mounted in the past few years; and 3) HHs have transitioned from financialisation of its savings by allocating a larger portion to physical assets.

I intend to discuss the economic implications of these developments and explain some nuances of HH savings.

It is a good idea to start by addressing the confusion surrounding the role of deposits within HH GFS. It is argued that even if an individual invests in mutual funds, insurance, or the PPF, almost all of it eventually ends up in someone's (company's) bank or non-bank deposits. If so, the change in the composition of GFS — away from deposits into S&D or insurance or P&PF — should not affect deposit growth.

This may sound correct, but it isn't. Let's say I

purchase common stocks worth ₹1,000 in XYZ company. It means my bank account is debited, leading to lower deposits, and my savings are shifted to “S&D”. Therefore, one must include other financial assets along with bank deposits to estimate GFS. There is, however, an interesting nuance. I can buy those stocks either from another individual (ie from the secondary market) or directly from the issuer (ie the primary market). In the former case, bank deposits and equity holdings of the two individuals will cancel each other out, and, thus, would not affect the composition of GFS. In the latter case, however, my bank account is debited, and XYZ's bank account is credited. At the same time, I increase my holding of “S&D”, and XYZ's liabilities (in the form of equity) also increase. Such shifts reflect either my unhappiness with lower interest rates on deposits or my strong confidence in the stock market. Speaking from the macro perspective, HH GFS may or may not rise in this case, depending on various other factors.

It is also important to note that although XYZ's bank account was credited, it does not necessarily lead to higher savings because bank deposits are not considered when estimating corporate savings. Loosely speaking, they are estimated as the sum of retained earnings (ie profit after tax after dividend) and the depreciation provision.

It also explains not all deposits are included in HH savings. Only HH deposits, which accounted for 62 per cent of bank deposits in FY23, are included in the calculation of HH GFS.

GFS must be adjusted with HH financial liabilities to arrive at HH NFS. Why? To avoid double counting and because not all HH deposits truly represent savings of HHs.



NIKHIL GUPTA

disenfranchisement of vulnerable groups. In “Covid-19 and Its Impact on Women”, Elizabeth Imti comments: “policymakers must acknowledge the multifaceted nature of the difficulties women encounter, spanning... gender-based violence and inadequate healthcare to marginalisation in the job market.”

This collection also includes essays that explore specific cultures, their attributes and conventions. Professor Saran's “Death Rituals Among Odia Hindus” is an ethnographic account about the funerary practices and customs of the titular community. He writes: “It is an expression of collective grief and continuity of a religious tradition... Socio-cultural and religious activities associated with death encompass the family and community as a whole.” In “Marrying Out: Why Khasi Women Marry non-Khasi Men?”, Sarah Jayal Sawkmie states that globalisation and associated changes as well as illegal immigration and job precarity has resulted in

increased contact and co-existence between Khasis and non-Khasis. For many, this trend is seen as a threat to their traditional ways of life, especially as exogamous marriages become more common. Ms Sawkmie tries to understand why this is happening and what drives these unions while featuring Khasi voices collected through her research.

Any historical overview of India must also contend with a history of migration, both within and without. Individuals and communities have come to or left the country in search of new opportunities, a safe haven, or a fresh start. Mahalingam M studies the mixed experience of Indian women in colonial and post-colonial Malaysia: “The migration of Indian women to Malaysia has emancipated them from some aspects of repressive Indian social and cultural traditions... [but given the ethnicity-based] socio-economic structures and gender stereotypes [in Malaysia], there has

been limited scope for them to use their agency.” Koyal Verma looks at the other side of the coin in “African Diaspora in India” and talks about various migrations of African peoples to India which ultimately led to permanent settlements. She considers the diaspora and their evolving identity as well as connection to Africa.

Identity formation in a society is bound up with existing power relations, hierarchies of privilege and the politics of inclusion and exclusion. There are socio-cultural, economic, and religious forces that also play a prominent part in this process. In a pluralistic society like India, many of the socio-cultural intersections have to be negotiated to determine one's distance from the centre and the peripheries. The essays in this collection interrogate what it means to be “Indian” and how these identities often involve a level of paradoxical disconnect between formal mandates and actual practices. The contributors uncover the everyday experiences of fellow Indians and show the ways in which we exemplify our truths and the things that need to change so that all inhabitants of the country can lead equitable, thriving lives.

The reviewer is editor-at-large at Asymptote Journal and a books editor at Inklette Magazine

The Indian mosaic



BOOK REVIEW

AREEB AHMAD

Edited by Manoj Kumar Jena, *Ways of Being Indian* is a collection of academic essays conceived in honour of Professor Renuka Singh who retired from the Centre for the Study of Social Systems, School of Social Sciences (CSSS), Jawaharlal Nehru University. Professor Jena as well as the other contributors were her doctoral students at CSSS. Taking on her pioneering work these essays explain “the themes of religion, gender and culture in the contemporary social order... drawing on theory, experiential practice, and research, as well as multidisciplinary approaches.” Through it all, a diverse portrait of India emerges that covers the various complex traditions, habits, and systems of belief that are an

integral part of the lived realities of people who happen to share a national identity.

In the essay “Disciplined Body of Widows”, Nilanjana Goswami probes the “processes that, through religious codes of conduct, discipline and transform widows into docile bodies.” Since women are treated as the receptacles of family honour in a patriarchal society divided on gender lines, the death of a husband is seen as a catalyst that “unleashes their sexuality” so they are expected to retreat from public life and adopt a devotional mind. Himashree Sarma's essay, “Menstruation and Ritual Symbolism”, takes the idea of religion policing women's lives further, exploring how a perfectly natural biological process attains the baggage of “socio-cultural ideologies of pollution and social stigma”, substantially impacting women's health.

The former essay is centred on the bhajan ashrams, temples and ghats in West Bengal's Nabadwip where widows find shelter; the latter focuses on the Kamakhya Temple in Assam. In the

essay “Exploring the ‘Other’ in Hindu Mytho-Epic Imagination” Kamalini Mukherjee analyses the epics in India and how overt social and religious ideas are drawn from them as blueprints of ideal conduct in relation to contemporary politics. She writes: “The disconnect between the Hindu mytho-epic imagination of gender and sexuality, and the manifest reality of queer experience in Indian society is great, and indeed fraught.”

Gender is examined in various ways beyond religion in other essays. Anindita Tagore looks at land rights and property ownership in both rural and urban contexts and what are some of the formal and informal barriers in front of women in “Urban Women and Matters of Land”. Ellina Samantroy flags a different aspect in “Women and Violence in the Workplace in India” which calls for greater participation of women in the economy and labour force, especially in the formal sector, and how legislation addressing sexual harassment and abuse needs to be strengthened so that they can remain gainfully employed without being forced to quit due to the inappropriate behaviour of male colleagues. The pandemic also played a role in reducing women's participation in public life and enabled large-scale



OPINION

The
Hindustan Times
ESTABLISHED IN 1924

{ OUR TAKE }

Anchoring ties in Chabahar waters

The port agreement suggests how India and Iran are keen to exercise strategic autonomy

The agreement signed by India and Iran for long-term operations by an Indian State-run firm at the strategic Chabahar port is a significant development, given the disruptions affecting global trade due to the instability in West Asia. The Chabahar project began in 2016 as an initiative by Afghanistan, India and Iran to create a trade and transit hub, with the tacit blessings of the US, which provided a carve-out for the port in its sanctions regime for Iran, given its interest in Afghanistan then. The situation has now changed, and the Indian side will have to be wary about the US threat of enforcing sanctions against all entities engaging in business deals with Iran. A US State Department deputy spokesperson, when asked about Chabahar, said: “Any entity, anyone considering business deals with Iran — they need to be aware of the potential risks that they are opening themselves up to and the potential risk of sanctions.”

Still, for India and Iran, the project offers a chance to build a trade route that could access Afghanistan and the landlocked Central Asian States. The deal is also in continuation with New Delhi’s long-standing relations with Tehran, which are showcased as a civilisational legacy, and hence, shielded from the compulsions of geopolitics. Nonetheless, India-Iran relations have been impacted by the ebb and flow of the West’s ties with Tehran. The 10-year agreement assuages Iranian concerns about India’s long-term commitment to the project, especially against the backdrop of New Delhi’s burgeoning strategic relations with Washington. While India has maintained a steady commitment for the development of a terminal at Chabahar, it faced challenges in its efforts to acquire modern equipment for the port because of concerns among Western suppliers over US sanctions. Despite these obstacles, the Indian State-run firm has handled more than 8.4 million tonnes of cargo since it began operations at Chabahar in late 2018. Experts believe this figure is only a reflection of the true potential of the deep water port, and India’s plans to invest \$120 million in new equipment will give a major boost to Chabahar’s capacity.

In the current context, the obvious gains for India are economic, as Chabahar will open up opportunities to further its interests in Iran, especially at a time when China is eyeing the country’s ports and coastal infrastructure, and facilitate trade with Afghanistan and Central Asia. Clearly, the port agreement is premised on long-term economic and strategic interests, and, perhaps, suggests how New Delhi and Tehran, despite their current diplomatic stance and friends, are careful to exercise strategic autonomy to further their respective national interests. That will require some balancing, though.

Inflation shadow on rate cut remains

India’s benchmark inflation number, as measured by the Consumer Price Index (CPI), was flat between March and April 2024, at 4.85% and 4.83%, respectively. The April inflation print is in line with most institutional forecasts. Even beyond the headline numbers, little has changed in the larger inflation picture between March and April. Core inflation — it measures the non-food, non-fuel part of the inflation basket — continues to decline and has reached its lowest ever level of 3.25% in the current series. At 8.7%, food inflation continues to be the biggest driver of overall inflation. What does all this mean for the economy and policy at large?

RBI’s Monetary Policy Committee has repeatedly underlined that a sustained decline in food inflation is essential for the headline number stabilising at RBI’s target of 4%. While there is little the central bank can do through monetary policy tools to bring down food inflation, it has been helped by a proactive approach by the fiscal policy of the government. The extent and efficacy of such interventions will depend on the severity (or lack) of supply shocks in food markets and the political feasibility of such interventions. The government withdrawing its ban on onion exports during elections in Maharashtra is one such example.

It would be wrong to assume that all the monetary policy action is being driven by trends in food inflation. With rate cuts in the US becoming increasingly unlikely this year, RBI will have one more reason to postpone its monetary easing. Whether a prolonged high interest rate environment is eating into India’s potential growth is a question which is bound to resurface in the next MPC meeting in June. But with growth numbers looking good for now, the answer is likely to remain the same.

On Israel, Biden’s quest for balance

A glance at public debate in America on Israel shows why the White House is struggling to manage the politics and optics of the war

To grasp the impossible political trap that Joe Biden finds himself on Israel, sample these four distinct moments, from four distinct sites, in Washington DC.

Emancipation Hall, Capitol Hill: May 7 was the Holocaust Museum’s Annual Day of Remembrance. Survivors attended a moving event marked by the spirit of Never Again. In New York, Columbia University had just called in the New York Police Department to remove student protesters outraged by Israel’s brutality in Gaza. But the political consensus on the issue, where the leadership of neither major American party deemed the protests as a legitimate political act, was striking. In an otherwise divided polity, the Democratic Biden and the Republican (House Speaker) Mike Johnson slammed what they saw as anti-Semitism in the campus protests.

Sitting in the hall, Irvin, whose grandparents died in Auschwitz and whose parents migrated from Hungary to the United States (US) in 1956, explained what, for him, was the line dividing criticism of Israel and anti-Semitism. “I have no problem with

criticism of Benjamin Netanyahu or the Israeli government. I support a two-State solution. But when you criticise the Israeli State, its right to exist, and chant slogans seeking its destruction, you attack the only Jewish State in the world. That’s anti-Semitism.” For Irvin and many Jewish Americans in the hall that morning, Biden — whose political socialisation happened in the two decades after World War II and for whom liberalism meant standing up against anti-Semitism — was a hero.

Starbucks, Pennsylvania Avenue: House Representative Ro Khanna, a rising Democratic Party star likely to throw his hat in the presidential primary for 2028, is a surrogate for the Biden campaign, especially in swing states with sceptical voters on the Left.

Over coffee, a short walk from the Hill, he elaborated on what he saw was Biden’s biggest mistake. “We gave too much of a blank cheque. We should never have bear-hugged Netanyahu given his history of having insulted President (Barack) Obama, having been an anti-democratic voice within Israel trying to get rid of the Supreme Court autonomy, and having never been a partner for peace.” Khanna added that while condemning the terror attack and supporting Israel’s right to get the Hamas perpetrators, the US should have insisted there could not be “indiscriminate bombing of hospitals and refugee camps”, that there could not be

“denial of sufficient aid”. “We should not have isolated ourselves in the UN in calls for a ceasefire. We should have made it clear our weapons would be contingent on Netanyahu not defying the American assessment of what it will take to preserve Palestinian lives.”

As protests continued in universities, Khanna admitted that the war was hurting Biden not just among Muslim-Americans and Arab-Americans but also the young and progressives and voters of colour. Biden needed to have a more balanced approach and was coming around to it, the lawmaker insisted.

Dirksen Building, Capitol Hill: After seven months of standing up for Israel’s right to respond to Hamas and destroy the terror outfit in the manner it deemed fit and defending Israel from Iranian strikes, Biden finally did attempt to strike a “balance”. On Thursday, Biden told CNN that if Israel launched a full-scale invasion of Rafah, the US would withhold offensive weapons, soon after reports that it had withheld some bomb shipments.

On the Hill, there was fury. Johnson now attacked the President. At a hearing of a Senate committee in Dirksen, Lindsey Graham rebuked defence secretary Lloyd Austin for daring to tell Israel how to fight its war “when everyone around them wants to kill all the Jews”. A set of Democratic lawmakers opposed Biden. Speculation swirled in DC



Prashant Jha



The United States is working on a ceasefire and hostage deal

AFP

about how Biden risked losing the centrist, centre-Right and Jewish support, which was much larger than the anti-Israel, Left and Muslim vote. And Netanyahu publicly defied Biden saying Israel will go it alone.

White House press briefing room: Biden was now getting hit from all sides — the pro-Israel crowd for betrayal and anti-Israel crowd for doing too little. And so, this Monday, Jake Sullivan offered a policy overview of what Biden believed.

The war began due to Hamas and the US wants the terror group defeated. Palestinian civilians are in hell. Israel should do more to protect civilians but what is happening isn’t genocide. The US will surge humanitarian support. The US is sending “a massive amount of military assistance” to Israel to help it defend itself against Iran and its proxies. But it has stopped the delivery of 2,000 pound bombs since the US believes these should not be dropped on densely populated cities. The US also believes Israel shouldn’t do a “major military operation in the heart of Rafah”. Biden won’t provide offensive weapons for such an operation were they to occur, but it hasn’t occurred yet and US and Israel are talking about other ways to defeat Hamas.

Biden also believes that military pressure is necessary but not sufficient to defeat Hamas and Israel needs a political plan for the future of Gaza and the Palestinians, or terrorists will return as they are in Gaza City. Israel’s future rests in greater integration with the region, including normalisation with Saudi Arabia, and this was a historic opportunity. The US is working on a ceasefire and hostage deal; this can happen immediately if Hamas released wounded, old and women hostages. And Iran and its proxies represented a threat to Israel, regional stability and the US, and Washington is working to prevent an escalation into a wider regional war.

Whether Biden’s latest policy approach is enough to satisfy antagonistic constituencies within America, while shaping Israeli behaviour and carving out a wider regional accord, is to be seen. The recent track record doesn’t offer much hope. But just listening to these voices reveals the complexity of the public debate on Israel in America and its multiple drivers, and offers some tentative understanding of why Biden is acting the way he is.

The views expressed are personal

In Uttar Pradesh, a poll potboiler in the making

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)’s aim of winning at least 370 of the 543 seats in the Lok Sabha in the ongoing general elections, and, together with its partners, in excess of 400, is hugely dependent on its ability to maximise its tally in Uttar Pradesh (UP), which sends the most representatives, 80, to the Lok Sabha.

In 2014, the party won 71 seats and 42.3% of the popular vote. In 2019, it won more votes, 49.6%, but fewer seats, 62. This time, the thinking before the elections were announced was that the party would do far better, perhaps win even more seats than it did in 2014.

There was enough reason to think so. UP is home to Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s Lok Sabha constituency, Varanasi, and he is a hugely popular leader in the state. As is the state’s chief minister (CM), the monk-administrator Yogi Adityanath who also heads the influential Gorakhnath math. The BJP won the 2017 state elections with 39.7% of the vote and 77.4% of the seats and retained power in 2022 with 41.3% of the votes and 63.3% of the seats. The consecration of the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya in January — it has drawn huge crowds since — created a wave not just across the Hindi heartland where the BJP is dominant, but even south of the Vindhyas. The party managed to forge a partnership with the Rashtriya Lok Dal, until then in the Opposition camp, and retained many of its existing alliances, such as those with the Apna Dal (Son-lyal) or ADAL and Suheldev Bharatiya Samaj Party (SBSP).

And the Opposition appeared in disarray: The Congress has been desperately struggling for the past two decades to recuperate in the state; the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) wants to have no truck with either the ruling alliance or the Opposition one, and seems to have lost relevance even among a section of its most loyal base; and the Samajwadi Party (SP), which put up a creditable performance in 2022 is trying to retain its space and build a base for the 2027 assembly polls.

But as the elections progressed, the script played out differently (though the ending may be the same), as even some leaders of the BJP admit. With polling complete in 34

of the state’s 80 seats and 379 of the 543 across India, this is perhaps a good time to try and understand what is happening in the crucible of Indian politics.

The euphoria over the temple started to subside even as the BJP fielded Arun Govil, who played Ram in the TV serial version of the Ramayan, from the Muslim-dominated Meerut constituency in west UP. The open rebellion by their loyal voters, the Rajputs, rattled the BJP leadership the most. Taking umbrage over their poor representation in ticket distribution despite the two tallest leaders of their community holding the position of CM and Union defence minister (Rajnath Singh), the Rajputs organised panchayats, pledging support to the party that could defeat the BJP. Some just didn’t turn up to vote. In the first phase, turnout in UP was 61.1%, 5.5 percentage points lower than in 2019; in the second, it was 55.2%, 6.9 percentage points lower. Only in the third phase did things pick up, but that too was only with respect to the gap with 2019. The turnout was 57.6%, compared to 60% in 2019.

After four phases of polling, the Sangh Parivar does not see the intense Modi wave of 2014 and 2019 that swallowed all other poll issues.

It also fears the erosion of the Hindu vote bank built on issues ranging from the “liberation” of three Hindu shrines in the state to the bogey of “love jihad”.

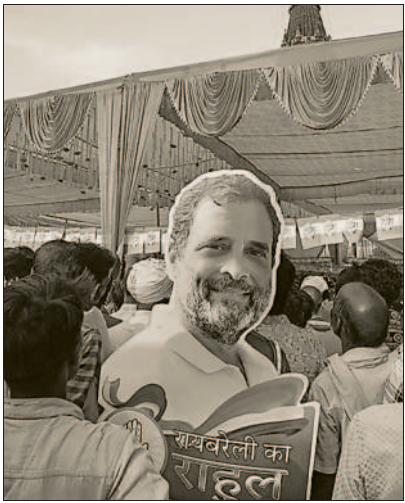
In its endeavour to upset the BJP’s apple-cart, the SP has fielded Hindu candidates in Muslim-dominated constituencies — a Dalit woman in Meerut and a Jat in Muzaffarnagar — to check polling on communal lines. But the Muslims, fearing the return of the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance government at the Centre, anecdotally appear to have decided to consolidate behind the Congress-SP alliance, ignoring other Muslim candidates. The formation of the INDIA bloc has given a national look to the SP. Crowds are visible at its meetings, but the question is whether they will convert into votes. And the biggest fault line that is worrying the BJP, whose success in the state is built on a larger Hindu consolidation across caste and caste lines, is caste. Perhaps triggered by rash statements by some BJP leaders, and fear-mongering by some in the Opposition, a section of Dalits fear amendments to the Constitution, created by one of the community’s torchbearers BR Ambedkar, to end their quota. The noise over these issues has diluted the potency of factors such as welfare schemes.

There are other key questions in these elections. What is the future of the Congress in the state: How will the party fare in Rae Bareilly, the only seat it held in 2019 and where it has fielded Rahul Gandhi? Since his nomination, the BJP high command has been busy strategising his defeat. The recent meeting of Shah and Raghuraj Pratap Singh from neighbouring Kunda is significant to that end — Singh, popularly known as Raja Bhैया, has a considerable hold on Rajputs and others in the region. And what of the BSP: Is there any hope of its revival and can it play spoiler in close contests?

Like always, no matter what the results, UP promises to provide the ingredients for a potboiler.



Sunita Aron



How will the Congress fare in Rae Bareilly, the only seat it held in 2019 and where it has fielded Rahul Gandhi?

PTI

The views expressed are personal

{ OLAF SCHOLZ } GERMAN CHANCELLOR

At best, it could lead to direct talks between Ukraine and Russia. But nobody should have excessive expectations. We are not negotiating the end of the war

On a peace summit to be held in Switzerland in June

Setting governance on track in national Capital

A vibrant cosmopolitan city, home to more than 20 million people from across the country and from all walks of life, Delhi represents the unique diversity and harmony of the Indian people. Already the world’s second-largest urban area, Delhi’s rich history and heritage undergird its extraordinary spatial and population growth.

As our Capital city, Delhi should reflect new India’s progress and aspirations. The harsh ground reality is that in the past 10 years, the state has been subjected to a model of governance that has been woefully and wilfully found wanting. The blame for Delhi’s malaise squarely lies with the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) — the political regime that has

helled Delhi’s administration in these 10 years. The AAP government, which had its origins in a people’s movement against corruption, now finds its leaders accused in multiple cases of graft. Its fast-and-loose politics have been detrimental to the city’s development.

The proliferation of informal settlements is one of the biggest challenges facing Delhi today. Despite their rhetoric, the AAP has not been able to provide pucca houses to people. The Delhi government dragged its feet on granting ownership rights to unauthorised colonies — delaying even undertaking basic surveys — till the Modi government stepped in to introduce legislation that regularised 1,731 colonies. Similarly, under the “Jahan Jhuggi Wahan Makaan” scheme, which aims to provide 10 lakh houses in Delhi’s slum clusters, in Kalkaji more than 1,800 families have already moved in. More such projects are nearing completion.

Under the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana - Urban (PMAY-U), the Modi government has sanctioned more than 11.8 million houses and 8.3 million have already been delivered to beneficiaries across all other states and UTs. The chief minister who refuses to provide homes to people found the time to build and embellish his own *sheesh mahal* (palace of mirrors; figurative for a grand mansion). His government’s unwillingness to implement PMAY-U is not an isolated instance. It has not implemented the Ayushman Bharat mission in Delhi which has proved to be a lifesaver for the poor. The AAP government has mastered a band-aid approach to civic problems to hoodwink the poor as compared to the robust and comprehensive welfare programmes of the Modi government.

This perfunctory approach to governance is also visible in the manner it deals with the serious issue of pollution. Before 2022, the Delhi government blamed pollution caused by stubble burning squarely on Punjab. Soon after the AAP assumed power in Punjab, it changed tack, muting its criticism of Punjab and generalising it as a North India problem. The Delhi government spent a mere ₹ 68 lakh on spraying bio-decomposers to disperse fog in 2020-22 but more than ₹ 23 crore on advertisements related to pollution!

Their deliberate dithering in contributing to the expansion of the Delhi Metro is another example of their misguided priorities. Under the Modi government’s proactive efforts, the Delhi metro system has grown exponentially in Delhi-NCR from 188.05 kms in 2014 to 426.44 kms today, with another 134.11 kms under construction.

Meanwhile, the Delhi government has spent all its energies in stymying the development of various Delhi metro and RRTS projects. From delaying the signing of MoUs to refusing to give its equity contribution for the RRTS project, it flouts established norms brazenly. It was on the repeated stonewalling of the Delhi government pleading lack of funds that an exasperated Supreme Court (SC) demanded of it to reveal its expenditure on advertisements during the previous three years. Under the glare of the SC, it came out that ₹ 1,073 crore was spent on advertisements and they had pleaded not having ₹ 415 crore for the RRTS project!

All these only highlight a widely known fact — the propensity of the AAP government to mislead the people of Delhi through fancy advertisements to hide the woeful delivery on the ground. In stark contrast, the Modi government has invested more than ₹ 50,000 crore for urban development and welfare projects in Delhi-NCR. The Centre has been ably supported by Delhi’s MPs who have worked tirelessly, utilising funds through the Urban Development Fund, the DDA and the MCD, to complete important development works that the AAP has neglected.

Delhi has been a victim of the AAP’s anarchy for far too long. The vision of Viksit Bharat@ 2047 requires a mature and statesman-like governance in Delhi.

Hardeep S Puri is Union minister of petroleum and natural gas, and housing and urban affairs. The views expressed are personal



Hardeep S Puri

*The Indian***EXPRESS**
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RAMNATH GOENKA
BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

SUSHIL MODI

When dividing lines are etched deeper, he was a builder of bridges, an unusual leader for the moment he lived and died in

AMONG THE SEVERAL richly deserved tributes that flowed in was the one Lalu Prasad wrote for “51-52 varshon se hamare mitra, bhai Sushil Modi (my friend and brother for 51-52 years, Sushil Modi)”. In his homage, Lalu’s son and political heir, Tejashwi, described Modi as “*hamaare abhivhavak* (our guiding light)”. That Lalu and Tejashwi should choose these words to pay their respects to the leader, who died after a battle with cancer on Monday, is good form — but it is more than just that. After all, Modi’s rivalry with Lalu, which began during their participation in the JP movement in the 1970s, had billowed over the following decades. Modi was one of the lead petitioners in Patna High Court in the fodder scam that has overhung most of Lalu’s political career, and still shadows his legacy and his son’s stewardship of the RJD. He played a pivotal role in Lalu’s conviction and later, his pungent press conferences on the property that Lalu and his family had allegedly acquired illegally hastened the end of the ruling alliance between the JD(U) and RJD. Lalu and Tejashwi’s tributes to a fierce political opponent are, above all, an ode to the way of Sushil Modi, whose relationships, across political differences and party lines, were marked by respect and cordiality.

The character of the BJP in Bihar — an ideologically less edgy and politically more flexible force — was shaped by the man who played various roles in the course of its rise, from MLA to Leader of Opposition, to Finance Minister and Deputy Chief Minister, the last one for 11 years in two stints, November 2005 to June 2013, and July 2017 to December 2020. In Bihar, unlike in neighbouring UP, for instance, the BJP has been reticent on polarising campaigns like “love jihad”. To be sure, that has to do with the state’s political biography. In this landscape of glaring inequalities, the socialist movement and the JP agitation for “total revolution” laid the ground for “social justice” mobilisations in the 1990s, which took precedence over religion-centric politics. But it also had to do with the leadership style of Sushil Modi. As he helped steer Bihar’s turnaround story as Nitish Kumar’s deputy, he kept governance at the centre and insistently spoke the language of policy. He is credited with pioneering the gender budget in Bihar, and in the state and at the Centre, played a key role in building the consensus that helped ease the implementation of the GST, and subsequently the fine-tuning of the indirect tax regime in the country.

Sushil Modi will be remembered for each and all the parts he played with wisdom and dignity — RSS swayamsevak and ABVP activist, protester who went to jail during the Emergency, deputy CM and finance minister of Bihar in a critical time for the state, and MP who expertly steered the work of several parliamentary committees. But most of all, in times when the dividing lines are etched deeper, and spaces are shrinking for dialogue and civility, he will be remembered as the gentle politician and the builder of bridges, an unusual leader for the political moment he lived and died in.

LOOKING WEST

Chabahar contract with Iran is indication of India’s diplomatic maturity, ability to negotiate complex global landscape

THE 2003 VISIT to Delhi by the then-president Syed Mohammad Khatami was hailed as a landmark moment for India-Iran ties. The centrepiece of the slew of agreements was cooperation on the development of Chabahar Port, which could open up access to the Persian Gulf, Afghanistan, Central Asia and Europe. In the 21 years since, as animosity deepened between Washington and Tehran, and Delhi grew closer to the former, the development of the port slowed down. Since 2015 — to the credit of the current government — there has been consistent forward movement. While the coordination between Iran, India and Afghanistan may have been dampened by the Taliban’s return in Kabul, the strategic importance of Chabahar is intact. In this context, the announcement of a 10-year contract between the government’s India Ports Global LTD (IPGL) and the Ports and Maritime Organisation of Iran for the operation of a terminal at Chabahar is significant and welcome.

IPGL will directly invest about \$120 million while India has offered credit in rupees equivalent to \$250 million. There is concern over US sanctions on Iran affecting India’s strategic bet with Chabahar, but these may be exaggerated. It was, after all, under Donald Trump’s tenure in 2017 — the former US president took a hawkish stance on Iran — that Delhi was able to get a waiver from sanctions on the Chabahar project, citing access to Afghanistan. On the commercial front, however, things are more complicated. Which products can be traded with and through Iran, and at what volume, may become a bone of contention for some of India’s friends in the West. Then there’s the fact that China is deeply entrenched in Central Asia and its markets, including through its Belt and Road Initiative.

The Chabahar project is a potential component of the International North-South Transport Corridor, envisioned by Russia, Iran and India to link South Asia with Central Asia and Europe. Tensions within Europe, as well as between Iran and the West, make this important project a challenging one. The India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor, announced at the G20 summit in Delhi last year, has great potential as well. Formulated as a counter to BRI, it seeks to build road, rail and shipping networks through India’s near-West to Western Europe. Unfortunately, the Israel-Hamas conflict has paused the gains of the Abraham Accords and slowed down the project. What these diverse partnerships illustrate is that Delhi is pursuing many routes as it looks to its near West, and that it is willing to negotiate a complex global strategic environment to do so.

IDLI BURGER

Food is an ever-evolving display of creativity.
Why be mealy-mouthed about it?

CONSIDER THE POSITION of the average idli: Why should this food, with no real taste of its own, but blessed with a spongy texture that allows it to soak in other flavours, be doomed to an eternal pairing with just sambar and chutney? There is no time like now to ponder this question as the Indian internet has a collective meltdown over a video of a Delhi street stall’s “idli burger”, where an idli is sliced from the middle, slathered with chutneys, sauces, mayo and sprinkled with grated vegetables and cheese, before being put back together.

Even as food purists have a fit of the vapours over this so-called “abomination”, they would do well to remember that food is more than just meat and vegetable, cereal and dairy — it is an ever-evolving display of human ingenuity and creativity, a canvas on which individual tastes can be projected and opened up to the possibility of collective enjoyment. Did the food vendor in Bombay, keen to sell a quick meal to harried workers, imagine he was inventing a classic when he sliced open a pao and slid an aloo vada into it? And did the person who first decided to combine cold ice-cream with hot gulab jamun realise that she was creating a dish without which no wedding feast in India would be complete?

As for the idli, here are all the ways in which it can be enjoyed: Dunked in sambar or rasam; dipped in an array of chutneys; coated in a paste of molaga podi and ghee; soaked in fish or chicken curry; with a fried egg on top; sliced, deep fried and sprinkled with chaat masala; chopped and stir-fried with vegetables and sauces. From kurkure chicken momos to gobi manchurian, the Indian palate has been enlivened by an array of weird and wonderful dishes. Why be mealy-mouthed about an idli burger?



ASHUTOSH VARSHNEY

“IS ELECTION MEIN chuppi bahut hai (this election is marked by a pervasive silence),” said a senior citizen at a tea stall in Amethi. “*Chuppi kyun hai* (why is there silence?),” I asked. He did answer, but only after the BJP office holder, also present in our group chat, had left. “*Chuppi hai kyun ki badlaav aane wala hai* (there is silence because change is coming)”. Others in the audience seemed to agree. But all of this happened only after the BJP office bearer was no longer at the tea shop. By then, the shroud of silence had slipped away.

Since 2009, I have travelled during all national elections. Each journey always has three or four pivotal moments. This was one of them. Elections in Uttar Pradesh (UP) are taking place in a climate that is reducing the candour typical of argumentative Indians. You can still get truthful narratives, but you have to probe much harder than before. This can legitimately be called a climate of fear, but it is not the kind of fear that will systematically cripple voting, some sporadic instances, such as the widely reported voter suppression in Sambhal, notwithstanding. It is mostly affecting open discussion on the ground.

By and large, academic research, which tends to have a statistical approach to studying elections, is unable to capture the insidious forces affecting electoral conduct. Through statistics, we ask: How many voted for the incumbents or the Opposition? Which social categories — caste, religion, gender, age — voted for whom? What were the main issues relevant to the electoral verdict?

This statistical approach will always be necessary, for we need to make sense of the larger picture, which travel alone can’t reliably produce. Travel is always geographically focused. Even the best-funded reporter can’t cover all 543 constituencies in a month or so. But focused travel has one great advantage that statistics doesn’t capture. It reveals which narratives are rising or falling, how people are expressing their preferences, how anger or affection is formulated, whether what voters tell you is influenced by those present at a collective corner. To learn about all this, 40 degree Celsius *mein sadkon ki dhool khana zaroori hai* (one must wrestle

Amidst voters in Uttar Pradesh, murmurs
of a desire for change

Election travel, at least by men, rarely captures women’s preferences as much as men’s. Women are not regularly out on the street in large numbers, nor present in tea shops. In the past, a lot of election observers, including me, have made mistakes in assessing electoral trends, primarily because women’s preferences could not be adequately ascertained. Later data showed that compared to men, women voted in larger proportion for Modi in many states.

with the heat and dust of streets).

My choice of UP for election travel was governed by a standard methodological protocol, namely, the idea of a “critical case”. The latter signifies the most unlikely setting for understanding whether important changes might be coming. UP is not only the largest determinant of who wins power nationally; scholars of contemporary India also argue that other than Gujarat, UP is where Hindu nationalist hegemony has been established. If there is a bend in the Hindu nationalist river in UP, that would count as a most unlikely development, imbued with larger significance.

So what do my UP election travels suggest? If what I observed holds good for the rest of the state, the BJP’s vote share is very likely to go down. Whether the seats will also decrease remains wholly unclear. In a first-past-the-post parliamentary system, a candidate can win even if the large older margin of victory shrinks. Vote can come down, but seats can stay the same.

Why is the BJP vote share in UP likely to decline? First, very few are speaking about Ayodhya. In January, when I was in India, there was an unmistakable Ayodhya wave all around. On January 22, when PM Modi said that “*kaal chakra badal raha hai*” and “*agle 1,000 saal ki neev daal di gayi hai*” (times are changing for ever, and the foundations of the next 1,000 years have been laid), a new political order, with Hindu primacy at its core, appeared to be taking birth. Many argued that the 2024 elections were a “done deal”. Unless the silent voter has a different calculus in mind, the subsidiarity of Ayodhya in election talk is generating a huge puzzle, which political analysts will have to solve. Be that as it may, Ayodhya taking a back seat is likely to depress BJP’s vote. It was the surest hegemonic bet four months back.

Second, unemployment ranks high among the youth, the group that hugely supported Modi in recent years. Many are even willing to say that the “paper leaks” are a deliberate ploy by UP’s BJP government to not provide jobs. When you ask “don’t the BJP government’s welfare benefits compensate for the absence of jobs?”, the answer, repeat-

edly, is that having *rozgar* (employment) is better than being a *labharthi* (welfare beneficiary). If you have a job, they say, you can buy the benefits; otherwise, they are like a begging bowl. Even the younger voters who would vote for the BJP said that jobs should have been a priority of the BJP government. The *rozgar-over-labharthi* trope may not reflect what women, looking after the household, are thinking. The 5kg free ration dominates women’s response about what is right about the Modi regime. But many young men are undeniably upset.

Third, young Dalit voters are beginning to express serious concerns about the *samvidhan* (Constitution). The 370 seat target, announced by PM Modi, is partly a source of this concern. Why talk of 370 if the purpose is not to overturn the Constitution? Would constitutionally enshrined reservation end? In many Dalit minds, if not all, these doubts have emerged. The Constitution is also linked to their veneration of Babasaheb Ambedkar, undeniably an icon. The scholarly argument has always been that the Constitution was basically discussed in elite politics. It has finally made an entry into mass politics. How far it will go remains uncertain.

But after all is said and done, how women would vote remains a highly unpredictable and key variable. Election travel, at least by men, rarely captures women’s preferences as much as men’s. Women are not regularly out on the street in large numbers, nor present in tea shops. In the past, a lot of election observers, including me, have made mistakes in assessing electoral trends, primarily because women’s preferences could not be adequately ascertained. Later data showed that compared to men, women voted in larger proportion for Modi in many states.

Will the women continue to be devoted to Modi? Or are the winds of change affecting them as well? This may well turn out to be the most critical determinant of these elections.

The writer is Sol Goldman Professor of International Studies and the Social Sciences at Brown University, where he also directs the Saxena Center for Contemporary South Asia at the Watson Institute



GURU PRAKASH

VERY FEW LEADERS in contemporary India have enjoyed cross-party support, admiration, and respect. One such senior politician was Sushil Kumar Modi, who came from Bihar, the heart of India. A RSS *swayamsevak* from his childhood and then an ABVP member, he was a product of the J P Movement. He rose through the ranks after learning what it takes to be a student leader and then joined the BJP to fulfill his role in active politics.

We will forever write and analyse his contribution in making the BJP one of the strongest poles in my state. What was it that made Sushil Modi different? He was incredibly passionate about making a difference to the lives of the people in Bihar and in ensuring that the voice of common Biharis reached the Parliament, the Legislative Assembly, and the Legislative Council. In order to do this, he felt that a strong political organisation for the BJP was a must. His life exemplified his tenacity, resilience, and remarkable desire to strengthen the BJP *sangathan* in the state. He served as the BJP’s state president, national secretary, and national vice president. In his final speech at the Rajya Sabha when his term came to an end on February 9 this year, he recalled how he remained indebted to the BJP because the party had given him the opportunity to be at four important legislative bodies: The Lok Sabha, the Rajya Sabha, Bihar’s Legislative Assembly, and the Legislative Council. What was poignant about his

THE PEOPLE’S POLITICIAN

Sushil Modi’s life was a lesson in how to keep nation first, party next, and self last

What was it that made Sushil Modi different? He was incredibly passionate about making a difference to the lives of the people in Bihar and ensuring that the voice of common Biharis reached the Parliament, the Legislative Assembly, and the Legislative Council. In order to do this, he felt that a strong political organisation for the BJP was a must. His life exemplified his tenacity, resilience, and remarkable desire to strengthen the BJP *sangathan* in the state. He served as the BJP’s state president, national secretary, and national vice president.

speech was that he mentioned how one could never be a lifelong political worker but one could be a lifelong social worker. Thus, he resolved to continue working as a social worker till the last day of his life.

During this speech, he also proposed that the government distribute handouts of the finance minister’s annual Budget speech to all Rajya Sabha MPs as they currently only had access to it on TV. It would help facilitate a better understanding. This was quintessential Sushil Modi. During his tenure on the GST Council, he demonstrated exceptional preparedness and shrewdness in handling misinformation about the GST that earned him widespread recognition. In numerous interactions or interviews on GST, he consistently asserted that the states stand united with the Government of India when it came to the GST. According to him, in the GST Council, states could express their opinions, collaborate on implementation, and find solutions to any issues that came up. In his condolence message on X (formerly Twitter), Prime Minister Narendra Modi rightly emphasised the importance of Sushil Modi’s “role in the passage of GST”.

He was always well prepared and used to make detailed notes on issues, but he also wanted to learn from people. He was forthcoming in giving feedback so that we could continuously improve our writing and communication. “Please do not refer to me as Uncle; I feel old,” he told me once during

one of our customary chats on the phone on days my opinion pieces were published in this newspaper. Last year, I had penned a tribute to Padma Vibhushan Bindeshwar Pathak, founder of Sulabh International and the driving force behind the toilet revolution in India. Sushil Modi had highlighted specific aspects that I could have included. Never in my wildest dreams could I have imagined writing a similar tribute to him.

His passion for international relations was equally strong. He led a delegation to Myanmar in 2014 as soon as Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the BJP-led NDA government came to power for the first time. He talked about how important historic and cultural relations were between India and Myanmar, as well as several innovative solutions to expand India’s Act East policy. He referred to India’s neighbourhood as a “Natural Economic Zone”. In the inaugural speech that he gave, he also said, “Myanmar can get everything else from the world, but for Nirvana, they have got to rely on India (implying a connection with Lord Buddha).”

His conversations, agreements, and disagreements with my father, Sanjay Paswan, will stay with me. Amidst all that I learnt from Sushil Modi, how to keep “the nation first, the party next, and the self last” is the foremost. An overview of his life will encourage party workers like me to resolutely serve the people and the nation’s interests.

The writer is national spokesperson, BJP

MAY 15, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

TWO RPF MEN KILLED

TERRORIST ACTIVITY CONTINUED unabated in Punjab with the murder of seven people, including two Railway Protection Force men and one CRPF personnel, in the last 24 hours. Unidentified people shot dead two RPF men at Rayya railway station on the Jalandhar-Amritsar railway section. The terrorists escaped after killing the security men.

INDIA-US TALKS ON PAK

INDIA TOLD THE United States it wanted to promote understanding and cooperation with Pakistan and stressed that other nations

should support this effort through their policies. India’s concern at the supply of sophisticated US weapons to Pakistan and initiatives taken by India to establish friendly relations with its neighbours, particularly Pakistan, were discussed by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi with US Vice President George Bush.

BANDH IN PUNJAB, HP

THE ONE-DAY BANDH observed in Punjab, Himachal Pradesh, Jammu and the Union Territory of Chandigarh was near total. Stray incidents of violence were reported. The bandh call was given by the Rashtriya Hindu Suraksha Sena, the Hindu Suraksha Samiti,

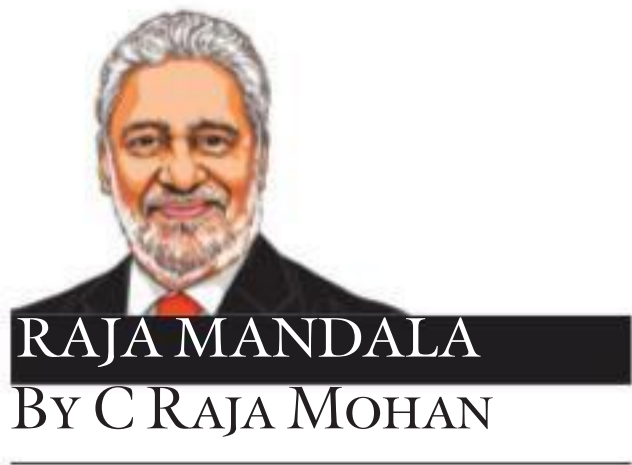
the Punjab Bharatiya Janata Party and the Communist Party of India to protest against the murder of editor Ramesh Chander.

PHILIPPINES POLLS

GUERRILLAS KILLED At least 44 people in a series of ambushes hours before millions of Filipinos voted in key parliamentary elections. A heavy turnout was reported among the 24.9 million registered voters despite terrorist attacks by guerrillas of the Communist New People’s Army and reports of voting fraud. Military authorities said at least 46 people were killed in six encounters bringing the death toll to 445 since campaigning began.

Misreading America’s lines

Debate on democracy might suggest that American foreign policy is run by missionaries to spread political liberalism. Nothing could be further from the truth



RAJA MANDALA
By C RAJA MOHAN

GOING BY THE Indian media coverage of the United States, you might think Washington keeps awake at night worrying about India’s “democratic backsliding” and planning to meddle in the Indian elections. America has far bigger worries keeping it restless, but that barely gets discussed in India. The US is in the middle of a general election that could alter its political, economic and geopolitical orientation. It comes amid Washington’s struggle to cope with the Russian invasion of Ukraine in Europe, China’s expansionism in Asia, and the war in Gaza that has enveloped American domestic politics.

The US is yet to effectively counter the Sino-Russian alliance that is chipping away at its interests across the world, including in Europe and among NATO allies. Chinese President Xi Jinping’s visit to Europe last week and Russian leader Vladimir Putin’s expected visit to China this week underline the growing strategic coordination between Beijing and Moscow against the West.

It’s a pity there is so little discussion in India on the consequential US domestic debates, especially this year amidst the impending elections in November. That former president Donald Trump, the great disruptor, might be back at the White House is sending a shiver down the spine of the US permanent establishment and American allies in Europe and Asia.

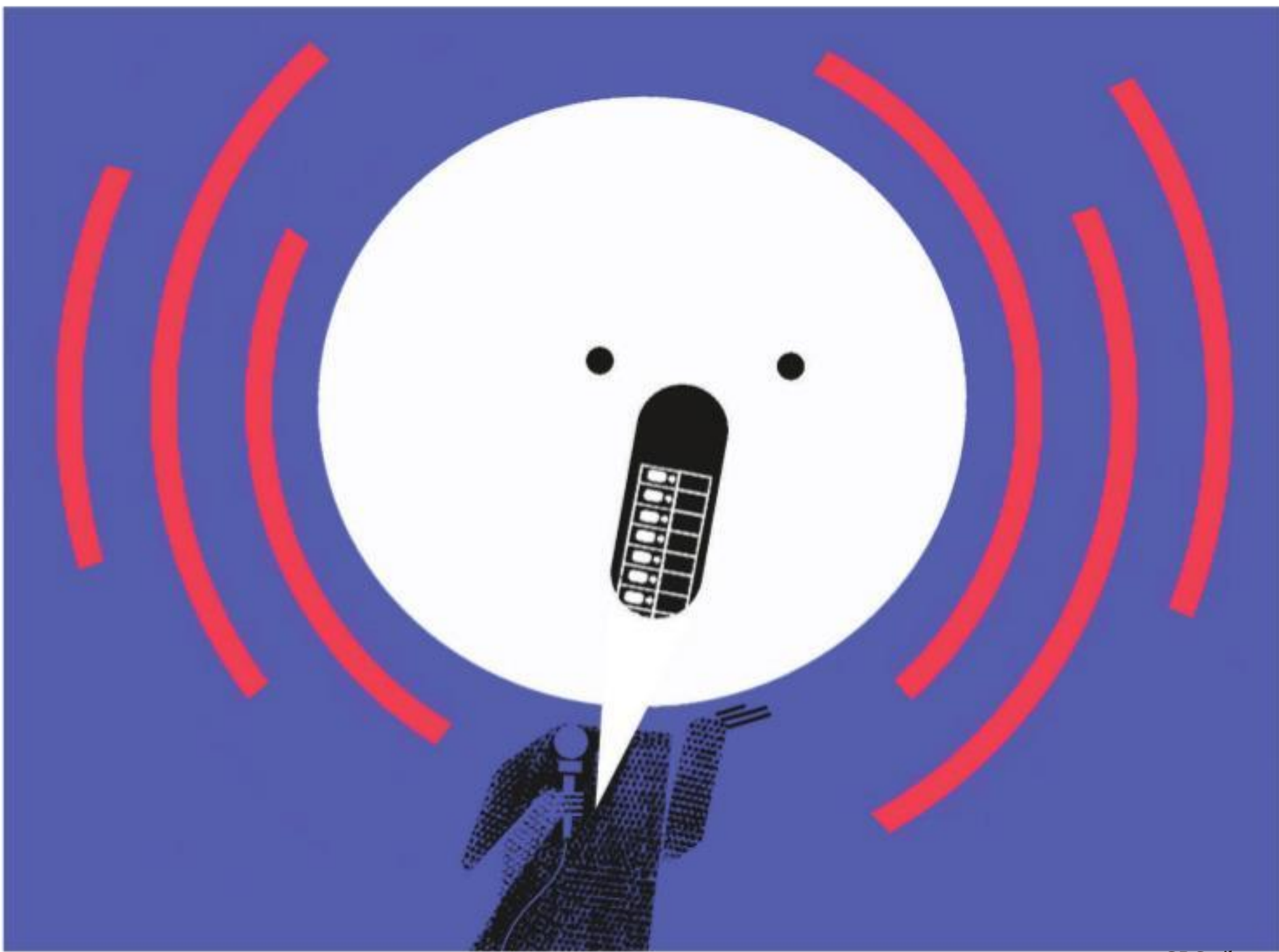
Yet, Trump’s recent interview with *Time* magazine, where he outlined a radical agenda — on border security, immigration, trade, military alliances, all issues that matter to Delhi — got little coverage in the Indian media compared to the running commentary by hapless State Department spokespersons.

The daily remarks in the US State Department press briefings are almost always in response to questions from Washington-based South Asia correspondents. This little theatre that few in Washington pay attention to is amplified into headlines in the Indian media. The state of the debate in Delhi on what America might be thinking barely corresponds to the reality in Washington.

What about the Western media coverage of the Indian elections? Here again, the reports of the India-based correspondents of the Western media, are read more in India than in the West, thanks to the play-back effect. It’s such a pity that our foreign reportage is less about the countries where the reporters are based than what their media says about India.

What about the “hostile discourse” on Indian democracy by the liberal Western commentary? Commentary about India in the US is a drop in the bucket of the massive daily output of the American opinion industry with its numerous media outlets and countless think tanks.

The debate on democracy in general and Indian democracy in particular might suggest that American and European foreign policies are run by missionaries to spread political lib-



C R Sasikumar

eralism. Nothing could be further from reality. Western interests are defined primarily by its capitalists and security planners, not the self-proclaimed missionaries for democracy.

Much in the manner of the Indian debates on “strategic autonomy” that tell us little about the conduct of Indian foreign policy, the slogans on “democracy promotion” and the claimed contradiction between “democracies and autocracies” say nothing about the nature of US foreign policy.

The same can be said about the discourse on “communist doctrine” in China or “Islamic internationalism” in Tehran. All countries have national mythologies about their role in the world. But these narratives are inevitably tempered by the need to pursue a range of interests — economic, political, and security — and the nature of external realities.

If democracy was the main foreign policy objective of the West, it would not have been such a good partner for the Pakistan Army for decades. If finding justice for the politically oppressed is the top priority for Washington, it would have got poor Imran Khan out of jail by now or stopped the hanging of prime minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto by the military usurper, General Zia-ul Haque in 1979.

If political liberalism was its dominant ideology, Washington would not have helped the Chinese Communist Party make Beijing into a formidable global power. Nor would it have mobilised a global pushback against Afghan regimes in the 1980s that sought to bring political and social modernisation to a tribal society. The world continues to reel today from this deliberate promotion of Islamic radicalism four decades ago in the name of fighting Soviet communism.

This is not to criticise the US’s foreign policy record but to underline the difference between rhetoric and reality and between the bark and the bite. Geopolitical contingencies

Much in the manner of the Indian debates on ‘strategic autonomy’ that tell us little about the conduct of Indian foreign policy, the slogans on ‘democracy promotion’ and the claimed contradiction between ‘democracies and autocracies’ say nothing about the nature of US foreign policy.

and commercial interests — not political values — have been at the forefront of shaping US engagement with the world.

That brings us back to the US elections, where neither India nor the quality of its democracy are political issues. The prospect of a 10 per cent tariff against all imports under Trump is an issue that should keep Delhi alert to the impact of the potential changes in US trade policy. After all, the US is now the most important trading partner for India. Trump’s potential strategies towards Russia and China should be part of India’s gaming of great power politics and its impact on Delhi’s strategic partnership with Washington.

Trump’s promise to use the US Army to round up illegal immigrants and evict them should be of concern to India, whose citizens are at the top of the list of those entering the US without valid papers. Trump also wants to leverage the expansive powers of the US presidency to bring sweeping changes to the American administrative state. Given its economic weight and global role, America’s “democratic backsliding” under Trump would have great implications for the world, including India. Delhi’s chattering classes should be tuning into those debates.

In the end, Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal’s warning about “dictatorship” in India and Congress leader Rahul Gandhi waving the Constitution in his election rallies are more consequential than the editorials on the Indian elections in *The New York Times* and *The Guardian*. The battle for Indian democracy, then, is at home and not between Delhi and the Western capitals.

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WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

“The socialist surge represents political vindication for Spain’s prime minister, Pedro Sánchez. In contrast with his conservative predecessors, Sánchez has consistently sought to take a more conciliatory approach towards the Catalan independence movement...” — THE GUARDIAN

Congress, BJP and an own goal

Neither party belongs to the communist stream. Then why the attacks on Adani-Ambani?



AAKASH JOSHI

IN 2008, A curious debate dominated and divided left-leaning students — “left-liberal”, then, was just a form of right-wing apologist. In the summer of that year, it was becoming increasingly clear that the communist parties of India, led by the CPM, were willing to withdraw support to the UPA government over the US-India Civil Nuclear deal. And that mild-mannered Manmohan Singh was going to stand his ground. Was the Left going to squander its greatest-ever opportunity to affect, even determine policy? Some believed that working with the Congress and other regional parties was necessary, not least because the BJP was one of two major national political parties. The purists scoffed at this suggestion: To them, the BJP and Congress were two sides of the same coin. Their attitude to capital — big business — was the same, both had used communal politics for electoral ends and both wanted to draw closer to the US, undermine labour protections and leave India’s poor to fend for themselves in a cruelly indifferent “market” society.

Sixteen years later, history has come half-circle, the left shoe is on the right hand and many other mixed metaphors besides. Both Rahul Gandhi and Narendra Modi have cast aspersions on “Ambani-Adani”. Contrary to the popular and leftist perception, though, it is not that Congress and BJP are expressing confidence in and an affinity towards the private sector. Both have tried to villainise the businesses that have grown, purportedly “created jobs” and underpinned markets and entire sectors under their watch. The question is, why?

First, though, a step back. Two terms into the BJP’s single-party rule, few on either side of the political divide would suggest that it is a mirror of the Congress of the UPA years. Congress and Rahul Gandhi point to “*mafia ka bazaar*” and all that entails, the revelations from the electoral bonds, the attacks on institutions and the Constitution. The BJP and PM’s refrain has been that they have accomplished all that could not be done “in the last 70 years”, from Aadhaar-linked direct benefit transfers to the construction of the Ram Temple and a revival and strengthening of Hindu identity.

Yet, both seem to be converging, in an inexplicable way, in their attacks on plutocrats. PM Modi’s rally in Telangana earlier this week began predictably, with attacks on Congress and Rahul Gandhi. As he brought up the latter’s obsession with business houses, it seemed that it was a prelude to — as in the past — a defence of entrepreneurship and “job creators”. “You would have seen that the Congress *shahzada* (referring to Rahul Gandhi), for the last five years, has been repeating this. Ever since his Rafale row was grounded, he started repeating this — first, he kept speaking of five industrialists, and then started saying Ambani-Adani, Ambani-Adani, Ambani-Adani,” he said. But in a twist, the PM almost echoed his *bete noir*: “The *shahzada* should declare — during these polls, how much have they taken

from Ambani-Adani (*kitna maal uthaya hai*)? How many sacks of black money have been taken? Have tempos full of notes reached the Congress? What’s the deal that’s been struck (*kya sauda hua hai*)?”

The PM is right when he says that Rahul Gandhi — from “suit-boot *ki sarkar*” jibes to “Adani-Ambani” slogans — has tried to paint capitalism as crony capitalism. He could have added that such campaigns have had little resonance with the electorate, and that his party has won election after election when such a strategy has been deployed. In fact, that’s likely the reason that the Congress has slowly but surely moved away from this line of attack.

Political strategy and tactics aside, there are other — perhaps more important — reasons why both parties need to recognise why trying to distance themselves from capital is not the best idea.

First, it reeks of hypocrisy. Neither the Congress nor BJP — the two dominant political parties in India since 1991 — are communist. If P V Narasimha Rao and Manmohan Singh ushered in liberalisation in the early 1990s, Atal Bihari Vajpayee’s government carried on and deepened that process. It pioneered the ministry for disinvestment, allowing businesses of adequate size to purchase and manage public assets. The Manmohan Singh years saw a dispersal and growth of business, along with high economic growth and an often expressed desire by the then PM and Deputy Chairperson of the Planning Commission to do away with a “planned” economy.

The Modi government, too, has followed that path: The (re)privatisation of Air India was portrayed as a feather in its cap. In addition, some of its flagship programmes — Ayushman Bharat, and UDAN for example — require the private sector to participate, invest and implement the government’s vision.

Second, the statements by prominent leaders of the Opposition and, more importantly, the sitting PM must take into account more than just electoral prospects, even in the heat of the campaign. Is there a chance, even a remote one, that the two major parties and their leaders will get off the track that the Indian economy was set on in 1991? What will this do to investor sentiment, which has still not completely recovered after the pandemic? What will it mean for the government’s efforts to “crowd in” private capex, which is finally showing some signs of recovery?

Reports of corporate leaders being “surprised” (a euphemism for disappointment) at the PM’s statements are already emerging.

Finally, the simplistic attacks on big business betray a lack of political imagination. The young voter of today, for better or worse, does not see anything wrong in profit-making and even displays of wealth: If nothing else, the obsession with Anant Ambani’s pre-wedding or the enormous success of *Shark Tank India* bear testimony to that. Perhaps the popularity of this notion of aspiration is a result of the Left’s failure. But it is certainly something both Congress and BJP should count as a success — their governments, after all, have helped create and nurture the environment in which such a desire for wealth doesn’t seem delusional.

Unfortunately, they seem to be campaigning against themselves.

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SIDDHARTH P AND UMA SUBRAMANIAN

Ask the children

Concerns about ‘virtual touch’ disregard agency of teenagers

ON MAY 6, THE Delhi High Court, while denying bail to an accused for alleged abetment of drugging, kidnapping, and sexually exploiting a minor, made special notice of the fact that the minor had first met the accused on a social media platform. The judgment recommends that “minors must be equipped with the knowledge and tools to navigate online interactions safely and recognise potential risks lurking in cyberspace”. It introduces the concept of “virtual touch”, drawing parallels between digital interactions and physical contact. It also suggests that this idea be introduced to young minds as part of the “good touch/bad touch” exercise, a common intervention that teaches children to discern between appropriate and inappropriate contact. The judgment is well-intentioned, but closer examination reveals critical points that merit consideration.

The judgment framing teenagers as ignorant of online risks and parents, guardians, and educators as informed stewards of online safety fails to account for the disruption of technology. While very young children may rely on adults for instruction, there are several instances where teenagers are educating their elders on technology. As more and more children connect to the internet, it is not uncommon to find minors as the most digitally proficient individuals in the household.

Many children, too, prefer to turn to peers and older siblings instead of parents when faced with internet-related risks. This is not

only to escape corporal consequences but also because they feel their parents may not be equipped to deal with the situation. The judgment’s parent/guardian-centric approach overlooks the formative role peers and siblings play in children’s online experiences.

Another critical aspect to pay attention to is the fact that individuals between the ages of 13 to 25 are in a developmental stage that is characterised by risk-taking behaviour. While teenagers may possess awareness of online risks, their inclination towards risk-taking behaviour cannot be discounted. Engage a group of teenagers in a discussion about the risk of online spaces — meeting strangers, sextortion, and the like — and you’ll likely find a deep and nuanced conversation unfolding. However, awareness does not always translate into cautious behaviour when faced with actual online dangers.

The disconnect between knowledge and knowledge-informed action is a crucial aspect that any safety module should hope to address. Why focus solely on teenagers when speaking of online risks? Every day, countless educated, professionally savvy adults become victims of internet fraud. Simple desires like financial gain, a new iPhone, or internet fame are manipulated by perpetrators who convince their targets to ignore their instincts. Once they fall into the trap, the threat of societal shame looms large. It’s a carrot-and-stick scenario — tempting aspirations followed by the fear of disgrace. In a country

like India, where both aspiration and shame hold significant sway, millions fall prey to these manipulative tactics.

Internet scammers are fly-by-night operators doing a business of volume. But imagine a situation of abuse where the perpetrator and the victim know each other — which is in a majority of cases. There is both familiarity and physical closeness. When perpetrators are operating on a sophisticated level, a simple framework like “good and bad” is not enough.

Nevertheless, while introducing knowledge of appropriate, inappropriate, and confusing interactions is a positive first step, the judgment has missed the forest for the trees. This became apparent when it asserted that the virtual space has become a breeding ground for alleged virtual affections among teenagers. Here, the judge rightly acknowledged that it is natural and biological for teenagers to seek love, relationships, and companionship in available spaces, including online spaces.

However, the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, 2012 (POCSO Act) denies children the freedom to participate in normal adolescent behaviour and attaches the stigma of criminality to natural exploration. This discourages adolescents from seeking help or reporting abuse, perpetuating the same conditions of desire, shame and silence that allow perpetrators to thrive. When societal norms and laws intersect to criminalise behaviours

inherent to adolescent development, it leaves children even more vulnerable to exploitation. The law, influenced by socio-cultural mores, inadvertently places the child at greater risk, undermining the very protections it seeks to provide.

There are other critiques such as how “virtual touch” may be unwieldy terminology as the concept of touch becomes vague in online spaces. There is also the fact that response to incidents of abuse needs to be strengthened as evidenced by this case that has dragged on for over two years even as POCSO recommends that cases end in one year. Any prevention education must be backed up by a robust victim-centric response system, which is currently the biggest gap that necessitates attention.

However, the primary issue with the judgment is that just like POCSO, it fails to recognise teenagers as growing, evolving individuals with their own agency and awareness, navigating the uncertainty of adolescence, and grappling with a myriad of physical, emotional, and social changes. Their online interactions are often a reflection of this journey — a space where they explore identity, seek connection and test boundaries. By failing to acknowledge teenagers as active participants in their own lives physical and virtual, the cloth from which laws are cut for Indian minors will always fall short.

The writers are co-founders and directors, Rati Foundation

New FLiRT variant of the Covid virus — should you worry?

ANKITA UPADHYAY & ANONNA DUTT
NEW DELHI, MAY 14

THE NEW coronavirus variant called KP.2 — nicknamed FLiRT — that has been linked to rising cases of Covid-19 in the United States, the United Kingdom, and South Korea, has been in circulation in India since November 2023, genomic surveillance data show. About 250 KP.2 sequences have been reported so far by INSACOG, the country's genome sequencing consortium.

What is the KP.2 variant of the Covid-19 virus?

KP.2 is a descendant of the JN.1 variant of the virus. It is a sub-variant of the Omicron lineage with new mutations. FLiRT, the nickname of KP.2, is based on the letters representing two immune escape mutations that allow the virus to evade antibodies.

Genomic scientist Dr Vinod Scaria said: "These two mutations on the spike protein disrupt the major sites on the spike protein

where antibodies bind and neutralise the SARS-CoV-2 virus. These mutations allow the virus to escape antibodies."

What do the genomic data on KP.2 from India show?

A little more than half of the 250 KP.2 genomes sequenced by INSACOG — 128 sequences — were from Maharashtra. The highest number of KP.2 sequences were found in March.

India has been reporting the highest proportion of KP.2 sequences in the world, global data show. KP.2 sequences made up 29% of Covid-19 sequences uploaded by India to the Global Initiative on Sharing All Influenza Data (GISAID), the world's largest repository of these sequences, over the last 60 days.

However, JN.1 continues to be the dominant variant of SARS-CoV-2 in the country. There were 679 active cases of Covid-19 in India on May 14, according to Union Health Ministry data, and one death — in Delhi — with Covid was recorded.

Can KP.2 cause severe disease?

FLiRT is characterised by its ability to evade immunity from vaccines and previous infections. Its symptoms are similar to those of earlier variants, including fever, cough, fatigue, and digestive issues.

Experts are watching the variant closely, but they are not very concerned at the moment. "There is no need to worry," Dr Anurag Agarwal, dean of the Trivedi School of Biosciences at Ashoka University, said. "These [immune escape] mutations [like the ones on FLiRT] have been seen before."

The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention notes that there are currently no indicators suggesting that KP.2 would cause more severe illness than other strains.

However, could KP.2 drive up infections?

Yes, FLiRT has a heightened transmission rate and, like its parent JN.1, it is likely to drive a wave of infections, Dr Scaria said. Also, the infections are likely to spread silently — be-

cause without severe symptoms, most people are unlikely to get themselves tested.

Dr Rajesh Chawla, senior consultant, pulmonology and critical care at Indraprastha Apollo Hospital in Delhi, said given the likelihood of easy spread of the virus through respiratory droplets, there is need to take stringent precautions, especially for those with a compromised immune system.

Senior citizens are vulnerable to severe illness due to factors such as age-related physiological changes, decreased immune function, and the presence of comorbidities.

Research indicates that adults aged 60 and older, especially those with pre-existing medical conditions like heart disease, lung disease, diabetes, or cancer, are more likely to experience severe and potentially fatal Covid-19 infections compared to other age groups.

People who are 65 and older, or immunocompromised, and pregnant women are the most vulnerable.

What are the symptoms of KP.2 infection?

This variant, like many of its Omicron predecessors, mainly affects the upper respiratory tract. "There is no documented difference in presentations," Dr Scaria said.

Dr Chawla said that those affected report fever or chills, cough, sore throat, congestion or runny nose, headache, muscle aches, difficulty in breathing, fatigue, loss of taste or smell, brain fog, feeling less wakeful and aware, and gastro-intestinal symptoms including upset stomach, mild diarrhoea, and vomiting.

Hospitalisation rates for patients with these symptoms were not higher than usual, Dr Chawla said.

How can infection be prevented?

Preventive measures are the same as the ones that have been advised since the beginning of the Covid outbreak four years ago. Social distancing and the use of well-fitting respirators like N95s or KN95s in indoor public settings protect against all variants of the

Covid-19 virus.

Increased air flow and filtration in indoor spaces also help reduce the concentration of virus particles. Vulnerable groups and those living in areas where the infection is in circulation should be especially careful.

Do we need booster shots of Covid-19 vaccines?

Most Covid-19 vaccines available in India are aimed at the original variant of the virus, so additional shots are unlikely to help.

"In late April, the World Health Organisation's Covid vaccine advisory group advised the use of JN.1 lineage as the antigen for upcoming vaccine formulations, as the FLiRT variants are within the JN.1 family. However the Indian vaccines are not updated with the JN.1 variant, and therefore booster doses in India are unlikely to be effective," Dr Scaria said.

Dr Agarwal said that most Indians do not need a booster because they have probably already had repeated infections, including silent infections with JN.1.

EXPLAINED AI

WHAT IS GPT-4o, OPENAI'S LATEST, MOST POWERFUL AI MODEL YET

BIJIN JOSE
BENGALURU, MAY 14

OPENAI on Monday introduced its latest large language model (LLM) called GPT-4o, billed as its fastest and most powerful AI model so far. The company claims that the model will improve its AI chatbot ChatGPT and make it easier to use.

Until now, OpenAI's most advanced LLM was GPT-4, which is only available to paid users. However, the GPT-4o will be freely available.

What is GPT-4o?

GPT-4o ('o' stands for 'Omni') has been developed to enhance human-computer interactions. It lets users input any combination of text, audio, and image, and receive responses in the same formats. This makes GPT-4o a multimodal AI model — a significant leap from previous models.

It could assist users with a variety of tasks, from real-time translations to having real-time spoken conversations. OpenAI said that the new updated version of ChatGPT will also have updated memory capabilities, and it will learn from its previous conversations with users.

GPT-4o will be made available to the public in stages.

What is the technology behind it?

LLMs are the backbone of AI chatbots. Large amounts of data are fed into these models to make them capable of learning things themselves.

Unlike its predecessors that required multiple models to handle different tasks, GPT-4o uses a single model trained end-to-end across various modalities — text, vision, and audio.

OpenAI CTO Mira Murati said the voice mode on previous models was a

combination of three different models, transcription, intelligence, and text-to-speech, while GPT-4o is a single model that allows for a more holistic processing and understanding of inputs. For example, GPT-4o can understand tone, background noises, and emotional context in audio inputs at once. This was a big challenge for earlier models.

Another leap is in areas of speed and efficiency. GPT-4o responds to queries as fast as a human does in conversation, in around 232 to 320 milliseconds.

Why does all this matter?

The AI race is intensifying, with tech giants Meta and Google working towards building more powerful LLMs and bringing them to their products.

GPT-4o could prove beneficial for Microsoft, which has invested billions into OpenAI, as it can now embed the model in existing services like its search engine.

The new model also came a day ahead of the Google I/O developer conference, where Google is expected to announce new updates to its Gemini AI model.

What are GPT-4o's limitations?

On its official blog, OpenAI said that GPT-4o is still in the early stages of exploring the potential of unified multimodal interaction, meaning certain features like audio outputs are initially accessible in a limited form only.

The company said further development is necessary to fully realise its potential in handling complex multimodal tasks seamlessly.

OpenAI said GPT-4o has safety measures including "filtered training data, and refined model behaviour post training". The new model has undergone safety evaluations and reviews focussed on risks like cybersecurity, misinformation, and bias.



AMITABH SINHA

THE EXTREME heat in parts of eastern and southern India this April has been attributed to climate change. A new study has said that the abnormally high temperatures were made about 45 times more likely by climate change.

In other words, if there was no climate change, it would be extremely unlikely that such abnormally high temperatures would be recorded at that time.

The research is by World Weather Attribution, an international group of researchers that tries to ascertain whether a particular extreme weather event was caused by climate change.

This is the third straight year that heatwaves in the early part of summer in India have been attributed to climate change. The same researchers had earlier shown that the excessive heat in March-April of 2022 and April of 2023 was also most likely caused by climate change.

Attribution science is a relatively new field of study that is becoming increasingly important in measuring the impacts of climate change. Climate change is a global phenomenon, and scientists have been extremely cautious about blaming any individual weather event on climate change. However, new tools and methodologies developed in the last two decades have made it possible to say whether a particular event was made more or less likely by climate change.

Heatwaves in India

Heatwaves are not defined by high temperatures. They are defined by abnormalities in temperature. For example, a place that normally sees a temperature of 40 degree Celsius during summer is not said to be experiencing a heatwave even if the temperature rises to 42 or 43 degrees. On the other hand, another location would be said to be facing a heatwave even at 35 degrees if its normal temperature during that time is 27 or 28 degrees (See box).

Heatwaves are quite common in northern, central, and eastern India during sum-

NUMBER OF HEATWAVE DAYS

STATES/UT	2020	2021	2022
Andhra Pradesh	3	4	5
Bihar	1	1	6
Chhattisgarh	0	1	6
Delhi	4	3	17
Gujarat	2	0	5
Haryana	3	2	24
Jharkhand	1	0	18
Karnataka	4	0	0
Madhya Pradesh	2	1	13
Maharashtra	5	0	4
Odisha	2	4	5
Punjab	1	2	24
Rajasthan	6	4	26
Tamil Nadu	4	3	3
Telangana	2	0	2
Uttar Pradesh	2	1	15
Uttarakhand	0	7	28
West Bengal	0	3	2

WHAT MAKES FOR A HEATWAVE?

Places with normal maximum temperature	Heatwave if temperature higher by	Severe heatwave if temperature higher by
40 degree Celsius or less	5-6 degree Celsius	7 degree Celsius
More than 40 degree Celsius	3-4 degree Celsius	More than 5 degree Celsius
For any place	Maximum temperature remains above 45 degree Celsius for two consecutive days	

These criteria have to be met in at least two stations of a meteorological sub-division for at least two consecutive days. Source: Parliament question and IMD

mer. But there is plenty of evidence now to suggest that heatwaves are becoming more frequent, intense, and prolonged because of climate change.

Last year, several parts of the country experienced heatwave conditions in February, technically a winter month for India. Maximum temperatures were 5 to 11 degrees higher than normal, easily meeting the criteria for heatwaves. It put the India Meteorological Department (IMD) in a fix because heatwaves are meant to be declared only in the April-July period. The mean temperature for February for the country as a whole last year was 1.36 degree Celsius higher than normal, making it the second hottest February in India ever. The year 2023 also ended up as the second warmest ever for India.

The heatwave outlook for this year was

more grim. Heatwaves at the beginning of summer were likely to be more prolonged, lasting for as long as 10 to 20 days at a stretch in some places, instead of the usual 4 to 8 days. True to prediction, an 18-day heatwave was recorded in Odisha in April, the second longest spell for the state ever, according to an analysis by Climate Central, a US-based climate research organisation. Gangetic West Bengal recorded the highest number of heatwave days for any month in the last 15 years, the analysis said. Not surprisingly, eastern India recorded its warmest April ever.

On Tuesday, the IMD said a fresh spell of heatwaves was likely to start over northwest India from Thursday.

Impact of heatwaves

Prolonged exposure to heat can result in

dehydration and cardiovascular and respiratory diseases, and exacerbate existing weaknesses, even leading to sudden deaths. Data on illnesses and deaths caused by excessive heat is not maintained well in India. Efforts to collect and collate these data began only about a decade ago. But reliable figures are still not available, and there are wide divergences among numbers reported by various agencies such as the IMD, National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA), the Integrated Disease Surveillance Programme or the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB).

For instance, the Health Ministry, in reply to a Parliament question last year, said it had information about just 33 heat-related deaths in 2022. But the NCRB, which counts heat-related mortality among accidental deaths caused by forces of nature, reported 730 deaths for 2022. In that same reply, the Health Ministry reported 264 heat-related deaths in the first six months of 2023.

Data collected and maintained by IMD and NDMA showed a sharp decline in the number of heat-related deaths ever since state governments and district administrations began implementing heat action plans. It was evidence for the success of early warnings and heat action plans, but this dataset has been showing a reversal of trends in the last couple of years. This could be because of better reporting or an increase in the severity of heatwaves.

Mitigation of heatwaves

All the 23 states known to be vulnerable to heatwaves now have heat action plans to manage the adverse impacts. Simple measures like the provision of cool drinking water at public places, free distribution of oral rehydration solutions, closure of schools and colleges during peak hours, and providing access to parks and other shaded places have brought relief to large numbers of people and prevented illnesses and deaths in several cities.

However, much more needs to be done, especially because heatwaves getting more prolonged and severe. Local administrations must mandatorily regulate activities even in unorganised sectors like construction. This would ensure that non-essential activities, especially those carried out in the open, are stopped during the worst time. Like schools and colleges, office timings can also be tweaked. All organised outdoor activities, including sports, would need to be strictly regulated. Some experts lament the lack of adequate funding for the heat action plans.

Putin's biggest reshuffle in years: what Shoigu's removal could mean

ALIND CHAUHAN
NEW DELHI, MAY 14

RUSSIA'S PRESIDENT Vladimir Putin has removed his long-standing ally Sergei Shoigu as the country's Defence Minister and made him Secretary of the Security Council. Andrei Belousov, an economist and Russia's First Deputy Prime Minister, will replace Shoigu.

The appointments are the biggest reshuffle of Putin's security officials in more than a decade. While Shoigu had been Defence Minister for 12 years, the man he has now replaced at the Security Council, Nikolai Patrushev, had been in the post since 2008.

The shake-up has come days after Putin began his fifth term as Russia's President, and as Russian forces continue to gain ground in Ukraine.

First, who is Sergei Shoigu?

Shoigu, 68, is Russia's longest-serving minister. His rise began in 1994 when he

was appointed Emergency Situations Minister in the early years of President Boris Yeltsin's administration, and became popular because of the energy and enterprise he demonstrated in the job.

Shoigu stayed in his post after Putin came to power and right up to 2012, when he was made governor of the Moscow region. Soon afterward, as the country's Defence Minister got embroiled in a corruption scandal, Shoigu

was appointed to the post, and was tasked with modernising the Russian forces.

As Defence Minister, Shoigu oversaw the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, and the intervention in Syria in 2015, which helped President Bashar al-Assad stay in power. He has overseen the invasion of Ukraine since February 2022.

Shoigu reportedly shares a close relationship with Putin, and has often gone on hunting and fishing trips with the President in Siberia.

And who is Andrei Belousov?



President Vladimir Putin with Sergei Shoigu (in uniform) during this year's Victory Day parade in Moscow. Reuters

Like Shoigu, First Deputy Prime Minister Belousov too, is an old Putin loyalist who graduated from Moscow State University's Faculty of Economics in 1981. Belousov does not have a background in Russia's armed forces.

In 2000, Belousov became a non-staff adviser to the Prime Minister of Russia. Six

years later, he was made Deputy Minister in the Economy Ministry. Between 2008 and 2012, he served as Director of the Department for Economics and Finance — this is also the time when Putin himself chose to serve as Prime Minister while Dmitry Medvedev was President.

In 2012, Belousov was made Economics Minister. From 2013 to 2020, he served as an adviser to the Russian President. In 2020, he was made First Deputy Prime Minister.

What does the reshuffle mean?

Nandan Unnikrishnan, Distinguished Fellow at Observer Research Foundation and an expert on Russia, said the decision was likely not made on a whim.

"Putin does not like changing personnel. Over the years, very few ministers have been changed... There must have been some specific calculations within the leadership of Russia... This (the reshuffle) must have been something he (Putin) thought through and must have consulted others, including Patrushev and Shoigu themselves," Unnikrishnan told *The Indian Express*.

One reason for Shoigu's transfer could be the mounting pressure on him. Most recently, his deputy, Timur Ivanov, was arrested on charges of bribery. Last year, Yevgeny Prigozhin, chief of the mercenary Wagner Group, had accused Shoigu of military incompetence and corruption. Prigozhin had rebelled in June, seizing the military headquarters in Rostov-on-Don and beginning an advance with his troops towards Moscow. Although he called off his march soon, and was suspiciously killed in a plane crash two months later, the episode undermined Shoigu's authority.

The Defence Minister had earlier come under fire in 2022 after the Russian military was forced to temporarily retreat at some places against the Ukrainian forces.

So is this a demotion for Shoigu?

No, it is not, Unnikrishnan said. Shoigu will continue to have a direct line to Putin, and will be only answerable to the President. He will also be Deputy President of the Military-Industrial Commission, and will head the Federal Service for Military-

Technical Cooperation (FSVTS), which is responsible for military hardware dealings with other countries.

"Putin could have felt that it is time to remove his friend (Shoigu) from the line of fire because things were sort of snowballing," Unnikrishnan said.

And what does Belousov's appointment indicate?

Belousov's placement as the new Defence Minister likely reflects the changed realities of Russia's war against Ukraine. For Moscow, the battle has reached the level of attritional warfare and Belousov, an economist, is expected to help make it more efficient.

"Belousov is a technocrat, a pure economist, who has been for many years one of the main advisers to Putin on economic affairs. He is a statistician, a person who believes that the state has a role to play in the economy and should spend money on infrastructure, etc. So, he is, in a sense, the right person to bring in whatever changes are required in the Ministry of Defence to adjust to the new realities," Unnikrishnan said.

WORRISOME RISE IN FOOD INFLATION, AND IT MAY GET WORSE

THE good news is that retail inflation has marginally eased for the second month in a row to 4.83 percent in April. The fall was mainly driven by lower fuel prices. The bad news from the government data is that food inflation shot up to 8.70 percent in April, compared to 8.52 percent in March. This was pushed by a sharp price rise in a wide spectrum of food items—cereals (8.63 percent), fruits (5.22 percent), oils (9.43 percent), and meat and fish (8.17 percent). For the common man, the heaviest burden is the persistent rise in the price of vegetables and pulses at 27.8 percent and 16.8 percent, respectively.

Food inflation, which hits the poor harder, has been at more than 8 percent year-on-year since November 2023. The data also showed that consumer inflation for rural households was higher at 5.43 percent, compared to 4.11 percent for urban consumers. For the government as well as for economists and planners, the real worry is that food inflation will probably get worse before it gets better. The continuing heat wave is expected to hit vegetable supplies further; possibly pushing up prices in May too; and the high prices in cereals and pulses will likely continue till the next crop comes in.

Overall, the retail inflation rate has been under control. The Reserve Bank, too, expects the downward curve to help reach an average of 4.5 percent this year from the 5.4 percent clocked in 2023-24. However, the RBI is holding its key lending rate steady at 6.5 percent for the seventh straight quarter, as it wants inflation to fall to a more durable 4.0 percent. In an otherwise improving scenario, food inflation continues to be a worry. Not only do food items account for almost half the basket that makes up the consumer price index, they also have a direct bearing on the living standards of people. The government has tried to control their prices, but has largely failed. Onion exports were banned to ensure easier supplies and prices, but then it was reversed earlier this month with an eye on the elections. Some factors such as extreme weather conditions that hit production cannot be controlled. But man-made factors like rising fertiliser and other input costs can be kept in check to keep inflation down.

KARNATAKA NEEDS TO IMPROVE ITS SCHOOLS

THIS year, Karnataka's SSLC (Secondary School Leaving Certificate) students have posted a dismal performance with a pass percentage of 73.4 percent. This is lower than the performance in the past few years, not discounting the Covid factor: 83.89 percent in 2022-23, 85.13 percent in 2021-22 and 99.99 percent in 2020-21. What makes the picture more dreary is that the actual pass percentage was 54 percent, prompting the education department to reduce the qualifying mark to 25 percent from 35 percent. Grace marks were given to over 2 lakh failing students to push up the pass percentage; last year too, marks were added to push through 59,000 students. None of the students from 78 schools passed; the number was 34 last year. Yet, there are some inspiring stories, like a Bagalkote farmer's daughter topping with 100 percent.

A comparison with other education boards brings out the starkness. ICSE students posted an impressive 99.8 percent pass percentage and CBSE students clocked 93.6 percent without grace marks. State board schools in Kerala posted a pass share of 99.69 percent, Tamil Nadu 91.55 percent, Telangana 91.31 percent, Andhra Pradesh 86.69 percent and Delhi schools posted 96.99 percent, though these numbers are to be taken with a pinch of salt, as state boards are more prone to indulge in grade inflation.

What ails Karnataka, which is ahead of many other states on other social development indices? Lowering the bar to dress up statistics may help the students now, but not when they face tough professional exams. The education department is only deluding itself and the students. A committee that assessed the decline in academic performance zeroed in on the lack of effective guidelines and a casual attitude towards quality. While strict rules are imposed on private schools, there are few for public ones. The panel has recommended a strong learning foundation for pre-primary students.

The government must set up a robust system of good, affordable schools. This Karnataka government came to power on the formula of five guarantees. While its cash handouts and free travel for women, and free power have proved to be a hit, the government has failed to do anything substantial for the education sector. It should now add free and good education to its guarantees, which is bound to deliver dividends in the future.

QUICK TAKE

ONE DEATH TOO MANY

FROM the beginning of its carnage in Gaza, Israel has questioned the number of dead Palestinians published by the Gaza health authority. The UN and all international relief agencies accept the numbers, as they have been found credible in the past. But now that there has been a revision, Israel again wants to tar the whole effort. The UN has explained it's not a reduction in the total, just a difference between bodies found and those conclusively identified—24,686 confirmed identities among about 35,000 dead. The tally will be needed for future administrative action. But for now, let's agree that the death of even one civilian is one too many.

PERIODIC polls are the lifeline of vibrant democracies and an occasion for slugfests between those in power and the opposition. It's a no-holds-barred war of words between the two sides. Impossible promises to the electorate and wild allegations against opponents are routine.

In this mad race for power, facts are twisted, arguments are turned upside down, and lies are concocted to spin helpful narratives—usually in acerbic tones—either to expand one's support base or to demonise opponents. The ongoing 18th Lok Sabha election is no exception. The public discourse at present is reeking of toxicity, which is typical of Indian elections.

The incumbent Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, seeking a third term, started his campaign by building on his achievements in the last decade and promising a bright future for India. He shared his dream to fully develop the country by 2047, the hundredth year of its independence.

PM Modi has a lot to showcase and claim credit for. Arraigned against him is a rainbow coalition of 26 parties—including the Congress, Leftists, DMK, TMC, SP and RJD—bearing the moniker INDI Alliance. These parties have little in common. They have often used the choicest of expletives against each other in the not-too-distant past. In many states, they are at each other's throats, even after the formation of the alliance.

The glue that holds the disparate opposition together is their visceral hate for Modi and his vision of India. The INDI Alliance parties had been considering drafting a common programme and holding joint rallies. However, they have failed to do both so far, thanks to their sharp differences on various issues and clash of interests.

Among Modi's notable achievements are a slew of welfare schemes that have changed the lives of millions of Indians for the better, the restoration of normalcy in strife-torn Jammu & Kashmir following the abolition of Articles 370 & 35A, the development of a Covid vaccine and its successful administration across India, and a massive impetus to the economy—pushing it to within touching distance of the third slot in the global ranking, from the tenth in 2014.

The revamp of Kashi Vishwanath at Varanasi and the reconstruction of the Ram temple in Ayodhya are significant steps in India's quest to rediscover itself and reclaim its spiritual past. India's unprecedented progress in development parameters and rediscovery of its cultural

The INDIA bloc seems glued together only by the parties' opposition to the BJP. Will the rich-poor binary work for them in 2024?

BEYOND THE BLUSTER OF WILD POLL PROMISES

BALBIR PUNJ

Former Rajya Sabha member & author, most recently of *Trust with Ayodhya: Decolonisation of India*



SOURAV ROY

roots may appear unrelated at the surface; still, they are part of a single phenomenon—the country's spiritual renaissance.

Rampant corruption, especially among politicians and senior bureaucrats seeping to the lowest rungs of officialdom, has corroded independent India's administrative set-up for long and wrecked successive governments' development plans. Even the best schemes, made with the noblest intentions, came to naught. The then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi estimated that out of the funds allocated, only 15 percent reached the target group, and 85 percent was stolen on the way.

Modi stopped it. It was a singular achievement because none of his predecessors could do so. He was innovative, used technology and disbursed money

through direct transfers to the bank accounts of millions of beneficiaries. A class of local leaders who doubled as dalals and siphoned off the public funds easily was decimated. More important, there wasn't any discrimination, against or for; any creed, caste or gender in the distribution of these freebies.

As a part of their strategy, his detractors (read opposition parties), however, have largely side-stepped the developmental issues. Muslims, who constitute about 15 percent of the electorate, have been repeatedly told that Modi, if voted again to office, would disenfranchise them and reduce them to third-class citizens. Modi is also being painted as an authoritarian out to squash dissent, snuff democracy, upturn the Constitution, and do away with

WEATHER DERIVATIVES: A NEW DAWN IN RISK MANAGEMENT

THE allure of weather derivatives—financial instruments that allow businesses to hedge against the whims of Mother Nature—is undeniable. They are tradable instruments that usually employ observed weather data to create an index on which a pay-out is based. Weather phenomena such as precipitation, tempests, cyclones and tsunamis pose significant risks to businesses, with one estimate suggesting more than 80 percent of business activities in the world are weather-dependent. These instruments offer a way to manage uncertainties. With the increasing unpredictability of weather patterns due to climate change, the demand for financial instruments to manage weather-related risks is only likely to grow.

With the Indian economy being largely agrarian, the agricultural sector and industries such as tourism, travel and energy have always been at the mercy of weather. The recent notification of the finance ministry allowing derivatives trading in weather marks a significant milestone in India's financial landscape. But the success of this initiative hinges on effective regulation of weather derivatives trading.

Derivatives are contracts between parties that hold a monetary value based upon the value of an underlying asset like equities, currency and other financial assets, or commodities. In India, a derivative contract that has a commodity or good notified by the central government as its underlying asset is known as a 'commodity derivatives' contract. These commodities, notified from time to time by the central government under the Securities Contracts (Regulation) Act, 1956, may include goods such as cereals and pulses, oil, spices, fruits and vegetables. These may also include certain notified activities, services, rights, interests and events, including weather derivatives.

The underlying asset in weather derivatives is meteorological parameters such as temperature, rainfall and drought. The value is defined by a predetermined weather index that varies according to the location and source of data. Unlike traditional financial derivatives, the underlying asset in weather derivatives does not possess any inherent value or marketability. Weather derivatives are considered an 'incomplete market' for this reason, which may lead to confusion when using the term 'derivative' to refer to them. The execution



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Advocates, Madras High Court

of the transaction is limited to cash settlements between the involved parties, which entails one party remitting the difference between the 'strike' value, which represents the agreed level of the weather parameter or index, and the 'spot' price, which represents the registered index throughout the duration of the contract.

Over-the-counter trading in weather de-



Weather derivatives can be used by farmers to mitigate the risks of suboptimal harvests resulting from inadequate or excessive rainfall, storms or temperature fluctuations. Even non-agricultural industries can benefit from these instruments

derivatives commenced in 1997. In a relatively short span, these assets attained the status of being tradable on an exchange and were regarded as an investment class by many hedge funds. The introduction of exchange-traded weather futures contracts by the Chicago Mercantile Exchange in 1999 was a response to the expanding market.

According to the recent notification, the central government announced the broadening of the range of commodities in consultation with the Securities and Exchange Board of India. In another notification issued the same day, the government notified certain items, including weather derivatives, as being permitted. These notifications will have a transformative impact on derivatives and commodity trading in In-

dia. These modifications will signify a substantial change in the regulatory structure that governs financial markets in the areas of derivatives and commodity trading. The government aims to improve market liquidity, expand hedging alternatives, and encourage involvement of the agricultural and industrial sectors in commodity markets by expanding the definition of tradable commodities and derivatives.

Weather derivatives will be of utmost significance to an agrarian economy like ours. They can be employed by farmers as a means of mitigating the risks associated with suboptimal harvests resulting from inadequate or excessive rainfall, strong winds or fluctuations in temperature. A study conducted between 1998 and 2006 on the use of weather derivatives in the wine industry in Italy showed the average payoff for the period with hedge is above the average of the payoff with no hedge. Even non-agricultural industries would benefit from this. For instance, a software company that has had to face hassles from yearly flooding may opt to purchase a rainfall day index, the value of which would appreciate in case of excessive rainfall.

The successful implementation of allowing trading in weather derivatives requires a robust regulatory framework, adequate market infrastructure and increased awareness among potential users, especially at grassroot levels. The SEBI, which is yet to come out with regulations for the trading of weather derivatives, has a crucial role to play in ensuring the smooth functioning of this new market. It needs to put in place stringent regulations to prevent market manipulation and ensure transparency. Potential users of weather derivatives need to be educated about the benefits and risks associated with these instruments. This could be achieved through workshops, seminars and training programmes. Nonetheless, the decision to allow trading in weather derivatives is a step in the right direction.

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reservations for various vulnerable sections of the society—in vogue since the birth of the republic.

There is absolutely no evidence that sustains these allegations. There isn't even a remote hint in any of the BJP documents—manifesto, party resolutions—or the statements of its top leaders suggesting any such move.

The BJP's manifesto celebrates India's "civilisational values, thought, wisdom and traditional knowledge", and seeks to craft policies to further India's "national interests with the spirit of Vishwa Bandhu and a Bharat First attitude". For the BJP, the last decade has witnessed the transformation of India from one of the 'fragile five' to one of the top five economies of the world.

The crux of Rahul Gandhi and Congress's electoral campaign, however, is identity politics—seeking to divide the country on the basis of caste—something the party had abhorred in the past.

In a letter to chief ministers dated June 27, 1961, Jawaharlal Nehru observed, "If we go in for reservations on communal and caste basis, we swamp the bright and able people and remain second-rate or third-rate. I am grieved to learn how far this business of reservation has gone based on communal considerations. It has amazed me to learn that even promotions are based sometimes on communal or caste considerations. This way lies not only folly, but disaster. Let us help the backward groups by all means, but never at the cost of efficiency. How are we going to build the public sector or indeed any sector with second-rate people?"

But to meet the exigencies of political ambitions, party policies in vogue for long can be buried fathoms deep. The Congress manifesto and statements made by Rahul Gandhi also indirectly speak about the redistribution of national wealth among various sections of society—scheduled castes, tribes, backward classes—on the basis of their share in the national population. The plans for evaluation and distribution are lacking in detail.

It appears that Rahul is on some sort of a nostalgic excursion, romanticising a bygone era when his grandmother Indira Gandhi successfully sailed to power on the 'Garibi hatao' (eradicate poverty) promise. The result of her policies was disastrous for the country. Most of the commodities of daily use were either in short supply or available in the black market. Will the rich-poor binary, which yielded results in the 1970s, work in 2024? Looks difficult.

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MAIL BAG

WRITE TO: letters@newindianexpress.com

Education needed

Ref: *Incentivise parents to keep girls in school, avoid child marriages* (May 14). More than 40 percent of the world's marriages before the age of 18 take place in India. Though it is a human rights violation and against the country's law, the practice remains widespread. Education should be developed in all areas, especially in rural areas.
V K S Krishnan, Kumbakonam

Not IPL

Ref: *India will need Rohit, Hardik to flourish* (May 14). Many reports suggest that all is not well between Team India captain Rohit Sharma and vice-captain Hardik Pandya. If the reports are true, they need to iron out the differences. Franchise cricket is different, but representing India assumes more significance. Both need to fire on all cylinders if India are to do well in the T20 World Cup.
S Sankaranarayanan, Chennai

Electoral participation

Ref: *Highest Srinagar voter turnout in decades; better 4th phase voting* (May 14). It was heartening that Srinagar recorded 37.98% voter turnout in the 4th phase of polling, up from 14.43% in 2019. That Jammu and Kashmir enthusiastically took part in the Indian electoral process emphasises the troubled state's allegiance to India.
George Jacob, Kochi

Chinese corridor

Ref: *Won't take long for PoK to integrate with India: EAM* (May 14). Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, a bone of contention between Pakistan and India, is partly occupied by China now; massive infrastructure has already come up for the Sino-Pak Economic Corridor in Saksagam valley. Authorities will have to snatch the area back from not just Pakistan, but China as well.
P H Hema Sagar, Secunderabad

Billboard atrocity

The horrifying accident of a billboard falling in Mumbai, resulting in so many deaths, is heart-wrenching. While the permissible size for billboards is 40×40 feet, the collapsed one was 120×120 feet. How did it escape the notice of authorities? Exemplary punitive action must be taken against the people responsible.
Mohan Kunnakat, Vaniamkulam

Political hypocrisy

The main subject of this election seems to be leaders accusing each other of caste and religious biases. All of them say they don't believe in caste and request votes on merit. But when it comes to candidate selection, it is purely based on their caste and religion. It is high time this is stopped.
Arun Maharaj, Kochi

THE NEW INDIAN EXPRESS

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Chabahar, Opening Routes for India-Plus

More options than Beijing for Tehran

With Monday's agreement, India takes over management of Iran's Chabahar Port for an initial 10-year period. This will change the face of regional connectivity, trade with landlocked countries of Central Asia and Afghanistan, and provide an alternative route that connects the region with Europe. For India and the region, economic benefits come with a strategic sweetener — an alternative that can bypass China and Pakistan's Gwadar Port.

Chabahar, Iran's only deep seaport with direct access to the ocean, is located beyond the Strait of Hormuz. This is critical to minimising trade disruptions, especially given its integration with the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) project. It would reduce transit times and cut freight costs by an estimated 30%. This, in turn, will enhance India's role in the global supply chain, as well as provide an entry point for humanitarian aid shipments. It bumps up India's energy security as it allows for diversification of import routes for oil and gas, and improves access to critical natural resources, mitigating risks associated with traditional import routes. As India's first overseas port management, here's an opportunity to



bolster our infra capabilities.

Trade, economics apart, this development is of great strategic importance. It gives India a vantage point across regions — West Asia, Indian Ocean, Africa. This isn't just for itself, but also for countries committed to a free and open rules-based international order. India's presence can provide Iran with an off-ramp necessary to ensure peace and stability in the West Asian region. It also allows Tehran to place its eggs in more baskets than in Beijing's. Central Asian states, and Armenia and Azerbaijan also get an alternative, strategic vantage in the Indian Ocean region. This is an opening that can counter plans that China's 'ambitious' vision has for the region. The US and other G7 powers should view India's management of Chabahar as the creation of a safety valve, an alternative where none seemed likely to materialise.

MACROECONOMICS

Make Farmers Better Informed About Risk

Food inflation is on another episodic spike. Which makes targeting inflation overall a more complicated exercise. Manufacturing and agriculture are diverging in price trends, in which the weather plays a crucial role. Food inflation is likely to remain elevated due to heatwave conditions till monsoon arrives. Then it's expected to trend down sharply because of the high base during last year's scattered and inadequate monsoon. Dependence of retail inflation on the weather is becoming more volatile with the rising frequency of extreme events. Supply responses like export bans and stocking limits don't address rising volatility, and with it headline inflation that serves as a key macro target.



A more holistic food supply response would look at price signalling, marketing and logistics support, and expanded irrigation and stockholding. These are longer-term solutions by derisking food production from weather. Then there are climate mitigation efforts to reduce extreme weather phenomena, an even broader

approach to keeping a lid on food prices. None of these will, of course, yield the outcome policymakers seek: an immediate reversal of food inflation. This tends to slow down progress on the policy that'll actually make a difference.

Food production is more a victim of state intervention than market imperfection. GoI adds to these imperfections by trying to control input and output prices in farming without having adequate control over the former and insufficient capacity for the latter. India needs to craft policy that makes agriculture less risky. Instead, what we get is state responses that heighten price volatility. Food availability, GoI's overriding concern, will be better served by farmers making better informed decisions about risk.



JUST IN JEST

Rahul Gandhi's reply to a very Indian question raises another question...

Can Marriage Give RaGa That Edge?

In a recent meeting with voters organised for Congress' eternal hope Rahul Gandhi in Rae Bareilly, an Indianism popped up. Amid all that talk about promises being made for his Lok Sabha constituency — or, as he put it, 'karmabhoomi' of both his 'mothers' (of the ordinary and grand-mum variety) — one curious soul decided to pop the question — about his marriage plans. It was a yorker that left everyone chuckling, including the 53-year-old bachelor. Prodded by his sister Mrs Vadra, Gandhi was a sport and replied, 'Jaldi hi karni padegi.' It's doubtful, though, that he can muster up a ceremony before the polls end to impress pro-marriage voters. Gandhi isn't the only member of UPA — Unmarried Politicians Association. There's Boris Johnson who tied the knot in office — and probably inside his office during Covid lockdown. Closer home, Bhagwant Mann, HD Kumaraswamy, Prafulla Mahanta and Virbhadr Singh, all took the plunge as sitting ducks, sorry, CMs. So, even if Gandhi doesn't get the top job of the central government post-June 4, he could consider CMship, and then husbandhood. After all, one needs a steady job to start a family — even if one has the means to set up shop. Other bachelors and bachelorettes could also consider telling the nation: I can take care of you the way I intend to take care of my better half.

It's the Politics, Stupid



T K Arun

The stock market's volatility index has doubled from the level seen on April 23, as traders worry about a BJP majority. In fact, traders should appreciate that the economy is guaranteed to do well, whoever forms the next government.

There are three possible outcomes: ▶ BJP gets a majority on its own, as in 2019.

▶ BJP falls short of a majority and becomes dependent on fickle allies.

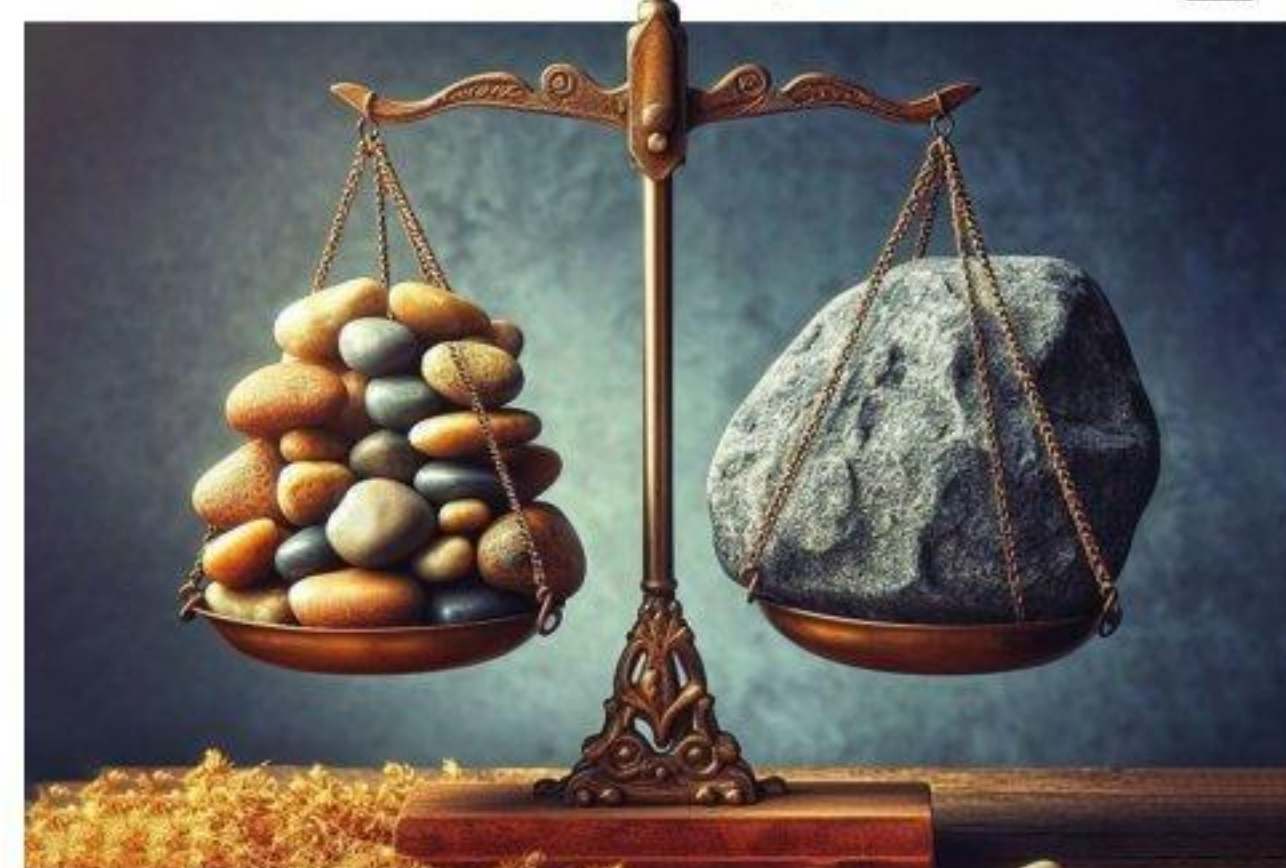
▶ BJP falls so short of a majority that the Opposition INDIA gets to form the government.

Most people equate a government by a single party that enjoys a majority in Parliament with political stability, efficient decision-making and living happily ever after. In this view, coalitions carry the risk of instability, erratic policy and economic woes. India's own recent history shows that such views are unfounded. Coalitions create and sustain pro-growth policy and governance, while the benign effects of single-party rule can be exaggerated.

1980-89 was a period of stable governments with rock-solid majority support in Parliament. Yet, it was a period of extreme political instability. Assam witnessed a violent anti-foreigner agitation. Punjab saw separatist terrorism. Tamil separatists of Sri Lanka were killing one another in Tamil Nadu and later turned against the Indian state, going so far as to kill Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi on his re-election campaign. Kashmir was drowning



in militancy and counter-insurgency violence. And an organised campaign to bring down the Babri mosque at Ayodhya was sparking Hindu-Muslim riots across north India.



What matters is the weight

in militancy and counter-insurgency violence. And an organised campaign to bring down the Babri mosque at Ayodhya was sparking Hindu-Muslim riots across north India.

The P V Narasimha Rao government that took office in 1991 was a minority government to begin with, and acquired a majority halfway through with the help of bribes. But that government launched India's economic reforms, held elections in Kashmir and Punjab, and gradually stabilised the polity, after ructions in the wake of the Babri mosque demolition and anti-Mandal agitations.

United Front that led the next government was a fractious coalition with two political lightweights as successive PMs during its two-year tenure. But it carried forward the economic reform programme.

Dematerialisation of shares, expansion of the scope of foreign institutional investment in stock markets, a New Exploration Licensing Policy for hydrocarbons, overhaul of tax rates to bring I-T rates to their lowest-ever levels, setting up of the Telecom Regulatory Au-

1980-89 was a period of stable governments with rock-solid majority support in Parliament — but of extreme political instability

thority of India — these were significant reforms, and were carried out by the short-lived coalition that depended on outside support by Congress and a section of the Left.

The succeeding two coalition governments led by Atal Bihari Vajpayee carried the reform programme forward, bringing down import tariffs, setting up statutory regulators for insurance, pensions and electricity, ending the mess in indirect tax rates by clustering them within three bands and narrowing the gap between the bands, and starting the rural road-building programme. It set up the National Pension System, made new recruits to the central government join NPS, and allowed states to voluntarily migrate their pensions to NPS as well.

It opened up insurance to foreign investment, with support from the opposition Congress, gave fresh banking licences, revamped the Unit Trust of India and reset telecom policy.

It allowed telcos to migrate from licences awarded to those bidding to pay the highest fees to a regime of licence fee as a share of the revenue. Then, it

regularised Reliance Telecom's backdoor entry into mobile telephony, in the process introducing, one, intense tariff-shrinking competition that made mobile telephony affordable by the masses, and, two, the more spectrum-efficient CDMA (Code-Division Multiple Access) technology, as well as the principle that regulation should not inhibit exploitation of a technology's full potential merely to spare incumbents additional competition.

BJP needed the support of its allies within NDA for the Vajpayee government to survive. This did not prevent that government from adopting pro-growth policies.

The two UPA governments that followed were also true coalitions, given to unseemly political squabbles, but still capable of delivering the highest CAGR sustained over a decade in India's history till now of 6.8%. It secured, and defended, the nuclear deal with the US, ending a period of technology denial and strategic isolation by the West, carried out a massive telecom revolution, and brought down poverty, maternal and

infant mortality rates, innovated PPP in large infrastructure projects, set up National Payments Corporation, created Aadhaar and the India Stack of APIs (application programming interfaces) that underlie India's public digital infrastructure, and launched a process of defence modernisation, including through local production with FDI.

Nor is it true that ultra-stable governments take brave decisions and carry through with them. The first Narendra Modi government made the economically disastrous decision to demonetise high-value currency notes, killing swathes of small enterprises. It tried to push through changes to the land acquisition law, but withdrew in the face of opposition. In its second term, the attempt to reform agriculture through new farm laws was hampered, invited stubborn opposition and was abandoned.

Do not fret about the economic policy of the new government. Worry, if you must, about how inclusive or divisive it would be.

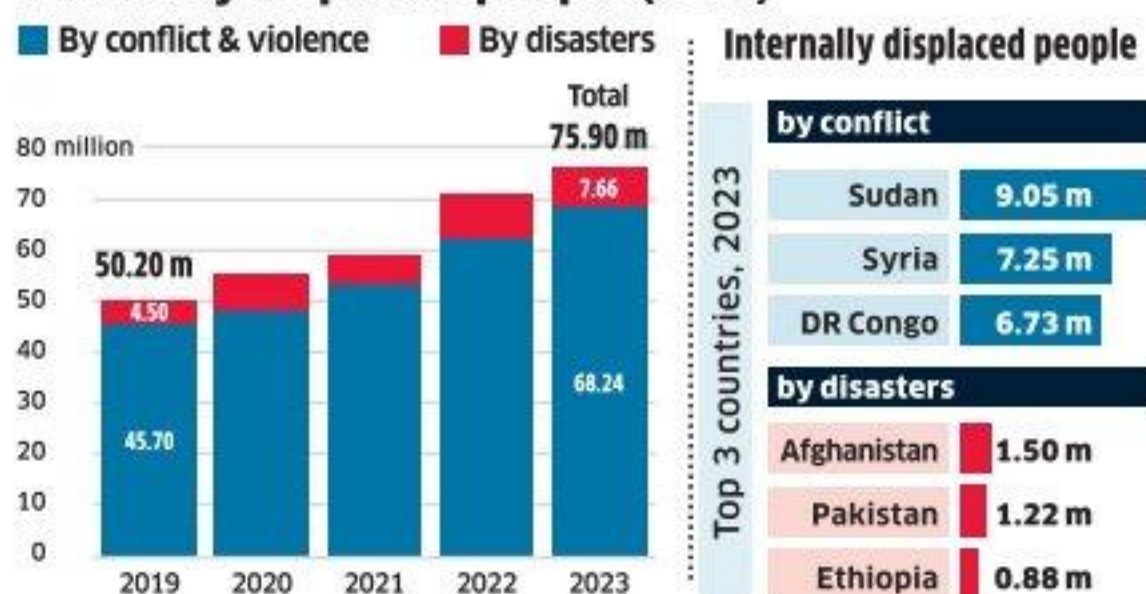
ChatGPT SHAIRI OF THE DAY

There once was an election so long,
It felt like a never-ending song.
Voters grew weary,
Campaigns made them teary,
They wished for an OTT marathon!

2023: 76M Displaced Within Countries

Conflicts and natural disasters left a record nearly 76 million people displaced within their countries last year, with violence in Sudan, Congo and West Asia driving two-thirds of new movement, according to a report by Internal Displacement Monitoring Center. Almost 90% of the total displacement was attributed to conflict and violence...

Internally displaced people (IDPs)



Note: The report tracks physical movements of people, or displacements, the cumulative number of people living away from their homes, including those still displaced from previous years; 'Excl. refugees' Source: Internal-displacement.org, AP

Bell Curves ■ R Prasad



Time to implement 'One Market, One Product' and save on advertising.

Urbanisation = Growth



Amitabh Kant & Ajit Pai

Since 1947, India has reluctantly traversed the path of urbanisation, largely due to its predominantly agriculture-dependent rural population. In 1951, 17% of its population lived in cities. While the post-WW2 world experienced rapid urbanisation, India followed suit at a slower and more haphazard pace. Misguided attempts to combat urbanisation as undesirable hindered growth of efficiencies of agglomeration in the economy, compared to nations that urbanised rapidly and more cohesively.

There's a clear correlation between urbanisation and income: higher the urbanisation rate, higher a country's per-capita income. This relationship holds true even among states, as empirical evidence suggests.

Cities hold the promise of better education, healthcare, jobs and other opportunities, attracting a large influx of rural migrants. However, inadequate investment to accommodate migrants has led to significant informal development in most cities. This issue is further compounded by rigid and outdated planning and administrative norms. India is estimated to be about 36% urbanised, compared to a global average of around 57%, and an OECD average of about 80%. Even recently developed countries like South Korea have surpassed 80% urbanisation.

Recent projections by key policymakers suggest India could reach 50% urbanisation by 2047. However, this projection seems as misguided as past ones that have contributed to the inadequacies of cities. Setting a goal for two-thirds of the country to be urbanised by 2047 would be more reasonable for India, especially if it aims to achieve its other economic and social targets more easily. To urbanise faster, these areas must come into focus:

► **Census towns** Many such towns meet the definitional criteria for city governance, but still function as villages, with infrastructure planning and government services viewed through a rural lens. While these areas are included in urban population counts, they lack essential city infra. State governments must spearhead the establishment of municipal corporations or urban local bodies (ULBs) in these towns.

Simultaneously, there's a need to reassess our urbanisation approach to unlock benefits of agglomeration. The next decade will witness the most significant increase in India's urban population ever. With appropriate planning, it could enable India to overcome legacy issues faced by leading metropolises worldwide.

The suburban sprawl of the latter half of the 20th century is economically and environmentally unsustainable. Expanding cities displace agricultural, horticultural and industrial activities, diminishing natural reserves. Urban growth demands better connectivity and infrastructure, encroaching further into undisturbed natural areas beyond city limits.

► **Floor space index** Higher FSI norms can facilitate vertical expansion, fostering the development of dense and compact cities. For instance, New York City has an FSI of 15, Singapore 25, and Tokyo 20. In contrast, New Delhi, Mumbai, Ahmedabad and Pune have FSIs in single digits. This sprawling urban development necessitates extensive trunk infrastructure development, including water, sewage, electricity lines and

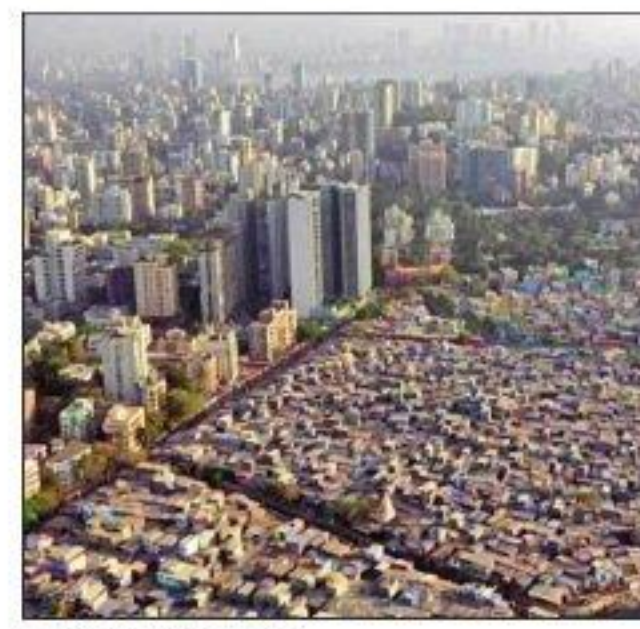
roads, as well as investment in social infrastructure.

► **Transport-oriented development** Making cities more walkable, and accessible to cycle lanes and other non-motorised forms of transport, must be integral to this plan. The US model of urbanisation prioritised cars over people, resulting in more congestion, pollution, and a higher proportion of valuable land occupied by roads and parking spaces.

All newly built stock could be in the most desirable configuration, with land use and densities minimising mechanical mobility requirements, utilising freshwater more effectively, reusing grey water, optimising energy consumption and generation, being easier to maintain and, importantly, being more liveable from physical, social and experiential perspectives.

India can accelerate its economy by prioritising urbanisation, which would enhance its competitiveness in manufacturing and services, while also delivering higher standards of ecological and social responsibility to fortify the economy for the long term. This could be achieved by government providing overarching policy principles and schemes at the central level, while the states focus on capacity-building and ensuring swift and effective implementation of the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments (related to panchayats and municipalities, respectively). Improved devolution and broad-based fundraising through municipal bonds will ensure investments can keep pace with demand.

A clear policy with a prioritised, future-proofed roadmap would encourage broad-based investment in accelerating urbanisation, while strengthening economic and social development in the most capital-efficient and environmentally sustainable manner. Instead of resisting urbanisation, we must reinforce the efficiencies of agglomeration and embrace global best practices and latest technologies to make our cities environmentally friendly, disaster-resistant, economically resilient, safe and liveable. This will provide the economy with a source of sustainable competitive advantage.



Work in progress

Kant is India's G20 Sherpa, and Pai is strategy lead partner, EY GPS



THE SPEAKING TREE

No Pressure, No Diamond

SUMIT PAUL

Thomas Carlyle's quote, 'No pressure, no diamonds', encapsulates the idea that to achieve greatness and success, one must endure and overcome challenges. The metaphorical comparison between pressure and the formation of diamonds conveys a powerful message. Just as diamonds are forged under immense pressure and heat deep within the earth, individuals too are moulded and strengthened through the adversities they face. It is through these challenges and pressures that one can discover their true potential, facing them head-on and enduring the discomfort that often accompanies growth.

Carlyle's quote serves as a reminder that great achievements, like diamonds, require resilience and courage to withstand the hardships that pave the way towards brilliance. An Urdu couplet summarises it so well, 'Sulagti ret pe talwe laho-lahoo karna / Phir us ke baad gulabon ki aarzoo karna, bleed your feet on the scalding hot sands / Then only will you be able to long for the roses. No pain, no gain.'

'Mare bina swarga nahin milta', heaven remains elusive unless you die. In fact, life's so-called hardships and hurdles are disguised reminders that success is achievable if we're willing to try for it. As it is, men are always being tested. Once you're inured to tasting the tests of life, it'll not appear bitter to you. So, brace yourself for all the hurdles. The best is on the anvil.

Chat Room

Contrived Issues Anger Voters

Apropos the interview, 'There's Palpable Sense of Public Anger Against Govt' (May 14), Congress general secretary Priyanka Gandhi is not off the mark when she opines that there is a palpable sense of public anger against the incumbent government. BJP's star campaigners have not addressed the real issues in their multiple rallies but have preferred to mock the Opposition instead. Unemployment that has caused acute distress among the youth, rising inflation and an explanation for the failure of measures like demonetisation have all been given the go-by. The 24x7 media coverage of the PM's interviews has resulted in an overkill that could prove counterproductive at the hustings.

CV ARAVIND
Bangalore

ARC Sale! 75% Off On Your Company

This refers to 'RBI Looks at ARCs Amid a Flood of Allegations' by Sangita Mehta (May 11). The reports that many ARCs are hobnobbing with defaulting promoters and giving them a backdoor entry in the companies that have defaulted in repaying loans are shocking. Why has RBI failed to evolve a mechanism to prevent malpractice? A defaulter promoter getting the company back in his fold with the help of ARCs at a price that is just 25-30% of the loan amount sends a wrong message to all borrowers. The policymakers should block the loophole in the insolvency law and reverse any decision in the past.


MAHESH NATANI
Indore

Multiculti Melee Called the Mela

Apropos 'Our Malls Need to Be Melas' by Madhavan Narayanan (May 14), melas and temple festivals have always been regular multicultural events that combined religious, cultural, social and commercial facets of traditional India's rural calendar. Malls couldn't weave themselves into the warp and woof of the religious and social strata of the Indian family because they concentrated only on the commercial aspect. GoI's focus on marketing local produce and the cultural rejuvenation could help reposition the Western idea of the commercial mall with the Oriental concept of the multidimensional mela.

PARAMESWARAN K
Coimbatore

Letters to the editor may be addressed to
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CONTRAPUNTO

How can so many human beings coexist in a space so confined without hating each other to death?

-EMIL MIHAI CIORAN

Hoarding's Tale

Wind one day, rain another, who should help Mumbaiers best their woes? Elected corporators

The 'high' winds that created chaos in Mumbai on Monday were actually just 50-60 kmph strong. The most notable wreckage was a massive hoarding in Ghatkopar that brought down several lives with it. Its 120x120 sq ft size had Limca Book of Records recognition, but far exceeded the permitted 40x40 sq ft. Its foundations likely did not go deep enough and it also turns out to have been illegal.

This accident underlines what ails India's financial capital today. Sure, it's sprouting a lot of world-class infra. But too much of the construction also suffers a lot of irregularities and shallow foundations. The city's municipal corporation bears a lot of the blame for these failures. Telling citizens that a 120x120 sq ft hoarding was illegal after it collapses feels like salt on an open wound.

BMC presented a ₹59,955cr budget this year, 10% higher than last year. Unfortunately, like too many other Indian cities, Mumbai is missing elected corporators. This takes a worrying toll on accountability. After all, govt officials who assume control in the absence of corporators are not concerned with getting re-elected. They may not have any local connect whatsoever. The irony is that a corporation's own elections being put on hold does not mean its officials are not doing liberal election duty, which again is bad news for a citizen looking for assistance or bearing a complaint.

Although infra woes are not new, that there is more falling through the cracks now than ever was made vivid in Feb, when a grand inauguration was followed by the jaw-dropping realisation that BMC had misaligned two flyovers. To date, it is not clear how or when this snag will be smoothened. This was a meme-worthy reminder that corporators play a vital role in coordinating the different departments necessarily involved in any infra project of significance.

This is not to say that a municipal election is a magic bullet. That's made clear by the way Mumbai and Bengaluru roads greet monsoon with potholed craters, the way these are dug up sooner rather than later after getting remetaled, the construction sites that never see a pollution board inspector, the unsafe buildings that remain unsafe, and so on. But municipal corporations are supposed to be the most accessible level of governance. There's too much work waiting to be done, but it needs to begin with accountability here.



Voice Of J&K

LS polls turnout in Srinagar is encouraging. Now ensure assembly polls and restoration of statehood

Polling in the redrawn Srinagar constituency on May 13 recorded a 38% voter turnout – highest since 1996 (40.9%). This being the first Lok Sabha election in J&K since the nullification of Article 370 in 2019, the uptick in voter participation is a shot in the arm for electoral democracy. However, peace and full normalisation in J&K remain a long-drawn process.

Vox populi? | Reading voting trends in Kashmir can be tricky. There have been allegations of voting suppression and coercion in the past. Plus, the security factor remains omnipresent, as highlighted by the terror attack on an IAF convoy on May 4 in Poonch that killed one soldier and injured four. BJP says it has taken popular decisions but isn't contesting any of the three Kashmir seats this time. Meanwhile, Kashmir parties PDP and NC are viewing the Srinagar turnout as a reflection of people's anger against A370 nullification.

BJP's proxies | Both PDP and NC are also convinced that BJP is surreptitiously supporting Altaf Bukhari's Apni Party (AP) and Sajjad Lone's People's Conference (PC).

In fact, AP was formed by different politicians from PDP and NC coming together in March 2020. PC was part of the Gupkar Declaration to restore A370 but subsequently pulled out. Lone is contesting the Baramulla seat, while AP is fighting from Srinagar and Anantnag. But Kashmir's political integration with rest of India won't be complete if national parties like BJP stay away.

Statehood and assembly polls | Last Dec, Supreme Court had directed Election Commission to hold assembly elections in J&K by Sep 30, 2024, and restore statehood as soon as possible. With delimitation done and voter rolls updated, there's no room for excuses. This is also vital for full normalisation in J&K. Its people must have a direct stake in the region's development. Ongoing LS polls should serve as a springboard for that transition.



Unsafe insurance

Warning: medical health cover might be injurious to your wealth

Jug Suraiya

Health insurance is meant to safeguard us from the high cost of medical expenses occasioned by illness or injury, but how safe is the safety net of health cover for your financial health? And the answer is, it's not very safe at all.

The unhygienic conditions of free state-run clinics and hospitals, being more likely to worsen the health of the patient than improve it, the average Indian is left to the untender mercies of the private sector for healthcare, and for the insurance that supposedly will pick up the price tag for it, which can be horrendously costly as most hospitals are money-making machines thinly described as medical centres.

Mindful of this, the Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority (IRDA) recently removed the age limit for health insurance, as well as the clause regarding pre-existing conditions.

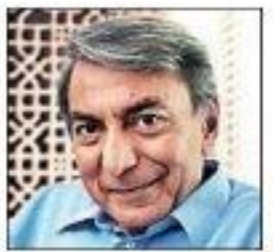
Despite such a relaxation of rules to favour the insured, health insurance remains a dicey business. In a recent case, when the head of a family sought to renew his family policy online which covered him, his wife and five-year-old daughter, he found that the premium charged had increased by almost 15%.

When the agent was questioned about the increase, the answer was that on the renewal link provided there was an option to choose a higher cover for a higher premium. The insured said he hadn't opted for this, but was informed that it had been selected for him by default, this apparently being standard practice, which could better be described as sharp practice.

Thanks to the intervention of the agent a new cover note was issued. This had the correct premium, but had only the name of the husband as the person insured, with no mention of the wife and daughter.

The devil is said to lie in the details. In the case of health insurance devilry, unintended or otherwise, can lie in the fine print which needs to be scrutinised, if necessary with a magnifying glass, to ensure that there are no unpleasant surprises lurking there.

Health insurance? It might more aptly be called unsurance.



WhatsApp & The Privacy Bubble

Two points on the messaging app vs GOI case on sharing encrypted data. India's not the only country asking for this. And internet privacy, really speaking, is an illusion

Atanu Biswas

In the plea that WhatsApp and Meta filed to contest Rule 4(2) of the IT Rules, 2021, their lawyer told Delhi HC that WhatsApp will leave India if they are told to break encryption. As per the law, major social media intermediaries must disclose the originator of any content when asked by a court or any other competent authority. WhatsApp said it would need to store millions of messages for years to comply with this. It claimed that no country, not even Brazil, had put such a law into effect.

According to WhatsApp, the traceability provision violates the basic right to privacy and is unconstitutional. However, court stated "somewhere balance has to be done" and that privacy rights were not absolute in the country.

WhatsApp has positioned end-to-end encryption as a fundamental component of its user privacy and data protection strategy ever since it launched the feature in 2016. It's interesting to note that "end-to-end" encryption has become a buzzword and is now frequently used to highlight the security of any product of this kind. People frequently think that between the two "ends", they are unbreakable.

In a July 2017 opinion piece in *The Daily Telegraph*, then UK home secretary Amber Rudd stated that "real people" aren't particularly interested in security features like unbreakable, end-to-end encryption that prevent govt and criminals from accessing their messages.

The discomfort of authorities persisted in different places. An open letter to Facebook was co-signed in Oct 2019 by the US attorney general, the acting US homeland security secretary, the UK home secretary, and the Australian home minister, requesting that the company halt its plans to implement end-to-end encryption throughout its messaging platforms.

In 2020, members of the intelligence-sharing alliance Five Eyes, comprised of US, UK, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, along with govt representatives from Japan and India, released a statement urging tech companies to devise a way for law enforcement to access end-to-end encrypted communications.

But are our social media messaging devices so safe



directions in cryptography: cracking existing security and creating more robust and effective security. According to a cryptologist acquaintance, an encryption is secure as long as it's not compromised. I was not in agreement, though. Until we found out it had been hacked or spied on, I believed that security was guaranteed!

Same for "privacy". The modern, internet-driven world may destroy the notion of "privacy", as it's so pervasive. To a great extent, we are also to blame for this because of our frequent interactions on social media, which reveal everything about us to the public, and our extensive use of search engines. Didn't Mark Zuckerberg declare in 2010 that "privacy is dead"?

In the 1998 film *The Truman Show*, directed by Peter

that they can't be hacked? Well, the Pegasus episode makes it quite evident that they're constantly susceptible on both ends. The type of encryption, the interceptor's performance, and other factors all affect how secure the encrypted message is between the two ends. Any encrypted communication is getting increasingly insecure as computers get stronger and quantum computers become more prevalent.

Weir, Jim Carrey portrayed Truman Burbank, star of a reality TV show that is aired live around the globe. Unbeknownst to Truman, his life has been a TV show since his birth, confined to the fabricated seaside town of Seahaven Island, where all but Truman were actors. Truman was thus deprived of any privacy, a fact he was unable to comprehend for 30 long years. Truman eventually realised it and burst into revolt. Consequently, we wonder if privacy is only a made-up notion. And as we are busy sharing every detail of our lives on social media, how much do we care about privacy?

And to what extent do the major tech companies care about users' privacy? In early 2021, WhatsApp told its 2 billion+ users that to continue using the service, they would need to consent to Facebook sharing their data. A lot of WhatsApp users downloaded alternative messaging apps. WhatsApp was then asked to remove its new privacy policy by GOI. Similar backlashes occurred in different other countries.

Global resistance to big tech's business models is now coming from a variety of angles. "Antitrust" has become a popular term and is gaining traction everywhere. Additionally, Australia mandated in 2021 that tech giants compensate publishers for hosting their content. Facebook, although it initially retaliated, compromised as it was unable to sacrifice the tiny share of its business in Australia.

India, on the other hand, provides a significant market share for these social networking sites. Among its 278 crore global users, WhatsApp would lose a whopping 50 crore if it were to leave the Indian market.

The controversy surrounding WhatsApp's encryption has spurred a conversation about striking a "balance" between security and privacy from the perspective of the govt's justification for traceability in situations such as acts of communal violence. Will the WhatsApp case have an amicable resolution?

With technology constantly developing, more complex scenarios are probably going to arise in the near future. However, it's really just a triangle with the three parties concerned on three corners. The "real people", who are the third party, would continue to be confused as the other two, govt and tech giants, engage in a fierce and frequently legal tug-of-war. In fact, the "real people" are confined inside a Seahaven that they themselves helped construct. Sadly.

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Bihar Voters In Search Of Samman & Hissedari

Dignity is a freighted word & a key concept in the state's caste politics. 'Fair share' in resources is the other slogan. JDU & RJD are being judged on both

Indrajit Roy

Political discourse in Bihar is peppered with the idea of *samman* (dignity). From Lok Sabha to panchayat elections, talk of *samman* is ubiquitous. One pamphlet promises *samman* for soldiers, farmers, labourers and the poor: *Jai jawan jai kisan, gareeb majdoor kisan komiley samman*. Another promises to deliver both *samman* and development, irrespective of caste: *Panchayat ke vikas ka vaada, yahi hai sankalp hamara, jaat na paat ki baat hai, samman aur vikas ki baat hai*. A third offers a twist on Modi's slogan: *Sabka saath sabka vikas – sabko nyay, sabko samman*.

Power of dignity | This isn't just political rhetoric. The word *samman* fills conversations. Labourers say they want to work for employers who give them *samman*. Those stigmatised as low-caste demand to be treated with *samman* by the self-styled high castes. Women and men say they want to lead lives with *samman*. What they all mean is they want to live with dignity. Even political rivals of the late Sushil Modi, BJP's most prominent leader in Bihar who was deputy CM for 11 years, described him in terms that centred on the dignity with which he conducted himself.

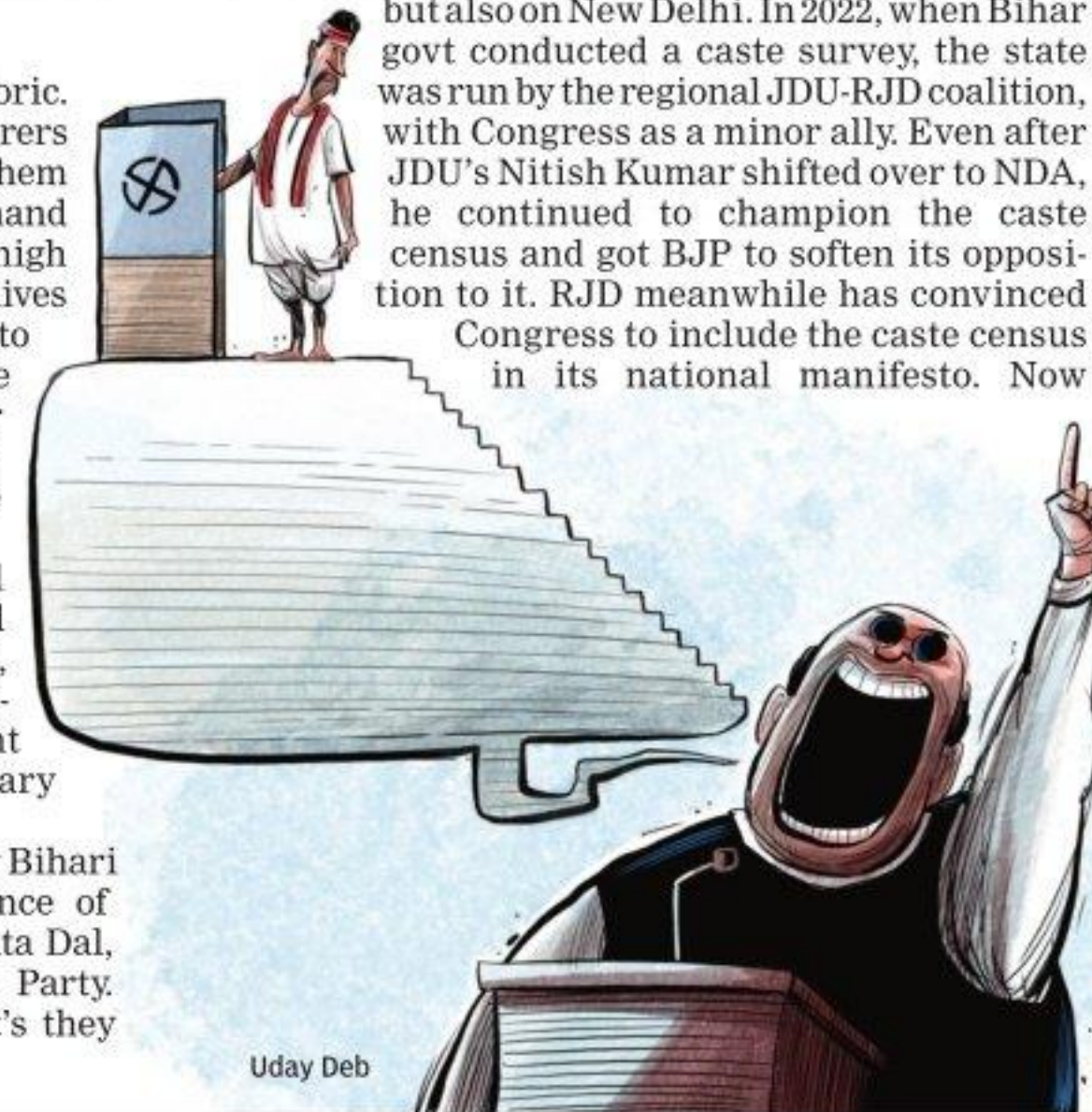
The language of *samman* was launched into circulation in Bihar by Lalu Prasad during the 1990 assembly elections. In 2005, Nitish Kumar coupled dignity with development, embarking on a slew of development projects, while holding fast onto the vocabulary of *samman*.

The omnipresence of *samman*, a distinctly Bihari political code word, bespeaks the dominance of regional parties in the state: Rashtriya Janata Dal, Janata Dal (United) and Loktantrik Janata Party. Even as these ally with BJP, INC or CPI, it's they that speak to Bihar's citizens.

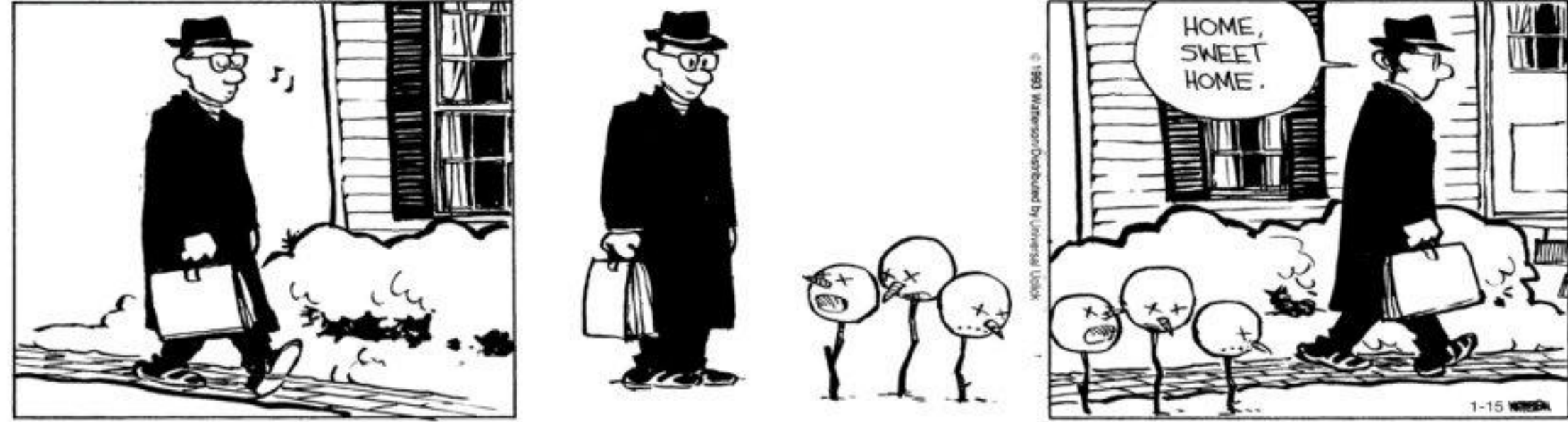


Regional parties entrenched | In the 2014 general elections, the three regional parties together won a combined 42.3% of the vote, while the national parties polled under 39%. In the 2019 elections, regional parties increased their vote share, proving themselves indispensable to the national parties even in general elections. At the height of Modi's popularity, his regional allies polled more votes and won more seats in Bihar than BJP in the state. In an election ostensibly shaped by nationalism, the two national parties secured barely a third of the vote share in Bihar.

Recent caste census politics shows the effect of Bihar's regional parties, not only on state matters, but also on New Delhi. In 2022, when Bihar govt conducted a caste survey, the state was run by the regional JDU-RJD coalition, with Congress as a minor ally. Even after JDU's Nitish Kumar shifted over to NDA, he continued to champion the caste census and got BJP to soften its opposition to it. RJD meanwhile has convinced Congress to include the caste census in its national manifesto. Now



Calvin & Hobbes



Shift The Focus To Duty-based Approach

Maulana Wahiduddin Khan

In today's world, people are so engrossed in their day-to-day lives that they are only concerned with fulfilling their responsibilities. They have no time to think of helping others, forming good relations, building a better society, and developing their nation.

If we want to usher in real change in a nation, we must first change individual thinking and conduct so that citizens may develop patriotism and national character by thinking of India first. The national character of its citizens plays the most crucial role in building a nation. The national character of its citizens is essential in nation-building, just as the quality of bricks is vital in construction work. A house made of unfired bricks is unsafe because any calamity, even a minor one, can bring it down. On the other hand, a building made of kiln-fired bricks can be trusted to withstand the


onslaught of tempests and floods. Similarly, citizens with a character so tempered that they can be depended upon through thick and thin – like the kiln-fired bricks – build a nation in the long run. On the other hand, building a nation without laying a solid foundation in its individuals is like building sandcastles, which soon crumble away.

Trees show us how to develop character. A tree's roots are deeply embedded in the soil, its trunk rises, and its branches spread out high above. Through this, the tree shows how to usher in real change in a nation's citizens: first consolidation and then expansion, where consolidation means to establish one's base in the ground firmly; expansion means to spread out everywhere. For example, if you want to successfully educate individuals for life, you must train young learners' minds on positive lines. Similarly,



THE SPEAKING TREE

Sacredspace



The world follows its own course. Each possesses his own thoughts, each treads his own path. So it is with your mother, and so it is with your starling. As it is with everyone. The world follows its own course.

Haruki Murakami

principle of social ethics. This is a universal teaching found in almost every religion in one verse or another.

Indians should make 'excellence' their goal; they should not accept anything less than striving for excellence. In doing so, not only will they reach great heights of success, but they will also be able to reform society along constructive lines and make India invincible. Actual results can be achieved only through long-term planning and unflagging, dedicated effort. The two great virtues indispensable in the struggle are patience and fortitude.

Let us dedicate ourselves to the noble endeavour of advancing our nation by embracing the principle of India first. This entails prioritising our nation's and its citizens' welfare and interests above all other considerations.

Maulana Wahiduddin Khan was an Islamic scholar and founder of Centre for Peace and Spirituality International